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Theorising change

**Book section
(Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation: Originally published in: Freeman, Dena, *Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2002

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Available in LSE Research Online: September 2016

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From: Freeman, Dena. (2002). *Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1 Introduction: Theorising change

In a remote part of southern Ethiopia there is a small farming community which has two forms of politico-ritual organisation. One is based on animal sacrifices and the other is based on initiations. The same people participate in both these systems. However, over the course of the past century or so these two systems have undergone very different types of change. The sacrificial system has retained more or less the same overall form although its practices have become less frequent and less elaborated. Whereas the initiatory system, in contrast, has undergone a fairly radical transformation so that the form of the initiations is now quite different from how it was a hundred years ago. All the external factors are the same, indeed it is the very same people carrying out both these practices, so why do the two systems change in such different ways?

This ethnographic puzzle provides us with an opportunity to try to understand cultural change. The unusual situation of two cultural systems changing in different ways in the same circumstances will force us to tease apart the mechanisms that bring about change. We will need to look at causality, at individual action, at systemic organisation and at communal decision-making. These, then, are some of the issues that this book will address as it seeks to formulate a model of cultural change that will allow us to comprehend this unusual Ethiopian ethnography.

Anthropological Approaches to Change

Anthropological approaches to cultural change can be broadly divided into two camps. There are those that prioritise structural or systemic factors and there are those that prioritise individual action. Much of the history of anthropology can be seen as a

series of attempts to bring together these two perspectives. And it is arguable that this synthesis has yet to be fully achieved. However, in order to explain our ethnographic case, where the actions of the same individuals lead to one system transforming and one system not, it will be necessary to understand both the individual and the systemic factors of change. This book then represents another attempt to synthesise individualist and systemic approaches to social life and to cultural change. Before outlining the approach taken in this book, it will be useful to take a look at some of the different varieties of systemic and individualist analyses that have been instructive in the development of anthropological theory.

The systemic mode of analysis

The systemic mode of analysis offers a way to understand the patterning of society or culture. By focussing on social and cultural systems, systemic analysis can offer insights as to how different parts of the system fit together and how changes in one part of the system will lead to changes in another part of the system. It allows us to take a holistic perspective and make some generalisations about the different forms of cultural life in different societies. Many different types of anthropological analysis can be classified as systemic analyses, but perhaps the two major anthropological traditions that fall into this category are functionalism and structuralism. Neither of these traditions are particularly noted for their focus on cultural change, but several anthropologists whose ideas have derived from these traditions have generated useful insights into the way in which cultural systems change over time.

Approaches derived from the functionalist tradition

One approach to the study of cultural change has been to try to elucidate causal variables that determine the form of different cultural variants, which are seen to be transformations of each other. These variables in turn are generally seen to be driven by one particular independent variable which forms the base of the structural system. Within this broad functionalist framework, various independent variables have been suggested, most frequently either various elements of social organisation, such as property transmission or residence patterns, or environmental factors such as ecology or the technology of production.

Studies of cultural variation and transformation in the structural-functionalist framework (eg. Nadel 1955, Goody 1962) posit some aspect of social organisation as the independent variable and then try to correlate changes in other variables with changes in this base variable. Jack Goody explains the position clearly:

[we must proceed by] comparing the standardised modes of acting in the two communities, in order to see where the differences lie. Having established the covariations, we have then to try to determine which are the dependent, which the independent variables. (Goody 1962:8).

In his study of mortuary rituals among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, Goody establishes correlations between a number of variables, including form of mortuary ritual, form of kinship organisation and the nature of father-son relations. He then suggests that the independent variable, which is thought to drive all the other variations, is in fact the system of inheritance. Among the LoWiili all property is transmitted agnatically, whereas among the LoDagaba immovable property is transmitted agnatically while movable property is inherited by uterine kin. So, for example, tense father-son relations are 'caused' among the LoWiili by the fact that the son is dependent on his father for his inheritance, and more relaxed father-son relations among the LoDagaba are 'caused' by the fact that the son is not so dependent on his father because much of his inheritance will come from his mother's brother. It follows then that one variant is a transformation of the other: start with the LoWiili variant and change the inheritance pattern and you will end up with something very similar to the LoDagaba variant. Goody in fact suggests that this is what happens in LoWiili/LoDagaba border areas where, through intermarriage, sons of LoWiili men and LoDagaba women can choose to inherit either from their father or from their mother's brother. If, for whatever reasons, they choose to inherit from their mother's family then changes in the way they propitiate the ancestors and hold their mortuary rites etc will soon follow.

Goody is more subtle than many functionalists in that he explicitly repudiates the notion that all variations in social behaviour interlock with each other in a holistic manner (*ibid*:419). However, the course of the transformation he suggests is still

based on an essentially organistic view of culture, and there is little discussion of mechanism, beyond the initial choice made by borderland youths about their inheritance. Most of the work concentrates on drawing up structural correlations, and the issues of causality and the direction of change are only addressed briefly in the final discussion of borderland youths. Goody's problem with causality is essentially that he wants to give structure causal efficacy, but because he also believes that structure is not a 'thing' that 'exists' he can find no way to ground his intuitions about change in any actual social mechanisms. Although Goody tackles this problem again in later works, it is not one that he successfully overcomes. In *Production and Reproduction* (1976), for example, he uses the statistical tools of linkage and path analysis to try to determine the direction of causality between a set of correlations regarding plough agriculture and diverging devolution. His use of these statistical tools is a brave attempt 'to get a little beyond the circularity of structural-functionalism and the much simpler unilineal, single-factor hypotheses that dog so much work in the social sciences' (*ibid*:37), but ultimately it tells us little about the micro-mechanisms of change and how it actually takes place on the ground.

The materialist approaches of ecological anthropology, cultural materialism and cultural ecology see cultures as adaptive solutions to environmental givens (eg. Steward 1955; Sahlins 1958; Sahlins and Service 1960; Rapaport 1968, 1979; Harris 1979, 1980). They differ in the degree to which they acknowledge the importance of technology and the organisation of production (Thin 1996:186) and in the extent to which they include other societies as part of the 'environment', but they all share a view of causality that considers the material 'base' (or 'infrastructure') to determine the cultural 'superstructure'. In other words, they consider 'culture' in functionalist terms, as a coherent whole that adapts to its environment, much as a biological organism adapts to its environment. Within these approaches there are two related perspectives on cultural change. One seeks to understand culture as a homeostatic system that changes in order to keep its population in balance with its environment (eg. Rappaport 1967), and the other seeks to understand the transformation of culture in response to changing environmental conditions.

Perhaps the best example of this latter perspective is Sahlins' comparative look at social stratification in Polynesia (Sahlins 1958). In this early work Sahlins looks at a

number of Polynesian societies and attempts to understand gross variations in the form and degree of their social stratification as functional adaptations, or transformations, driven by different ecological and technological conditions. His causal model starts from environmental conditions and then extends to considerations of the organisation of production and exchange, then to social stratification, and finally, rather weakly, to vague extrapolations to other elements of cultural and ritual life. He writes:

Degree of stratification is directly related to surplus output of food producers. The greater the technological efficiency and surplus production, the greater will be the frequency and scope of [food] distribution [centred around chiefs]... Increase in scope, frequency and complexity of distribution implies increasing status differentiation between distributor and producer. This differentiation will be manifest in other economic processes besides distribution, and in sociopolitical and ceremonial life. Thereby the hypothesis: other factors being constant, the degree of stratification varies directly with productivity (Sahlins 1958:5).

Through a fairly detailed look at fourteen Polynesian societies and their environments, Sahlins shows that this hypothesized correlation more or less holds. However, by simply comparing static, idealised structures he is unable to show that it is anything more than a correlation. By ignoring mechanism or process, or any real consideration of history, he is, like Goody, unable to prove his suggested causality, and unable to convincingly explain how the suggested changes actually occur. His analysis is devoid of subjects or agents, and thus causal mechanisms are implicitly considered to work at the level of 'structure', wherever this may be. As in many other models in ecological anthropology, 'the system' is imbued with causal efficacy while there is no adequate discussion of the ontological status of such a system. The causal model that results is as a consequence either teleological or down right mystical.

If, for the sake of argument, we were to accept his model of causality, then the explanation of cultural change that we are left with is essentially linear and evolutionist. The basic cultural structure is elaborated to a greater or lesser extent

according to the amount of surplus available. Implicit in this argument is the idea of reversibility: if one of the less stratified societies were to become more productive then they would evolve into a form like that of the more stratified societies existing in its vicinity, and if one of these more stratified societies were somehow to become less productive they would devolve into a form like their less stratified neighbours. In a later publication Sahlins expands his set of factors which might cause devolution to include greedy chiefs, status rivalry and other non-environmental factors (Sahlins 1963:297-300), but the essentially linear nature of his model remains the same. There is no room in this model for structural transformation, or what we might call nonlinear change.

Leach's study political systems in highland Burma suffers a similar problem (Leach 1981 [1954]). Although purporting to be a model of 'structural change' and 'historical transformation', it is in reality a linear model which sees variants of Kachin culture forever oscillating between two fixed ideological points. The stumbling block for Leach is his analytical separation of the 'system on the ground' from the 'system of ideas'. By this analytical twist Leach can ignore the spiralling effects brought about because, on the ground, 'the facts at the end of the cycle are quite different from the facts at the beginning of the cycle' (*ibid*:xiii), and instead concentrate on the supposed cyclical oscillation of the 'system of ideas'. By ironing out these on-the-ground differences, he implies that they have no causal power to *interact* with the system of ideas and, perhaps, transform it. Instead they can only *drive* the system into more (*gumsa*) or less (*gumlao*) hierarchical form, while the system itself is untransformable.

Leach's model is thus linear for different reasons than Sahlins' (1958) model. Sahlins' model is linear because it is essentially uncausal. Productivity determines all. Whenever there is more than one causal variable the rest are 'held constant' so that the linear variations with one variable can be seen. But Leach's model ostensibly embraces multicausality, as he looks at the causal effects of ecology, political history and the actions of individuals (Leach 1981 [1954]:228-63). However, by rendering the system of ideas off-limits to any effects of these factors, and yet imbuing these ideas with causal power over the actions of individuals, Leach short-circuits the

multicausal model of complex interactions between different factors, and effectively ends up with a linear model.

There are, I think, two major reasons for the weaknesses in Leach's model which are pertinent to this discussion. One is that Leach was arguing against the functional holism that was common at the time, and exemplified, for example, by Sahlins' (1958) book. However, he does not fully manage to step out of this framework, for although he insists that the system 'on the ground' is full of incoherencies, he still feels the need to posit a 'system of ideas' that is a coherent whole. The other reason for the incoherence of Leach's own model is that he is ultimately unsure whether to place causality in the realm of structure or in the realm of individuals. On the one hand he sees the structural contradictions between the *mayu-dama* marriage system and both *gumlao* and Shan ideology as driving 'structural change', and yet on the other hand he states that 'every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavours to exploit the situation as he perceives it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of the society itself' (*ibid*:8). Leach is thus acutely aware of the ontological problems of seeing structure as causal, and is trying to incorporate a more ontologically sound individualist view into what is essentially a structural account. While this is definitely a step in the right direction, Leach does not quite succeed in combining these two approaches in a rigorous manner. I will return to this below, but first let's take a look at another set of approaches to cultural variation, those that take their inspiration from Levi-Strauss and structuralism.

Approaches derived from the structuralist tradition

For Levi-Strauss, studying cultural variation and transformation is fundamental to any study of culture. Whether looking at kinship organisation or myth (1963, 1994[1964], 1969, 1981 [1971]), his works proceed not by generalisation into 'ideal types', but by the explication of numerous variants, of which no one is more 'true' than any other. He is interested in the way that different versions of a cultural element represent transformations of its basic structure. Thus he looks for underlying patterns which

form the 'structure' of all variants, and at the same time seeks to understand the logic by which one can transform into another.

Levi-Strauss's conception of 'structure' is thus radically different from that of the structural-functionalists. He does not see structure as the holistic, organically functioning backbone of society, but rather as the logical patterning of principles existing behind surface variations in cultural elements. This structure is 'deep', and can only be uncovered by the study of surface variation. Furthermore, it never forms coherent wholes, but is a matter of continual communication and modification (Bloch 1996:535).

His notion of 'transformation' is also more complicated. He considers that myths, for example, are genetic, as well as formal, transformations of other myths (Sperber 1985:84). By this he means that when a myth-teller recounts a myth he is transforming a myth that he himself heard earlier - transforming the version that he heard by forgetting bits, adding new elements, changing the order, and so on. This is genetic transformation, transformation in its genesis. Formal transformation, which is the notion of transformation more commonly associated with structuralism, refers to the processes of opposition, inversion, symmetry, substitution and permutation by which different variants can be logically related to each other (D'Anglure 1996:335). Since it is difficult to follow the actual genetic transformations which myths undergo in their telling and re-telling, he suggests that it is possible to try to reconstruct this history by taking 'formal transformations between related myths as hypothetical models for genetic transformations' (Sperber 1985:84). Thus although Levi-Strauss's study of myth is for the most part synchronic, much of his causality lies in the realm of history, as he sees one variant generating another through time, in response to changing external conditions.

For the most part Levi-Strauss does not attempt to explain how myths actually transform in practice, but limits himself to showing how variants of myths can be seen to be logical transformations of each other. Near the beginning of the first volume of his magnum opus on Native American myth he states the case plainly:

By demonstrating that myths from widely divergent sources can be seen objectively as a set, it presents history with a problem and invites it to set about finding a solution. I have defined such a set, and I hope I have supplied proof of it being a set. It is the business of ethnographers, historians and archaeologists to explain how and why it exists (Levi-Strauss 1994 [1964]:8).

Many anthropologists working in the structuralist tradition have followed this path, and thus stuck to formal analyses of variation which are ahistorical and non-causal. Thus, to cite but one example, Nur Yalman provides a formal analysis of Sri Lankan and South Indian kinship systems, showing how they are all variations of one underlying structure (Yalman 1967).

Another branch of Levi-Strauss's intellectual descendants, however, have sought to ground such formal analysis of structure and variation in the external world, by trying to look at the causal effects of politics, ecology and what have you, as they transform structures through history (eg. Sahlins 1985, Piot 1995). These efforts differ from Leach's model in that external factors are considered not just to drive structure into greater or lesser elaborations of its basic form, but to actually transform it. In this way the short-circuit between the external world and symbolic ideas that doomed Leach's model to linearity is opened out, and these historical structuralist models take on a non-linear nature. In other words, they try to model the recursive way in which the external environment affects structure, and in turn how structure affects the form of interaction with the external environment. Structure and history become analytically inseparable.

Thus Sahlins, to cite a well known example, suggests in his later work that external events, such as the arrival of Captain Cook in Hawaii, are initially understood through local cultural structures and then transform these structures, as cultural categories take on new meanings and connotations in the new context. And Piot suggests that the symbolic structure of Kabre society in Togo both influenced the way in which large numbers of immigrants were absorbed in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and in turn was itself transformed by these politico-historical events. The innovation in these models is that causality is not seen as unidirectional, and the insights of both

Marx and Weber are brought together to understand cultural change. In this way they attempt to transcend the distinction between materialist and idealist approaches, and between structure and history. Thus Sahlins' notion of the 'structure of the conjuncture' focusses on neither 'structure' nor 'history', but compounds the two to focus on the 'practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents' (Sahlins 1985:xiv).

Bruce Knauft uses a similar approach to great effect in his book on south coast New Guinea cultures (Knauft 1993). But in contrast to Sahlins' formulation, Knauft does not require the influence of foreign forces or events to set change into motion. Rather, he focuses on 'how structures feed upon changes that they themselves generate' (1993:11). Through a detailed look at the variations between the many cultures of south coast New Guinea, he argues that structure should not be seen as a synchronic entity that might be re-valued as the historical context changes, but rather as an entity that might *itself* transform. He shows how the unintended consequences of some actions will 'act as irritants' and lead to structures 'self-transforming from the inside as they respond dialectically to their own prior actualisations' (*ibid*:11,14). Sociomaterial factors in the external, or nonsymbolic, world feed into this recursive process, offering both constraints and opportunities for development in certain directions.

Knauft goes further than many other theorists in explicitly acknowledging the unpredictability and nonlinearity that transformation through such recursive processes generates, and stresses the sensitivity to initial conditions whereby very similar forms can diverge quickly into strikingly different cultural variants. He appears to give symbolic and nonsymbolic factors the same ontological status, and thus sees both as causally efficacious. However, because his scale of analysis is large, encompassing the many cultures of south coast New Guinea, he does not attempt to theorize the micro-mechanisms that actually bring about the transformational change that he describes.

This is perhaps the greatest weakness of any form of systemic analysis. Focussing on large-scale systems, studies in this mode tend to lose sight of the individuals whose

actions actually generate the social system. Structure tends to become reified and it is often implicitly seen as a causal entity that somehow constrains the actions of individuals. And at its most extreme, individuals become almost like automatons who blindly follow the rules of the social system. Even in less extreme forms it is often unclear how individuals live through the system and how the actions of individuals somehow add up to 'create' that very social system. To explore these types of questions we need to turn to the individualist mode of analysis.

The Individualist mode of analysis

The greatest strength of the individualist mode of analysis is that it offers ways to understand the actions of individuals. Analyses in this mode take the individual as the starting point, not 'society' or 'structure'. They are thus far more ontologically rigorous than systemic analyses and they try to explain social or cultural phenomena from the bottom up, rather than the top down. They do not portray individuals in far away places as exotic 'others' and we can generally sympathise, if not empathise, with the subjects of this type of analysis. The most important traditions within this mode of analysis are transactionalism and what I shall refer to as the cultural transmission tradition.

Approaches derived from the transactionalist tradition

A transactionalist approach sees society as the product of the interactions between individual actors. Structure is considered not to be a 'thing' that determines people's actions, but rather it is seen as an emergent phenomenon that derives from the cumulative effects of the freely chosen actions of individuals. In order to understand why individuals act in the way that they do, it is instead necessary to consider their motives and goals and to then look at the strategies that they use to accomplish these goals. These strategies will often involve manipulating social values and institutions. Structure, in other words, can itself be used as a tool, or as a resource, in the negotiations between individuals.

Perhaps the best example of a transactionalist analysis is Fredrik Barth's *Political Leadership Among Swat Pathans* (1959). In this account Barth argues that Swat

politics can be understood by looking at the relations between leaders and their clients. Individuals choose to become clients when they make the choice to enter into a relationship with a leader. There are various different types of leader, such as chiefs and saints, and various different types of political grouping. Individuals choose which relationships they wish to enter into and indeed, whether they enter into any relationships at all. Local politics can then be understood as the series of negotiations that take place between individuals, as the various leaders and the many clients try to get into relationships which they believe will be the most beneficial to them. Everyone is acting in their own self-interest and trying to manipulate the accepted social order in the pursuit of their own goals.

This approach to culture provides a dynamic action-oriented perspective. The focus placed on individual choice would seem to offer a useful way to approach the question of cultural change, because if individuals are always choosing what to do, they are always free to choose to do something differently. If we can understand what would make them choose to do things differently, then we would be a long way towards understanding how cultural change actually takes place.

But what this approach does not offer us is a way to understand how systemic change takes place. It is unclear quite how structure ‘emerges’ from individual actions and why the cumulation of lots of individual actions have a pattern at all. Whilst society or culture may not be as ordered as some of the systemic analyses suggest, there certainly is some degree of coherence in socio-cultural life that cannot be adequately explained by the transactionalist approach. And what happens to this pattern if some people begin to change their individual actions? How does the pattern itself change and why does it not simply fall apart? I will return to these points later, but first it will be useful to take a look at a very different type of individualist analysis.

Approaches derived from the cultural transmission tradition

The final group of theoretical approaches to cultural change that I will discuss here focus on the way that incremental transformations take place during cultural transmission. These approaches (eg. Dawkins 1982, Barth 1987, Sperber 1996) do not

see culture as some over-arching whole, but rather as being made up of units that are continually communicated between individuals. They have a firmly materialist ontology and give little or no analytic weight to the shadowy notion of structure. Instead they seek to explain macro-phenomena in terms of the cumulative effects of micro-phenomena, rather than in terms of other macro-phenomena (Sperber 1996:2). Thus rather than try to explain religion, say, in terms of economic structure, these approaches would seek to explain the distribution of religious ideas in a given population in terms of their mode of transmission.

These approaches do not carve up the world into 'individuals' and 'societies' in the manner of much anthropological theory. Instead they have as their basic unit of analysis cultural elements - memes (Dawkins), representations (Sperber) or ideas (Barth) - and their transmission. Thus for Sperber, for example, there is no separate domain of culture in opposition to the individual, but rather there are representations that are more or less cultural, as they are more or less widely distributed among a population (Sperber 1996:49). These approaches, then, focus their analysis on communication or transmission.

One major difference between the theorists grouped together here, however, is the way in which they consider cultural transmission to occur. Dawkins has perhaps the simplest model. He calls his cultural units 'memes', as a cultural analogue to genes, and suggests that, like genes, memes are mostly replicated through transmission. Only occasionally will mutations occur, and these mutant memes then compete with other memes so that the fittest survive. In this way natural selection is considered to guide the gradual evolution of culture. Sperber strongly critiques the meme model and argues that cultural transmission is far more complicated. He suggests that cultural transmission consists of the complicated process whereby an individual creates a public representation from an individual mental representation, and then a second individual creates a new mental representation from this public representation. Environmental factors influence this process, for example in providing opportunities for the public representation to be spoken or written, as do psychological factors, such as the memory and mood of the individuals, and the relevance of the content of this particular representation to the other representations they have stored in their minds. Thus transmission of representations is rarely simple replication, but is instead

transformation, influenced by the cognitive capacities of the human brain.

In *Cosmologies in the Making* (1987), Barth uses a transmission model to explain a particular pattern of cultural variation and transformation in inner New Guinea. Like Sperber, he sees continual transformation occurring as ideas oscillate between public and private versions, but unlike Sperber, he considers that the organisation of these communicative events themselves influence the degree to which transformation or replication occur. Thus for Barth, it is the organisational form of Mountain Ok initiations - that they take place only every ten years, that they are shrouded in secrecy and only one ritual leader is thought to know how to conduct them properly, and that people may also attend the initiations of neighbouring communities - that provides the opportunities for their continual transformation, through the individual creativity of the ritual leader. If they were organised some other way, perhaps if they took place annually, or if the knowledge were open to all, then they would transform in quite different ways and to quite different degrees.

This much seems extremely plausible, but Barth is rather weaker in his modelling of the individual creativity which can be either stimulated or constrained by the organisation of communicative events. According to him, the creative imagination of the ritual leaders leads to an unintentional symbolic drift, as the incremental changes in the fan of connotations of symbols, in the saliency of their various meta-levels, and in the scope of certain cosmological schemata add up over time (Barth 1987:31).

When it comes to causality, these approaches again differ markedly from the other approaches discussed above. Both Barth and Sperber are looking for the mechanisms of cultural transformation, and, although they conceive of them a little differently, they both locate them in the workings of the human mind and in the mechanisms of transmission of ideas or representations between human minds. Whereas Barth's discussion of inter-individual transmission focuses solely on social organisational and psychological factors¹, Sperber's repeated stress that causal factors are both psychological and environmental (eg. *ibid*:28, 84) opens up his model to causal influences from all areas, including history, politics, ecology, technology, etc., as they cause particular inputs to particular human minds. And of course, these psychological and environmental factors are themselves affected by the distribution of

representations, so that feedback loops result in a causality that is not multi-linear, but recursive (*ibid*:84).

The most important shortcoming in these generative approaches to cultural change, however, is their almost total loss of any notion of culture as a system, whether open or closed, simple or complex. Sperber's location of causality in either psychological or environmental (mind-internal or mind-external) factors, whilst encompassing everything, leaves us with a model of brains in the environment that downplays the significance of the structural interactions between different cultural elements. Barth's explanation of the variation in Mountain Ok ritual does take into account some social organisational factors, such as the frequency of the ritual, but it also avoids any discussion of the actual structure of the ritual, and thus implicitly considers it irrelevant for its own transformation. In other words, whatever structure the ritual has, it will, according to his argument, transform in the way he describes, because the nature of the transformation is caused only by the psychological and social organisational factors he discusses, and not by the structure of the ritual itself. This approach, then, offers us no way to explain why different cultural elements transform in different ways, and to different degrees, when they are performed by the same people in the same cultural setting. Whilst ontologically rigorous, the downplaying of structural factors thus severely limits the usefulness of these approaches in explaining certain features of cultural change.

Towards an integrated theory of cultural change

It is clear that both systemic and individualist analyses offer important insights into the nature of social and cultural life and how it changes over time. The challenge is to find a way to integrate these two perspectives in one analysis so that a more complete understanding of cultural change can be achieved. This task has been attempted by several theorists over the years, including many of those whose works I have reviewed above. Whilst some of them have succeeded in incorporating certain aspects of an individualist approach within a systemic analysis, or vice versa, it has proved difficult to formulate a truly integrated approach.

The most useful attempt in my opinion is one that I have yet to discuss, namely practice theory, particularly the version put forward by Anthony Giddens (eg.1976, 1984). This approach to social life brings together insights from both systemic and individualist modes of analysis, particularly structuralism and transactionalism, and seeks to understand social practices ordered across space and time. However, while practice theory goes a long way towards integrating systemic and individualist perspectives on social life, it is rather less successful at modelling cultural change. In order to formulate an integrated theory of cultural change, then, we will need to take practice theory as a starting point and then modify it somewhat. Most importantly, it will be necessary to bring in insights from regional and world systems theorists, from structural Marxists, and from the rather unfashionable field of legal anthropology. In what follows I will build on the practice theory approach in order to formulate a model of cultural change which will then help us to solve the ethnographic puzzle presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Let us start by outlining some of the most important aspects of the practice paradigm. In this approach to social analysis individuals are seen as agents who act in the world in a purposeful manner. They act in their own self-interest and seek to improve their own situation through their interactions with the environment and with other people. They develop strategies to further their self-interest and these strategies often shape the nature of their interactions. These individuals are maximisers and all of them are ultimately trying to maximise the same thing, power. If a researcher can understand how power is constructed in a particular society, then she will be able to empathise with the people of that society and understand the strategies that they use in their interactions.

So in the practice paradigm we have individuals who act purposely in the world in order to maximise their self-interest. So far this is very similar to the transactionalist approach. However, Giddens then complicates the picture by suggesting that all action has both intended and unintended consequences. Thus when I burn some incense I intentionally make the room smell nice but I unintentionally set off the smoke detector, or when I write in English I intentionally communicate something but I unintentionally further the reproduction of the English language. So even though most human action is purposeful and strategic, it will always have unintended

consequences that were not part of the original strategy. And in some cases the unintended consequences may turn out to be more important and long lasting than the intended ones.

The concept of structure in the practice paradigm also bears consideration. In Giddens' formulation structure is not an overarching totality, but is rather a set of rules and resources that individuals use when deciding how to act. These rules and resources are not necessarily codified and individuals may or may not be able to discursively formulate them, but they form the tacit knowledge that people use all the time in their everyday life. Thus if I want one of those cakes in the shop window I know that I have to pay for it, or if I want to communicate with you then I know that I have to speak in English. Whether implicit or explicit, these rules can be thought of as the techniques or generalised procedures that are applied in the enactment of social practices. They have no ontological existence in time and space, according to Giddens, other than as ideas and memory traces in people's brains and in the instantiations of their practice. Structure, for the most part, is inside people's minds. It is not something that is external.

With these formulations of structure and agency, Giddens considers how social action takes place. Using the rules and resources available to them, individuals develop strategies of social action in order to maximise their interests. However, the unintended consequences of their actions tend to feed back and create the context of further action. And because this new context is generally no other than the original context, patterns of behaviour are reproduced over time. So the act of standing up when a teacher comes into the room reproduces the idea that students should stand up when a teacher comes into the room and thus constrains other students to stand up when a teacher next comes into the room. 'The moment of the production of action' to quote Giddens, 'is also one of reproduction in the contexts of the day-to-day enactment of social life' (1984:26).

It is at this step in the argument that I have to part company with Giddens. What started out as a flexible and open model of social action has somehow ended up being a circular model for social reproduction. By doing the things that they do, people create the conditions to continue doing the things that they do. This formulation, as it

stands, is not going to help us to understand social or cultural change. Let us reconsider the final step of the argument and see if we can find the flaw that dooms his model of social action to one of endless social reproduction.

The flaw is tiny, but terribly significant. When it comes to the unintended consequences of action feeding back to create the new contexts of further action it is not always the case that the new context is the same as the original context. In fact it is extremely *unlikely* that any two actions will take place in exactly identical contexts. For example, the class of students that stood up for their teacher yesterday is in a slightly different context today. The cleaners have cleaned the classroom, one of the students had an argument with his father last night, and the goody-two-shoes who always stands up first is off sick. The unintentional consequences of all of these actions feed back and create the new context for action. In this case, the new context is reasonably similar to the old context and it is likely that the students will again stand up for their teacher.

However, it is also possible that the unintended consequences of the actions of the previous day will lead to a new context that is significantly different. For example, some of the students might have seen a documentary on television the previous night that argued that it was an archaic practice for students to have to stand up when their teacher entered the room. As a consequence of watching this documentary they might have discussed it with their classmates and decided that today they would not stand up when their teacher comes in and they would see what happens. In this example, the unintended consequences of action have fed back to create a new context for action and in this new context the students have chosen to perform a new action.

So we see that in any real life situation the context is constantly changing and because of this actions do not always reproduce structure every time they are performed. On the contrary, they continually re-create structure, sometimes creating it as it was before and sometimes creating it slightly differently. The reproduction of structure is thus but a limiting case in the continual micro-transformation of structure. It is not the norm, but the exception.

With this modification, we can begin to see how the practice paradigm might offer us the basis from which to develop a model of cultural change. In this type of model we see that as the context changes, individuals use the available rules and resources (both new and old) to develop strategies of action to maximise their interests. Some of the unintentional consequences of their actions feed back to create slightly different contexts for further action. In these new contexts individuals draw on the now slightly different rules and resources to develop slightly different strategies for action. Some of the unintentional consequences of these actions feed back to create a slightly different context, and so on.

This basic formulation, though, is not yet complete. There are three matters that we need to consider. Firstly, what *types* of contextual change will tend to lead to novel actions? Secondly, what are the *causes* of these changes in the first place? And thirdly, how is any coherence or ‘systemness’ created and maintained through the aggregate of constantly changing individual acts?

Let us start by considering the types of contextual change that will lead to individuals changing their actions. It is clear that only contextual changes that offer individuals new opportunities (or resources, in Giddens’ terminology) to maximise their self-interest will lead to them changing their actions. Other contextual changes will have little effect. Thus the change in the cleanliness of the classroom or the absence of a particular student in our example did not provide either the students or the teacher with any new opportunities to improve their lot and thus did not lead to any new action. The screening of a particular documentary, on the other hand, gave the students some new information and some new ideas. It gave them a justification for not standing up and thus provided them with the opportunity to contest a rule in order to improve their status and subtly challenge the authority of the teacher.

When a changed context provides this type of new opportunity it is very likely that an individual or a group of individuals will choose to take advantage of the situation and act in a different way. The causation is not determinative. The change in context does not *necessarily* lead to change in action. The students might have watched the documentary and thought nothing further of it. But given that individuals are

maximisers who are always trying to improve their lot, it is *likely* that someone at least will choose to act on a new opportunity.

If it is contextual change, or change in the available rules and resources, that provides new opportunities for strategic action, we need to consider what causes these contextual changes in the first place. Other than natural events like earthquakes and changes in the weather, the only thing that can bring about changes in the context is the intended or unintended consequences of the actions of individuals or groups of individuals. If people lived in closed societies that existed as discrete bounded entities, then this argument would be circular and we would be stuck in a chicken and egg situation – which came first the changed context or the changed action? But since people do not live in such closed societies this circularity does not arise. We do, though, have to consider the nature of the societies or communities in which people live.

The vast majority of people live in some sort of collectivity, whether this is a small scale local community or a large scale national society. For want of a better term, these collectivities can be called social systems. But these social systems are not closed systems. They are open systems and they are in turn part of broader regional or world systems (Friedman and Rowlands 1977, Wolf 1985). This is a shorthand way of saying that individuals interact with a large number of other individuals, some of whom live in the same local collectivity and some of whom live further away. The nature of these interactions might be quite different, varying from reciprocal face-to-face conversations to one-way communication via television or newspapers, or from trading partnerships to relations of colonial domination. Most interactions will probably, but not necessarily, take place within the local social system, but it is often through the more infrequent and unusual longer distance interactions that new ideas are transmitted and new opportunities come about.

Thus in our example we could consider the school to be the local social system. Many of the interactions of the students and the teachers take place with other members of the school, but all of them are also involved in interactions with people outside the school, such as parents, friends, TV presenters, novelists and so on. In our hypothetical case the consequences of the actions of a group of documentary makers,

programme schedulers and various other people outside of the school provided the students in the school with some new resources which they used to justify a new action.

Or we could take another example. Consider three small scale communities, A, B and C. People in A have trading partnerships with people in C and they travel through B's territory as they go back and forth with their wares. At some time, however, the people in society D invade B's territory and start a long drawn out war. This action of the people from D will have consequences not only for the people of B, but also for the people of A and C. It is now no longer safe for them to pass through B's territory in their trading activities and they will have to decide whether to look for other routes, or new trading partners from other communities, or to give up trading altogether. In this way the consequences of people's action can change the context for other people even though there has been no *direct* interaction between these two people or groups of people.

The point here is very simple, but very important. Because of the complex web of interconnections between individuals, the actions of individuals in one local social system can have consequences for individuals in other local social systems. This is not to say that all change is 'externally generated', for the division between internal and external has become blurred. The open nature of social systems means that 'internal' and 'external' are just matters of degree. Contexts do not only change because external colonisers arrive, they can also change because wars disrupt trade which changes the local opportunities for wealth production, or in any number of other ways. In order to understand change in one locale then it is not necessary to trace back the chain of causes to some ultimate starting point. Such an exercise would in any case be impossible. Going back two or three links in the chain should be more than sufficient to understand the local dynamics that have provided the new opportunities that have led to people changing their actions.

Now that we have seen how contextual change can come about, and the type of contextual change that is likely to lead to individuals changing their actions, we can now consider how the aggregate of these changed actions can retain some degree of coherence or 'systemness'. The model so far might seem to imply that everyone just

does as they please and that any resulting social or cultural change is simply random. This is not the case for two reasons. Firstly, when individuals try to change their actions these changes are often contested. And secondly, most collectivities have institutions for making communal decisions and hence communally-sanctioned changes. These two types of local interaction tend to have the effect of retaining some degree of 'systemness' in social life.

When there is contextual change this change will not necessarily open up new opportunities for everyone. In most cases some individuals will be able to benefit from the new opportunities while others will not. Some may even stand to lose from the new opportunities that are now available to other people. In our example of the students and their teacher, for instance, the new context provided an opportunity for the students to enhance their status but it thus also opened up the possibility that the teacher's status might be diminished. The fact that changed contexts provide different types of opportunities for differently situated people has been ably demonstrated by several anthropologists, notably those from the Marxist tradition (eg. Meillassoux 1975, Rey 1975). In this type of situation it is common for conflicts to emerge between individuals who stand to gain and individuals who stand to lose from the change. The way that these conflicts are handled will affect the way that individual change aggregates and incremental social or cultural change takes place.

Let us return to our example of the students and their teacher. In our hypothetical case the screening of the documentary has provided the students with new opportunities to take action to enhance their status in the school and challenge the authority of the teacher. Let us assume that the students choose to act on this opportunity and that they do not stand up for when their teacher next comes into the room. It is extremely unlikely that the teacher will just accept this behaviour and continue as normal. On the contrary, he is likely to contest this new behaviour and try to make the students stand up. The way in which the teacher chooses to contest the new behaviour will depend in part on the rules and resources that are available to him. Thus he might threaten the students with detention. Because the teacher can draw on more powerful resources than the students, such as detentions, it is very likely that he will be able to successfully contest the change and force the students to act in the 'appropriate' way.

In this case, then, a one-off change will not aggregate into incremental change in the social system because the change has been successfully contested.

Such cases are not unusual. Because the rules and resources in society are never equally distributed, it is generally the case that one protagonist in a dispute will be able to draw on more powerful resources than the other protagonists. In this way the unequal distribution of power in society can make certain types of change more difficult, such as those that are to the detriment of the power holders. And conversely it can make certain other types of change more easy, namely those that are of benefit to the power holders. So change will not be random after all. Its patterning will be shaped by the distribution of power in society.

Let us imagine for a moment that power is distributed somewhat differently in the school and that the teachers cannot give detentions. In this situation, when the threat of sanctions cannot resolve the conflict, it is likely that negotiation will take place instead. The head teacher might call a special meeting and the teachers and students might get a chance to argue their cases and explain why they think one particular behaviour or the other is appropriate. In such a situation the students have a far greater likelihood of persuading the teachers to accept their new behaviour and it is much more likely that a change will be successful. If the change is agreed by all the teachers and students in the meeting then it will become the new rule. Students in other classes will not have to stand up for teachers and a tiny transformation of the local social system will have taken place.

In this case we have seen a rather different method of dispute resolution. Instead of powerful people using codified rules and sanctions to impose a judgement, we see individuals coming together to resolve their differences through discussion. Both methods of dispute resolution can lead to a change in the rules, but the type of change that is most likely will be different according to the range of interests represented in the decision-making body. School rules are far more likely to change to the benefit of the students if students are involved in the dispute resolution and decision-making processes. The important point here is that methods of dispute resolution and communal decision-making will influence the way that overall incremental change takes place. In order to understand social and cultural change, then, we must rescue

the topic of dispute resolution from the backwaters of legal anthropology and place it right at the centre of our analysis.

Let me summarise the argument so far. Social and cultural change will take place in a local social system when the consequences of actions of individuals or groups of individuals in other local social systems provide new opportunities for certain individuals to improve their lot. Being maximisers, these individuals will probably try to change their actions so as to exploit the new opportunity to their benefit. Other individuals will most likely contest these changes because they stand to lose from them. This will result in conflict and disputes. Each disputant will use all the rules and resources available to him or her to try to resolve the conflict in their own favour. In most cases these resources will not be distributed equally between the two disputants, giving one of them an advantage.

One of the resources available to both disputants in most cases however will be the procedures of communal dispute resolution that are used in that local social system, such as courts and judges or informal communal assemblies. The final outcome of the dispute and hence of the initial attempted change will be influenced by both the distribution of resources between the disputants and by the particular procedures of communal dispute resolution and decision-making. The outcome may either be the upholding of tradition (ie. agreeing to do things the way they were done before) or the micro-transformation of structure (ie. agreeing to do something new).

This outcome will then feed back to influence further action. If the outcome happened to be the micro-transformation of structure then the new rule agreed upon would form part of the new set of rules and resources that other individuals could then draw upon when deciding how to act. It would thus change the context of further action. If it changed the context in a way that did not provide any new opportunities for individuals to further improve their lot then it would not lead to any further change. If, however, it changed the context in such a way that it did provide new opportunities for certain individuals to further improve their lot, then these individuals would probably act so as to exploit these opportunities and the cycle of disputes, resolution and possible micro-transformation would go round again. In this way incremental

micro-transformations can iterate and eventually result in overall systemic transformation.

In order to show how this can take place we must now leave abstract theorising and return to grounded ethnography. The series of events that I propose will eventually result in systemic change, or even systemic transformation, do not follow a linear sequence. We cannot start at the beginning and predict what will happen. In any real situation the interplay of changed contexts and changed actions is so complex that we can only understand what happened after it has happened. We need to take a real situation and try to follow through the course of events as they unfold. Let us then return to southern Ethiopia and introduce our ethnographic case in a little more detail.

The Gamo Highlands

The ethnographic puzzle presented at the beginning of this chapter comes from one of the communities of the Gamo Highlands. The Gamo Highlands lie in a fairly remote part of Ethiopia, some 500km southwest of Addis Abeba. They are located in what was formerly Gamo-Gofa province and is now, with some boundary changes, North Omo Zone. The administrative centre of this zone and the locus of most connections between this area and the central government of Ethiopia is the town of Arba Minch. Founded near the southern shores of lake Abaya in the late 1960s, Arba Minch is a small town with a population of some 40,000 people (Population and Housing Census 1994:109). Two dirt roads climb the 1,500m up from hot and dusty Arba Minch into the cool and damp highlands. One road leads to the tiny town of Gerese in the southern part of the highlands and the other leads to the slightly larger town of Chenchä in the north. Despite the presence of local government offices, neither of these towns have electricity, running water or a population greater than 6,000 people.

Rising up from the west of Lakes Abaya and Ch'amo, the Gamo Highlands reach altitudes of over 3,000m and are home to approximately 700,000 men and women (Population and Housing Census 1994:14). The cultivation of cereals forms the basis of subsistence, with barley and wheat being most important in the higher altitudes,

and maize and sorghum more important on the lower slopes. *Enset*², or the ‘false banana’, is also central to subsistence and other crops include peas, beans, potatoes and cabbage. Manure is essential for successful agriculture and thus cattle and small-stock are kept by most farmers. Men hoe the land using the two-pronged hoe and they often farm together in work groups. In some parts of the highlands men have also taken up weaving and trading in recent years.

People live in scattered settlements and are organised into many different communities or *dere*. The national administration further groups these communities together into Peasant Associations, which form the smallest unit of local government. Each Peasant Association will have a chairman, secretary and various other officers who will generally be local men who have had some school education and become literate in Amharic. This state allocation of power, however, exists alongside local political traditions in which the distribution of power in any community is organised according to two contrasting politico-ritual systems which, in short hand, we can call the sacrificial system and the initiatory system.

Sacrificial seniority is ascribed and is largely based on genealogical seniority according to primogeniture. Seniors make animal sacrifices on behalf of their juniors at all levels of society: lineage heads for their lineage members, clan heads for their clan members, and community sacrificers for their community. The senior sacrificer of a *dere* is generally known as *kawo*, and, although he is more a symbolic figurehead than a political leader, this term has sometimes been translated as ‘king’.

In contrast, initiatory seniority is achieved and is essentially open to anyone. Men are initiated to the position of *halak’a*, with their wives or mothers, through a series of rituals that can span between two months and two years and include a series of feasts for which the initiate must accumulate large amounts of resources. While he is *halak’a* a man is said to ‘herd’ the community. He has a special role in the communal assembly, he carries out animal sacrifices on behalf of the community and he observes a number of prohibitions in his own behaviour. Once his period of ‘herding’ the community comes to an end, the *halak’a* discharges these responsibilities to the next *halak’a* and himself takes on the more senior status of *dere ade*, or community father.

As a *dere ade* he now commands greater respect and can often become highly influential in community matters.

These two cultural systems are not unique to the Gamo Highlands, but are found in various forms throughout much of southwest Ethiopia. In the areas to the north and west of the Gamo Highlands there are traditional kingdoms and chiefdoms where the sacrificial system predominates, while in the areas to the south and east there are many societies with generation grading systems based on organised series of initiations. What is unusual about the Gamo Highlands, located at the overlap of these two broad 'culture areas', is that here these two systems co-exist alongside each other.

Thus there is no overall leader of any *dere* and sacrificers, *halak'as* and *dere ades* can all make competing claims to seniority and authority. None of these men, however, have the power to impose their will on the community or to make laws or judgements. Instead all community decisions are made at open assemblies in which all male citizens can participate. Decisions are made after lengthy discussions and only when the assembly can come to consensus.

I lived in the highlands for 21 months between 1995 and 1997, and spent most of this time in the community of Doko. Doko is the community which presents the particular ethnographic puzzle that will form the focus of this book. It is a reasonably large community and it is located in the northern part of the highlands, not very far from Chenchu town and the road down to Arba Minch. It is currently divided into two halves, Doko Masho and Doko Gembela, and I lived in Doko Masho with a family who very kindly took me into their home and quickly involved me in local life. They will appear many times in the pages of this book, and hence deserve some introduction now.

The head of this family was a man named Shagire. In his late sixties or early seventies, Shagire was a respected elder and *dere ade*. He had a reputation for fairness and honesty and he also had a very wicked sense of humour. His wife, Halimbe, was a quiet woman who seemed rather older than her years. She had given birth to four surviving children. The girls, Assani, Shasheto and Tsehainesh had all married and gone to live with their husbands' families, while the one son, Wale,

continued to live with Shagire and Halimbe. Wale was an intelligent man in his thirties. He had six years of school education behind him and was literate in Amharic. He had also trained as a carpenter and thus he spent little time engaged in farming. Much to Shagire's dismay, Wale had refused to be initiated as *halak'a* and had converted to Protestantism some years ago. Instead of participating in many of the ritual activities that his parents felt to be important, he now preferred to go to Church on Sundays with his wife, Almaz, and their two young children.

The tensions between the different members of this family will play a large part in our story of social and cultural change in Doko. The story that I am going to tell, though, stretches back in time to the beginning of the nineteenth century and involves a consideration of events beyond the confines of Doko, or even of the Gamo Highlands. In order to understand how the practices of the sacrificial and initiatory systems have changed we will need to consider the causes of these changes and the way in which they have been brought about by the actions of individuals. And in order to understand how the changes in the practices of the initiatory system have resulted in the overall transformation of that system we will need to follow through the complicated chain of incremental changes that have taken place.

Given that I was only in Doko for a short time and given that the micro-sociological detail that such an analysis requires are unlikely to be retained in the historical record, it would seem that we have a difficult task before us. And indeed, reconstructing the precise details of all the events that actually took place in the past two hundred years would be impossible. But this is not our aim. Our aim, more simply, is to construct a plausible model of how that change took place.

The structure of the book

In order to construct such a model we will first need to know about the macro-historical changes that have taken place during the last two hundred years or so, and chapter two starts our story by recounting these events. We will also need to know how these macro-historical changes have changed the local context in the Gamo Highlands and consider what new opportunities they have opened up and who was

well placed to take advantage of them. This will be discussed in chapters three and six. In order to understand this fully though, we will also need to know something about the distribution of power in Doko at various times throughout this period and also about the rules and resources that structure, and have structured, the local social system. This will be discussed in chapters four and five, where the sacrificial system and the initiatory system will be taken in turn.

Having pieced together a picture of the changing context in Doko and of the types of new opportunities that would have become available to certain people at various points in the past two hundred years, the analysis then turns to consider how certain individuals would have acted on these opportunities and how other people would have responded to their actions. We will need to look at the types of conflict that would be likely to ensue and the way in which these conflicts would be resolved. And we will also need to consider whether or not the Gamo mode of conflict resolution would be likely to result in decisions to make incremental changes to the 'rules'. All this is the topic of chapter seven.

Then in chapter eight we can consider how a series of such incremental changes might have iterated and resulted in overall systemic change in the initiatory system. We will piece together a plausible chain of events by considering the change that took place between two known instantiations of the system. With this knowledge of 'before' and 'after' we can extrapolate what is likely to have happened in between. We can construct a plausible model of how the system transformed. Having done this, we must also consider why the changes that took place did not also lead to the transformation of the sacrificial system. And finally, we can discuss more generally why it is that different cultural systems seem to change in different ways.

Notes

¹ However, in a later publication Barth writes ‘all social acts are ecologically embedded... The social and ecological cannot, with respect to the forms of social events and institutions, be treated as separate systems’ (Barth 1992:20).

² *Ensete venticosum*. Differing from ordinary banana plants in terms of the form of the pseudostem, seed, embryo and chromosome number of the fruit, enset takes three to six years to build up a sufficient store of carbohydrates to be utilized as food. During that time it requires large amounts of manure or it will exhaust the soil. Despite this disadvantage, enset will support a greater density of population than cereal grains, has higher caloric yields per land unit, and is far more drought resistant (Hamer 1986:217-8).