

The Prospect for Cultural Communication

Gerry Philipsen

INTRODUCTION

Every people manages somehow to deal with the inevitable tension between the impulse of individuals to be free and the constraints of communal life. Such resolutions, of course, are never fixed in some absolute cultural stasis. The reality of a culture as experienced by those who live it moves along an axis with two poles at the opposing extremes, one exerting a pull toward the communal, the other toward the individual, as the dominant themes and warrants of human thought, speech, and action. Locating a culture on this axis reveals a partial truth about it, a kind of cultural snapshot, but in order to perceive the culture fully, one must also know the culture's direction of movement along the axis and the relative strengths of the competing forces pushing it one way or another.

Observers of contemporary Western society characterize its last several centuries in terms of gradual, unchecked movement from a communal culture to an individual consciousness. Recently, this process has been noticed, and this noticing has made possible, and in part stimulated,

countervailing forces, such that there has emerged a history and a critique of the movement away from the communal. On one hand is the plethora of lay, literary, and professional rhetoric pressing for the primacy of the individual conscience and the cultivation of the intimate bond as the context for its nurture and celebration. On the other is a nostalgic yearning for community and memorial ways. It is not known how strong these countervailing forces are, but it seems obvious that Western society is moving toward the individual and away from the communal poles of the axis but also that there are emergent forces—or voices—of counterpoise which must be mapped onto the axis of contemporary cultural life.

In Western society in the past four centuries, the interplay between the individual and the communal motives and sensibilities has been sharply correlated with trends in human communication. Three broad shifts in the discursive terrain, their attendant problems, and consequent conserving reactions can be noted. In his book, *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett (1976) noted one of these changes. He claims that over the past four centuries the center of moral gravity has shifted from the public to the intimate domain of human expression. The public has been replaced by the intimate as the standard and the setting for communication conduct. In the past, according to Sennett, it was society—the public group—which laid down ways of acting in public, and these rules were important forces in human affairs. Today, by contrast, there is a relative emphasis on negotiation between and among intimates about ways of acting in private, and these rules are the relatively important forces in human affairs (Sennett, 1976).

A second thesis was advanced by Berger, Berger, and Kellner (1974) in their book, *The Homeless Mind*. They claim that "honor" has been replaced by "dignity" as an ultimate term in the vocabulary of motives of Western man. There has been, they said, a shift in the appreciation of persons because of their attained or ascribed status to appreciation of persons because of their personhood itself. Such a shift is manifested in the decline in fashion of *honorifics* and the contempt by many for their use. Berger *et al.* wrote:

The social location of honor lies in a world of relatively intact, stable institutions, a world in which individuals can with subjective certainty attach their identities to the institutional roles that society assigns to them. The disintegration of this world as a result of the forces of modernity has not only made honor an increasingly meaningless notion, but has served as the occasion for a redefinition of identity and its intrinsic dignity apart from and often *against* the institutional roles through which the individual expresses himself in society. The reciprocity between individual and society, between subjective identity and objective identification through roles, now comes to be experienced as a sort of struggle. Institu-

tions cease to be the "home" of the self; instead they become oppressive realities that distort and estrange the self. Roles no longer actualize the self, but serve as a "veil of *maya*" hiding the self not only from others but from the individual's own consciousness. (Berger *et al.*, 1974, pp. 93-94)

Steiner, a literary historian and critic, noted a third trend. Based on his analyses of selected literary works in several centuries including the twentieth, Steiner found compelling evidence of a weakening of the tendency to withhold thoughts from public presentation, a loosening of the rules for public utterance. Relatively less time is spent in forming, shaping, and editing speech than was done in previous eras, relatively more is spent in talking (Steiner, 1979).

Although these shifts in emphasis from the communal to the individual have been described here in relatively neutral terms and although they have in part been welcomed by those who document them, there is nonetheless an attendant critique. First, coordinating diverse lines of action becomes problematic when rules for selecting and attaining goals are not widely known and shared. This is the problem of *alignment* (there is a related problem of *civility*), as manifested in such contemporary conditions as the apparent decline in the capacity for institutional coordination. The apparent inability to perform, without disruption, such public ceremonies, as high school graduations, has been observed in the author's community, Seattle, Washington. Such failures are symptoms of a deeper, more chilling problem—the replacement of cultural value by undisciplined force as the locus of control in contemporary life. As Sennett (1976) wrote:

. . . the masks of self which manners and the rituals of politeness create . . . have ceased to matter in interpersonal situations or seem to be the property only of snobs; in closer relationships, they appear to get in the way of knowing someone else. And I wonder if this contempt for ritual masks of sociability has not really made us more primitive culturally than the simplest tribe of hunters and gatherers. (p. 15)

Or, as Berry (1978), a critic of contemporary culture, wrote, "To think or act without cultural value, and the restraints invariably implicit in cultural value, is simply to wait upon force" (p. 169).

Second, a sense of who one is becomes problematic when the burden for personal definition is shifted from society to self. This is the problem of *meaning*, as is manifested in a widespread sense of what Berger called "homelessness":

The individual is given enormous latitude in fabricating his own particular private life—a kind of "do-it-yourself" universe. . . . This latitude obviously has its satisfactions, but it also imposes severe burdens. The most obvious is that most

individuals *do not know how* to construct a universe and therefore become furiously frustrated when they are faced with a need to do so. The most fundamental function of institutions is probably to protect the individual from having to make too many choices. The private sphere has arisen as an interstitial area left over by the large institutions of modern institutions of society. As such, it has become underinstitutionalized and therefore become an area of unparalleled liberty and anxiety for the individual. Whatever compensations the private sphere provides are usually experienced as fragile, possibly artificial and essentially unreliable. (Berger *et al.*, 1974, pp. 186-187)

Third, when the standards for permitting or distributing discourse break down, the interest and quality of speech declines. This is the problem of *form*, as is manifested when an egalitarian ethic works against the highest forms and accomplishments in speech. As Steiner (1977) has written:

Today, the stress is on "saying all," on telling "how it is," in explicit rebuttal to what are regarded as archaic, class-determined, uptight atavisms of censorship and decorum. . . . The approved loquacities of psychoanalysis, of mundane confession (as they are practiced in modern therapy), in modern literature, in competitive gregariousness, and on the media go directly counter to the ideals of communicative reticence or autonomy represented by the private letter, diary, or journal. The telephone consumes, with utter prodigality, raw materials of language of which a major portion was allocated to internal use or to the modulated inwardness of the private, silently conceived written correspondence. One is tempted to conclude that where much more is, in fact, being heard, less is being said. (p. 208)

In their studies, of contemporary American sociability, Riesman, Potter, and Watson (1960), and of contemporary public address, Baskerville (1980), provided disciplined, sobered assessment of the decline in standards of form in contemporary communication.

Problems of alignment, meaning, and form have prompted a rhetoric of lament by some observers of contemporary, Western communication. More positively, such concern is an expression of and a warrant for renewed interest in what Berger called the "human significance of tribalism." From the standpoint of communication theory, attention can productively be focused on *cultural communication*. This essay is a programmatic treatment of cultural communication as an emerging problem of contemporary communication theory, research, and practice. Specifically, I shall treat the nature, forms and functions, variations in styles, and prospects of cultural communication in contemporary society. I hope to propose a way to describe cultural communication and to propose a heuristic framework which lays the groundwork for a theory of ethnographic description and comparative analysis of cultural communication.

THE NATURE OF CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

A culture can be viewed from many perspectives, each of which provides one partial but important glance at the nature of things cultural. Three such perspectives can be discerned in the work of various scholars who have used the culture concept. When the focus is on culture as *code*, an observer examines a system of beliefs, values, and images of the ideal. Culture as code emphasizes the fixed and the ordered and focuses on the system of cognitive and moral constraints represented in a world view or value system. Culture as *conversation* emphasizes a patterned representation of a people's lived experience of work, play, and worship. Whereas code is a source of order, the lived conversation of a people is a source of the dynamism and creativity of culture. Codes and conversations are abstractions which, ultimately, can only be made from or applied to particular, nameable contexts, as part of and in part constitutive of a community. A focus on culture as *community* draws attention to a human grouping whose members claim a commonality derived from shared identity, an identity grounded in a communal ordering of memories or the memory traces of a tribe. Communities, thus, are the concrete settings and scenes where codes are learned and where the communal conversation is played out. These three perspectives, when taken together, afford a comprehensive insight into the nature of culture.

The function of communication in cultural communication is to maintain a healthy balance between the forces of individualism and community, to provide a sense of shared identity which nonetheless preserves individual dignity, freedom, and creativity. This function is performed through maintaining a balance or equilibrium between two subprocesses of cultural communication, (1) the creation and (2) the affirmation of shared identity. Thus, cultural communication is the process by which a code is realized and negotiated in a communal conversation. It includes the processes of enactment, a playing out and affirming of cultural forms, and of creation, the creation, adaptation, and transformation of those forms to meet the contingencies of daily life. As such, a community's discursive life both manifests the community's location on the communal-personal (or code-conversation) axis and serves as the means by which a condition of equilibrium is maintained.

A healthy culture maintains a balance among the subprocesses of enactment and creation. It maintains, in the words of Weaver, in *Visions of Order*, "an equipoise of status and function" (Weaver, 1964, p. 25). Depending on where the culture is located on the communal-personal axis, either enactment or creation will be more prominent than the others, and

for maintaining a healthy balance of opposing forces in the culture, it is necessary to expend greater conscious effort at the other subprocess in order to perform the function of affirming shared identity while preserving individual dignity. An emerging problem of Western communication can, thus, be stated in terms of a broad shift which has created an imbalance among these processes, such that it is now important to work at moving from a process of creation to identification of those processes of cultural enactment which lead to affirmation of shared identity. Such efforts can be productively made only in terms of those communication forms which are designed to fulfill the cultural function. It is to those forms that I now turn.

FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

"At the root of culture must be the realization that uncontrolled energy is disorderly—that in nature all energies move in forms; that, therefore, in a human order energies must be *given* forms" (Berry, 1978, p. 122). Although the way the cultural function is performed differs from community to community, there are characteristic forms used to affirm and negotiate a sense of shared identity. Three of these which figure prominently in cultural communication are ritual, myth, and social drama.

Ritual is a communication form in which there is a structured sequence of symbolic acts, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object. An example of a contemporary ritual, as described by two students of Black churches in America, is that of "call-response." Daniel and Smitherman (1976) noted that the sequencing of a call by a minister and a response by the congregation constitutes, in the Black churches studied, a sequence of acts which has grammatical force. The sacred object is Black togetherness and unity in a world of hostile, alien forces. Participation in the ritual performs the function of honoring that unity and of affirming commitment to it. Daniel and Smitherman wrote:

As a communicative strategy, then, call-response is the manifestation of the cultural dynamic which finds audience and listener or leader and background to be a unified whole. Shot through with action and interaction, Black communicative performance is concentric in quality—the "audience" becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. As Black American Culture stresses communality and group experientiality, the audience's linguistic and paralinguistic responses are necessary to co-sign the power of the speaker's rap or call. They let him know if he's on the right case. A particular individual's linguistic

virtuosity is rewarded with a multiplicity of fervent and intense responses. Thus despite the cultural constraints imposed on individuality, skillful sacred and secular rappers can actualize their selfhood within the community setting. (1976, p. 39)

Rituals function so as to maintain the consensus necessary for social equilibrium and order, especially the nonrational consensus. Their form provides for the celebration of what is shared by participating in known sequences of coordinated action, which, by definition, require—and, once enacted, implicate—the exploitation of shared rules. Thus, ritual, the most highly precoded of the cultural communication forms, is a “declaration of form against indeterminacy” (Turner, 1980).

Whereas ritual provides a tightly woven form or pattern for affirming shared identity, myth offers a looser fabric of expression. A myth is a great symbolic narrative which holds together the imagination of a people and provides bases of harmonious thought and action. An example of contemporary mythic expression is found in Hannerz' study of Black men in a Washington, D.C. ghetto community. Each day, the members of the neighborhood streetcorner groups gathered together to talk about the day's activities. One participant described the activity in these gatherings as, “You just sit there and let your mouth run” (Hannerz, 1969, p. 107). But Hannerz found there is more than that. Each man was given an opportunity to tell a tale, a tale in which he, a Black man, must deal with a White man or woman, and in which he, the Black man, against the odds of his alter's superior moral position, used wit and cunning—usually verbal—to bring off at least some subtle, symbolic victory amid the inevitable degradation of the transactions with these important others in his life world. Hannerz wrote of such “streetcorner mythmaking”:

The notion we are entertaining is that reminiscences may be like myths, sociability a kind of mythmaking. Myths, we have often been told, are intellectual phenomena by way of which men reflect on their condition: on myths men ground their beliefs about what moves them and their world. Of course, streetcorner narratives are not in all ways like prototypical myths. They are not sacred tales; they do not deal with primeval times, or with men who are like gods. The time is yesterday or yesteryear and the protagonist may be unemployed, separated, or perhaps most noted as someone who occasionally drinks too much. But ghetto men's reminiscences, when added together, may give the understanding of forces transcending the fate of any particular man, because these forces are the same regardless of who happens to be the narrator and temporary incumbent of that external protagonist's position which we have referred to as Ghetto Man. The forces act from the world surrounding him, but they also move him from within. By sharing these experiences, the men establish the fact that a man can hardly help womanizing, drinking, and getting into trouble.

Myths posit a supersensible world of meaning and value from which the least member of a tribe can borrow something to dignify and give coherence to his life. Schneidau, in his book *Sacred Discontent*, claimed that myths do for the group what dreams do for the individual—they transform desires and fears, and especially conflicts and contradictions, into mental patterns that can be dealt with, faced up to (Schneidau, 1976, p. 7). Whereas ritual is the form whereby cultural actors most directly and most wholeheartedly affirm the past, the traditions, myth is the form wherein they creatively apply and discover the fit between past and present, community and individual. They can use myth to give life coherence, by seeing their own acts as conforming to a pattern which is implicit in the patterned stories of the heroic figures of their tribe's past.

A *social drama*, a "drama of living," can occur when specified personae gather together on some nameable or identifiable ground. Therein is created a scene, in which a particular dramatic action can unfold. Social dramas, with the scene thus set, consist of a dramatic sequence in which social actors manifest concern with, and negotiate the legitimacy and scope of, the group's rules of living. More specifically, as Turner (1980) described in his "Social Dramas and Stories about Them," the sequence of dramatic action follows four phases. In the first, there is a *breach*—a violation of the communal code. There follows a second stage, that of *crisis*, in which members of the community notice, attend to, and publicize the problematicity of the violation. Crisis is followed by *redress*, the third stage of the drama, in which the offender—or his spokesman—repairs or corrects the damage wrought by the breach. Finally, the offender is either *reintegrated* into the community or the community recognizes there is a schism or moral dissensus.

Social dramas play an important function in communal life. Whereas rituals have as their dominant function the celebration of a code and myths have as theirs the using of the code to make sense of the communal conversation, social dramas serve as occasions for defining the boundaries of the group and for reintegrating into the group those individuals whose acts have tested the community's moral boundaries. Whereas ritual is a way to affirm it and myth is a way to articulate and apply it, a social drama is a way to remake and negotiate a particular people's sense of communal life.

Surely there are other forms, and their attendant functions, of cultural communication. But in ritual, myth, and social drama, we have available to us three forms—three processual units—of cultural communication and three attendant social functions, ways of relating the individual to the communal. An understanding of these forms and the communal work they perform can lead to enhanced understanding of cultural communication.

VARIATION IN CULTURAL COMMUNICATION STYLE

Hymes (1974), building on the work of Margaret Mead and others, proposed a taxonomy consisting of a set of dimensions for the description of whole communities and their ways of speaking. The taxonomy includes four ideal-typical ways in which a given community resolves the personal-communal tension. In a *personal* society, as exemplified by the Arapesh, "societies depend, for impetus to or inhibition of community action in public situations, upon the continuing response of individuals. The point of communication is to excite interest and bring together persons who will then respond with emotion to whatever event has occurred" (Hymes, 1974, p. 39). In a *positional* society, as exemplified by the Iatmul, the societies "depend upon formal alignments of individuals who react not in terms of personal opinions but in terms of defined position in a formal sociopolitical structure" (Hymes, 1974, p. 39). In a third type of society, such as that of Bali, communal effort functions "by involving participation in and respect for known impersonal patterns or codes, and in which communicators act as if the audience were already in a state of suspended, emotional attention, and only in need of a small precise triggering of words to set them off into appropriate activity" (Hymes, 1974, p. 39). To this third category, the traditional type, Hymes added a positional, traditional type, as exemplified by the Zuni.

The differences described by Hymes could be called differences in the style of cultural communication. Style refers to patterned variation in the selection and arrangement of choices. Three attributes or dimensions of style will be employed here, following Weaver (1964). He referred to elaboration, the going beyond what is useful to what is engaging to contemplation; rhythm, the marking of beginnings and endings; and distance, the creation of separation between the users of signs and that which they signify (Weaver, 1964, p. 19). With regard to cultural communication, in different societies the rituals have different sacred objects, the myths different characters and story lines, and the social dramas different rules, violation of which is the basis for a breach. Put in stylistic terms, these are differences in what is elaborated, in what sacred objects are singled out for appreciation and decorous treatment. There are also differences in rhythm, in the rules for sequencing participation in community life, particularly in the degree to which the rules are rigid or flexible. Finally, there are differences in distancing, in the nature and strength of such boundary mechanisms as taboos on topic, interlocutors, and manner, of public communication.

Extending Hymes's schema to cultural communication style, one can refer to a personal, positional, traditional, and positional/traditional style.

Three of these will be amplified here. In a personal society, as exemplified by the West, the sacred object, mythic quest, and source of dramatic exigence is the individual self-concept; rules for participation are relatively fluid, providing for easy participation by all; and public life is pressed into the service of breaking down boundaries, of reducing distance between people. In a positional society, it is the group itself which is the sacred object, mythical force, and dramatic focus; rules for participation, based on position or status, and public life take on their greatest power when the salience and significance of group life is left unsaid but indirectly affirmed through the use of shared communal symbols. In a traditional society, the code, law, or scripture is the object of elaboration; tradition specifies participation patterns; and it is tradition which carries the greatest degree of unspoken force in regulating public conduct and in affirming shared identity.

Certain communication forms should be most naturally associated with certain cultural communication styles. Where individuality is prominent, as in a personalistic society, social dramas, which provide for reintegrating the individual into a communal life, should be prominent. Myth, as a loose form which permits individual variation in feeling and behavior to be given coherence within an enduring communal experience, is ideally suited to a positional society, which derives its coherence and force from group heroes and places. Ritual, as a precoded form, is the archetypal form of cultural communication in a traditional society.

These dimensions and types are presented here for heuristic purposes. Comparative analyses of existing ethnographic research would permit revision and development of the crude scheme here presented. But the move proposed is (1) to isolate cultural differences in cultural communication style by postulating, as Hymes did, specified stylistic types, such as personal, positional, and traditional and, further, (2) to extend previous work by suggesting three stylistic dimensions along which various types can be compared and contrasted. With regard to (2), it was suggested that a cultural communication style varies as to its object of elaboration, rhythm, and distance. This development of an existing, heuristic typology should make it possible to do further comparative work in and across societies. It should also make it possible to see variations in cultural communication style as diverse expressions of a common humanity and of a common need for cultural communication.