

Why is the body an important object of anthropological study?

In order to try and understand a different culture I feel it is of paramount importance to first consider the smallest human unit of that culture. How people relate to that individual unit, facilitates understanding of collectives such as the family and the society itself. As Comaroff suggests, (1985:6-7), “the body mediates all action upon the world and simultaneously constitutes the self and the universe of social and natural relations of which it is a part. It is through this mediation that a body becomes a person.” Therefore, without the fundamental understanding of the values and significance different cultures place on the object ‘the body’, and how that transpires into how cultures classify basic notions of personhood, gender and membership of families, there can be no real understanding of more specific ideas e.g. the need for genitalic manipulation in Somalia and literal divides of communities along the lines of sex within the Hua community. This essay will look into different ways in which an understanding of the body tells us something about a culture; its importance as an object of anthropological study.

One culture where the body is used to categorise people and therefore define how society is made up, is the Sa’dan Troja. Their society is split into two people, the true people and slaves; it is what their body is said to be made up of that determines which category they fall into. True people and slaves are seen as having different qualities as they were originally formed in different ways, slaves for example were created using mud by the Puang Mata, whereas nobles were made using gold. Their origin and the value of the substance their bodies are made up of is seen as significant as “every act of proper procreation is a continuum of the original cosmogenic practice, an imitation of the initial process of engenderment,”ⁱ. Their body type, and social category then, is used as a guide for that person’s right and duties. “The body gives the ability to live and also tells how one should live, it is inscribed and inherited through body-social roles.”ⁱⁱⁱ Although people can act as individuals then, their actions are predetermined by their bodily inheritance. For the Sad’ dam Troja, society is both determined and understood through the physical body.

Although the body is a physical unit unto itself, it is not always thought of as such. In our culture the body is a personal thing, its outer layer can be used to reflect what we are like ‘inside’ for example, large tattoos suggest rebellion. However the body as a reflection of an individual’s soul isn’t used across all cultures. The Gahuka-Ghana of New Guinea are a patrilineal society, bloodlines dictate moral codes, one is thought of in relation to their family and their social roles, the self doesn’t end at the body. Just like the person extends into the wider view of their family, the concept of the body extends also as a reflection of more than ones self. To the Ghaku-Ghama, all people are of ‘one skin’; you are the sum total of yourself and your associated bodies. Their perception of the boundaries of body explains their tight community. Similarly, understanding that the body’s boundaries vary cross-culturally makes it possible to comprehend why like the Sa’dan Troja, death is interpreted differently. We see the failing of the entire body system as death, but for the Sa’dan Troja death doesn’t occur until the end of certain rituals. In cultures where personhood is seen as a progression of, not just the having of a body, then death can’t be seen as simply a reflection of a state of the body either. Because body parts

are seen to have been inherited from your family, death doesn't mean you have completely ended as these body parts are passed on through your offspring. This is sort of along the line of genetics, but these body substances don't determine particular characteristics, they provide you with them. People aren't dead until there has been social involvement event, a ritual. Interpretations of the body then also affect the fundamental issue of what it is to be alive.

Like the Ghaku-Ghama, the Somalians are also a patrilineal society and see body as unnatural and in need of change for their society to work. Infibulation is standard practice to transform girls into real women as gender is only casually dependent upon sex, and also into respectful, pure people who deserve to be part of their family and start their own. The procedure isn't a matter of choice; without it to the Somalis you are impure and of lesser moral worth. If we don't study the body anthropologically how would we be able to comprehend just how important family membership is to some cultures? The bodily shape in this circumstance links the person to society.

Errington discusses an interesting point about how we are born unfinished.ⁱⁱⁱ The basic body is seen as a starting point, we in the west see the body's development through physical stages of puberty, but also through emotional growth as without human contact the basics of communication and social rules aren't learnt. However, in other cultures such as the Bimin-Kuskusmin of New Guinea changes of the body reflect the progression of personhood, these changes aren't the natural ones involved in growth. The initiation rights amongst these people see various harms being done to the body including enforced vomiting and flesh burning and various incisions. The changing of the body is vital for the forging of a new identity of an individual, once the initiation process is complete the individual can his moral career in society gaining responsibility and status. The changing of the body is therefore seen as a visible evidence of an inward and conceptual process. Furthermore, the memories of what their body has suffered also then serves as a physical reminder of the acquired masculinity and therefore just how much value it ought to mean to him. These initiation rituals are open to males, even though they are born with male bodies the belief is that it is made up of both male (agnatic) and female parts, the female are undesirable and must be removed. Therefore their ideas of what makes up the body also reflects what it meant be part of the male or female category in their culture. For other cultures the physiological make up of the body is again of great importance, but instead, like for the women of Somalia it is its external presentation which is used to reflect the type of person they are; the body is used as a canvas to reflect your stage of personhood.,

The body is important to study because it is universally seen as starting point of how to act. In the west your sex is given from the day you are born, we then act in a certain way to project what type of sex we are because without showing anatomical evidence is unacceptable. For the Bimin-Kuskusmin one is born genderless, however this still tells you how to act as it gives you something to aspire to. Gender isn't for the Bimin-Kuskusmin, seen as natural. The body then is also important because even though our particular physiology because of our gender doesn't physically stop us talking part in certain activates, it is still used to put people into categories of what they can and can not

do. The interpretation of the body allows for a society to control who ought to be doing what.

Other cultures also see the external as the important was to recognise people's genders. The Tehambuli for instance are men because they dress like them, their actions and external presentations are what define their gender. In that society then you can change gender all the time, this then transpires into having a pretty much equal society as having no division of categories mean no rules need to be assigned to each sex. This is important for anthropological study as it suggest that if we disregard the body, don't let it effect how we design society then there can be equality within a culture and an encouraged idea people being valued on their individual merit.

As well as having wider social significance, the body is also used to shows signs about certain people. For example, an unbalanced body in the Sa'dan Troja is said to reflect illness or that they have committed an offence. Great faith then in some cultures is placed in the body for its use of showing truths about people. A further example of this is with the Hua of New Guinea where it is said that men can become pregnant, this is an illness contracted in various ways, one of them being by eating food prepared by menstruating women.^{iv} As women are seen as harmful in their society (during the age of ovulation or barrenness in particular), then seeing that they can cause this illness reinforces that women are inferior and that their community should operate in a gender divided way. The body here then doesn't just help organise the social hierarchy, it is used as an instrument of explaining why events like illness occur.

The body isn't just necessary to understand the human organization of societies, it also tell us how cultures perceive the world around them. In the west we place great significance in our eyes, sight it how we make sense of the world, it is our index of truth. However for the Tzotzil, touch is the most importance sense, to touch an object is to understand it, they use a different part of their body to understand the world around them, it isn't just a physical tool, it is used more for thought also. This shows that for some cultures there is a direct link between what the body means and how objects are interpreted, for others like the Tzotzil the body is still used for interpretation, but the body is part of the process for understanding things, heat is the basic force of the universe, it cant be felt without your body, so without using your body you have no perception of the world. The body had more than just meaning because of its form and function.

Studying the body and how it effect societies divisions through gender is important then, as there is little to be understood of their social hierarchy without it. As the Somalis have shown new biologys can be accepted, the body isn't the ultimate tool in understanding as it can be changes, so understanding that societies aren't jus determined by what their bodies reflect teach us as anthropologists to look for different ways that cultures are organised and appreciate that nothing can be taken as natural.

Errington points out an alternative benefit for the anthropologist who studies the meanings of the 'the body'.^v Although we have seen that cross-culturally the

interpretation of bodies and gender varies, the difference in male and female bodies in a purely visual way, does act as evidence for their being different categories of people, differences aren't simply products of human consciousness. Different cultures will explain why, to what extent and what it means to them to use gender related categories in their society, but the visual difference of a male and female body does confirm the existence of difference. Bodies therefore "provide rich material for the classification and interpretation of human activities",^{vi} but can also be used by the western anthropologist to confirm basic notions of difference.

To conclude, Marriot (1796:109-110)^{vii}, suggests that "Society is determined by and perceived through the physical body". This has been shown to be true as it used by various cultures, in various ways to help organise and direct their society, therefore as anthropologists, it is essential for the body to be understood to gain accurate insights into different peoples.

ⁱ Tsintjilonis, D. 2000 'Death and the Sacrifice of Signs; "Measuring" the Dead in Tana Toraja'. *Oceania* 71: 1-17

ⁱⁱ As above

ⁱⁱⁱ Errington, S. 1990 'Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A theoretical and Regional Overview'. In J. Atkinson and S. Errington (eds), *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*. Stanford University Press. Pages 11-37.

^{iv} Meigs, A. 1976 'Male pregnancy and the reduction of sexual opposition in a New Guinea Highlands society'. *Ethnology* 15: 393-407

^v Errington, S. 1990 'Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A theoretical and Regional Overview'. In J. Atkinson and S. Errington (eds), *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*. Stanford University Press. Pages 11-37.

^{vi} As above

^{vii} As cited in Errington, S. 1990 'Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A theoretical and Regional Overview'. In J. Atkinson and S. Errington (eds), *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*. Stanford University Press. Pages 11-37.