Lesson Two
Culture

You can respond to human differences with hate or ignorance, or you can choose to open up to them and ask questions you have never considered before.

THE ART OF SEEING

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?" — David Foster Wallace

Culture is like water to us. We're so immersed in our own ideas and assumptions that we can't see them. It can be useful to jump out of the water now and then. This is one of the great virtues of encountering someone or some place that is radically different from what we know. We see the contrast between how we do things and how they do things, and we can then see ourselves in a new light.

The art of seeing can be broken up into four parts. First, we have to see our own seeing—that is, see how we see the world, recognizing our own taken-for-granted assumptions, and be able to set them aside. Second, we have to "see big," to see the larger cultural, social, economic, historical, and

political forces that shape our everyday lives. Third, we have to "see small," paying close attention to the smallest details and understanding their significance. And finally, we have to "see it all," piecing all of this together to see how everything we can see interacts from a holistic point of view.

Learning to see in this way is the essence of learning. As Neil Postman points out, "The ability to learn turns out to be a function of the extent to which one is capable of perception change. If a student goes through four years of school and comes out 'seeing' things in the way he did when he started … he learned nothing."

Mastering the art of seeing offers many benefits beyond just the ability to learn. The most obvious benefit is that you become better at building and maintaining relationships. Being able to see your own seeing and set aside your assumptions, see big to see where another person is coming from, and see small to truly understand them from their point of view can help you through the most challenging of relationship troubles. It can help you build better friendships, and allow you to make more friends across boundaries rarely crossed.

But mastering the art of seeing offers something even more profound. When you master the art of seeing *you will never be bored.* You will see the strange in the familiar, and the familiar in the strange. And you will have the ability to find significance in the most mundane moments. As David Foster Wallace says, "if you really learn how to pay attention … it will be in your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down."

While his metaphor of a fish in water is useful, culture is different from water in one very important way: it is not just the environment around us. It is a part of us. It is the very thing that allows us to see and notice things at all. We see the world through our culture. Leaping out of the water doesn't just allow you to see your own culture in a new light; it allows you to see your own seeing. And

sometimes, even something that looks familiar on the surface might be the source of a revealing difference.

SEEING YOUR OWN SEEING

Basketball arrived in my village just one year before me. Large groups of all ages gathered every afternoon on a dirt court that had been cleared of grass and pounded flat by nothing but bare human feet. The backboards were slats of wood carved with axes from the surrounding forest, and the rims were made of thick metal wire, salvaged from some other project. They played every day until sundown, the perfect end to a day of gardening and gathering firewood. It was a welcome and familiar sight, and I eagerly joined in.

I stepped onto the court and noticed that for the first time in my life, I was taller than everybody else. Even better, the rims had been set to about 8 feet, perfect for dunking. I rushed in for a massive dunk on my first opportunity, putting my team up 6-0. I looked to my friend Kodenim for a high five, but he looked concerned or even angry as he slapped his hand to his forearm as if to say, "Foul! Foul!"

I owned the court. I grabbed a steal and went in for another dunk, looking to Kodenim again for a fist pump or cheer. Instead, he gave me a stern look and pounded his bicep with his hand. He was trying to send me a signal, but I wasn't getting it.

Later I would find out that he was trying to send me a not-so-subtle reminder of the score. Rather than a "Base 10" counting system (cycling 1-10 then starting again 11-20 and so on), the villagers use a "Base 27" system and use their entire upper body to count it. 1-5 are on the hand, 6-10 along the arm, 11 at the neck, 12 is the ear, 13 the eye, 14 the nose, and then back down the other side. 6-0, Kodenim slaps his forearm. 8-0, he slaps his bicep.

It is a clever system that suits them well. There are no annual seasons to track in Papua New Guinea, so the most relevant natural cycle to track is not the path of the sun, but the path of the moon. A hunter can start counting from the new moon and know that as the count gets closer to his eyes (days 13, 14, and 15) he will be able to

see at night using the light of the full moon. Women can use it to count the days until their next menstrual cycle.

I drifted into the background of the game as I tried to figure out what was going on. The other team started scoring, tying the game at 14. "14-14!" the score keeper announced with jubilation, pointing to his nose. Everybody cheered and walked off the court. *Where's everybody going?* I thought. *It's tied up.* "Next basket wins!" I suggested. Kodenim took me aside. "Mike, we like to end in a tie," he said, and then he smiled the way you smile at a four-year-old who is just learning the ways of the world, and gently recommended that I not do any more dunking. "People might be jealous."

The story illustrates the power of different types of cultural differences. Some differences, like the Base 27 counting system, are intellectually interesting, but they do not threaten our core beliefs, assumptions, or our moral sense of right and wrong. Such differences are fun to consider and give us an emotionally easy way to play with cultural differences and "see our own seeing."

Other differences, like the preference to end a game in a tie, are a little more challenging, because they force us to recognize that many of our core ideas and ideals are actually culturally constructed. They take what seem to be obvious and natural ideas – like the idea that sports are meant to be won or lost – and show that things need not be this way. We can then ask new questions. *Why do we value competition while they do not? What advantages are there to favoring competition vs. favoring a tie? What does this difference say about our society? What role has this obsession with winning played in my own development? Would my life be better or worse without the emphasis on winning?*

And then there are differences that shake you to your core. They are hard to see because they challenge your most foundational ideas, ideals and values. They might make you question everything about what you thought was right and wrong, real and unreal, possible and impossible.

I was about to find out that the most interesting difference I encountered on that basketball court that day was not the tie game or

the interesting method of counting. It was that last thing Kodenim said to me: "*People might be jealous*."

A few weeks later, Kodenim would fall ill and be fighting for his life. His once-strong physique would wither until his arms and legs looked like little more than a skeleton, while his stomach would enlarge and become so distended that people would describe him as "pregnant." He would put the blame for his illness on jealousy and claim that someone – probably my adoptive father – was working witchcraft on him. With lives and reputations on the line, it would not be so easy to just put aside my own beliefs, ideals, and values or "see my own seeing." I would need more tools, more ways of seeing.

SEEING BIG

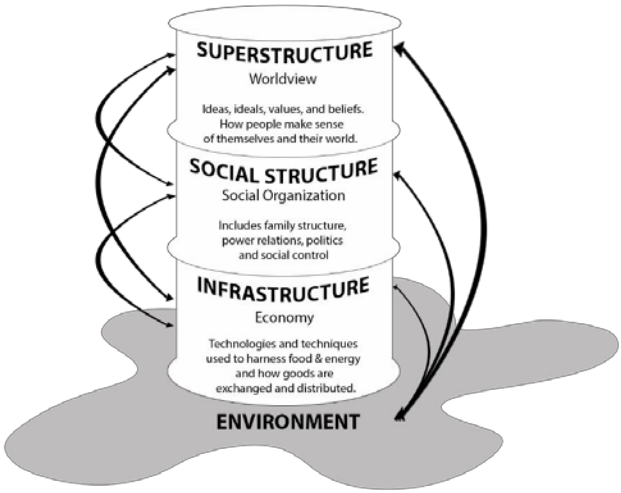
A basic assumption that anthropologists make about culture is that everything is connected. Culture is a complex system made up of many different but interrelated elements. You cannot understand any one part of a culture without understanding how it is related to other parts in the cultural system. Understanding culture will ultimately require that we take a holistic perspective. We have to practice "seeing big."

Given the complexity of culture, it can be useful to have a model. Anthropologists have devised many models and metaphors for understanding culture. Many of them refer in some way to the idea that culture can be divided into three levels: infrastructure, social structure, and superstructure. Here we will use the "barrel model" developed by anthropologist Harald Prins to demonstrate what these levels refer to and how they are interrelated.

The model captures three key features of culture:

1. It is structured.
2. It is pervasive and present in all aspects of our lives, from our economy to our worldview.
3. Each element of culture is integrated with the other elements.

First, by using the word "structure," the model expands upon our common-sense notions of culture. Most people tend to think of culture as "the beliefs and practices of a group of people," but this definition hides the ways in which the vast complex of beliefs and practices in a group ultimately form into formidable structures that shape our lives, just as wood and nails can be joined into complex patterns to form the structure of a house or building. We do not define a house as "wood and nails" because it would tell us nothing about the form of those wood and nails.



A rendition of the "barrel model of culture" developed by anthropologist Harald Prins, based on ideas first introduced by Karl Marx.

In the same way, we cannot simply describe culture as "beliefs and practices" because the long-term patterns of beliefs and practices become as real and formidable as the walls of a house. They form a structure that shapes our lives just as surely as wood and nails can form a structure that shapes a room.

Cultural structures can be difficult to see, so there is often a sense of "seeing beneath the surface of things" in order to understand why we do the things that we do. This is an especially exciting part about obtaining the ability to "see big." When we see big we are seeing big

patterns and structures that are usually hidden from our everyday consciousness.

It is like pulling back the curtain on the workings of the world or cracking open the box of culture to see what really makes us tick. The model then teases apart three different levels of structure, further expanding our notion of culture beyond mere "beliefs and practices." Culture can be divided into infrastructure, social structure, and superstructure, or, in other words, our economy (technologies, techniques, exchange & distribution systems); social organization (social, political, and family structures); and our worldview (ideas, ideals, beliefs and values).

The model demonstrates that culture permeates our lives, from how we make a living (economy) to what we live for (our ideals and values).

But perhaps the most important piece of the model is the double arrows, which point to the fact that culture is integrated and dynamic. Change one thing and you change them all. A shift in the environment or a new technology can have profound effects on social structure or worldview, and vice versa.

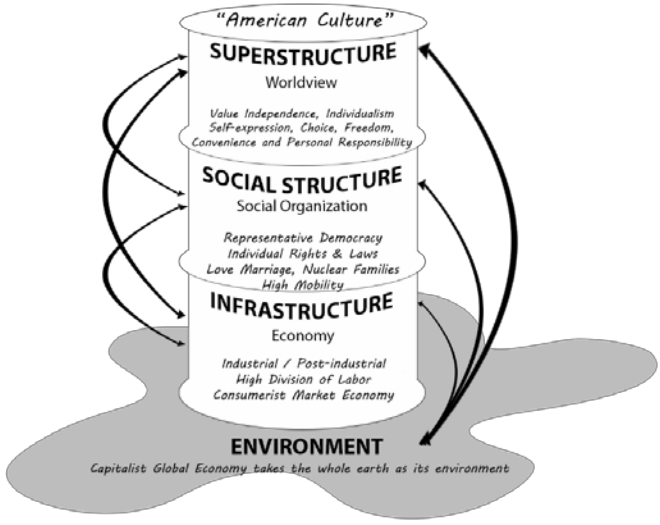
"Seeing big" takes practice. You cannot just memorize this model and suddenly be a master of seeing big. Structure is hard to see, and seeing the complex relationships between different levels of structure can be even harder. Unlike simple math, when you try to understand a culture, there is no point at which you will know beyond doubt that you "have it right." But despite this uncertainty, it is absolutely necessary.

Let's start our practice by using the barrel model to examine American culture. We can begin by simply plugging in some simple descriptions of American infrastructure, social structure and superstructure.

Our infrastructure might be described as industrial or post-industrial with a global capitalist economy. To survive, we each must find a job, earn money, and then exchange this money for food and

other goods. Our exchanges are meant to be efficient and simple exchanges of commodities.

Relationships are hidden or minimized. We usually have no idea who grew our food, who packaged it, who delivered it, or even who sold it to us. We certainly do not feel obligated to them in any way once we have paid for the goods.



This shapes and is shaped by a worldview with a owerful sense of independence and individualism. *I earned my money. I bought these things. They are mine now.* Choices are abundant, and we can demonstrate to others who we are by the choices we make.

We not only choose what we will eat, wear, or drive. We also choose what jobs we will do, who we will marry, and where we will live (mobility). Our political system further enshrines the value of choice as we vote to choose who will represent us and make our laws.

We value and nurture individualism in our schools when we give out individual grades or champion a student's unique creativity. We celebrate and elevate sports and movie stars for their unique individual talents. We seek individual salvation or enlightenment. The values of independence, individualism, choice and freedom permeate

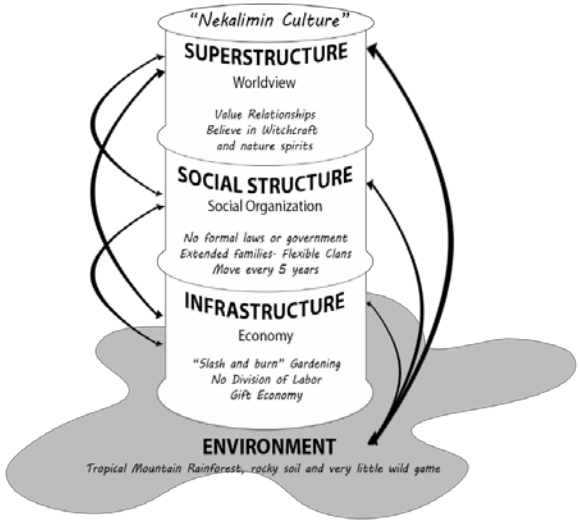
our lives, from infrastructure, to social structure, to superstructure.We can try to tease apart the culture and find causal relationships. *Does capitalism cause individualism? Or does individualism cause capitalism? Or more broadly, does infrastructure cause superstructure or vice versa?*

But the closer we look, the more we find these elements of culture are so intimately connected that there is no way to pull them apart. Instead of saying that one element shapes another, we often say that one element "shapes and is shaped by" another.

Capitalism shapes and is shaped by individualism. Individualism shapes and is shaped by the American political system. The American labor market shapes and is shaped by individualism. This kind of relationship is called "mutual constitution." Both elements are "constituted" (made up of and made possible by) each other.

If our value on individualism waned, capitalism would change as well. If capitalism changes, so do our individualistic values.

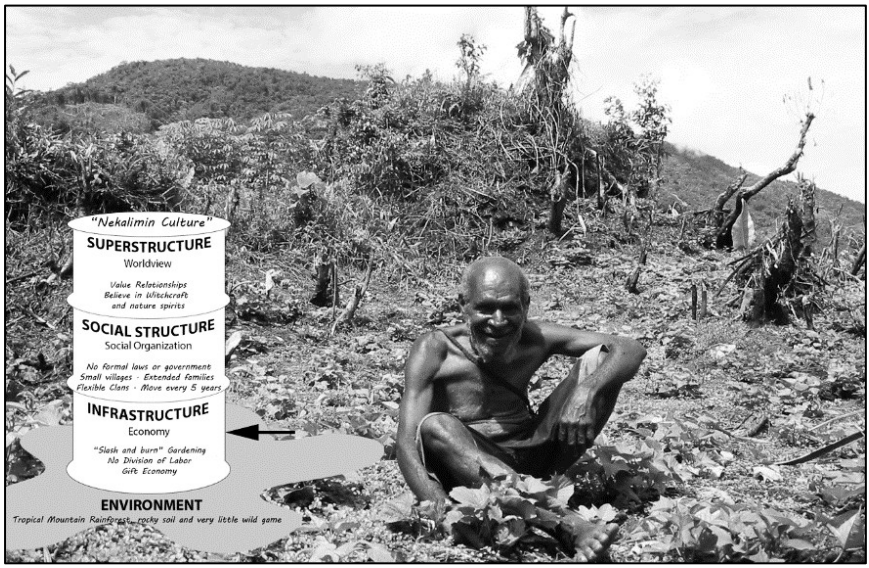
Now let's look at Nekalimin culture. A quick sketch of the key elements of their culture plugged into the barrel model looks like this:



Let's do a quick tour of their land to see what this looks like in reality. They live in a tropical mountain rainforest with rocky soils

and very little wild game. There is not enough game to support the culture, so they cannot survive on hunting alone. The soil is rocky, low in nutrients, and most of it is shaded by the forest canopy. However, by cutting down the forest they let the sunshine in and they can burn what they cut as a way of adding nutrients to the soil for their taro, sweet potato, and bananas.

Here is a picture of my father in his garden that has recently been cleared, burned and planted.

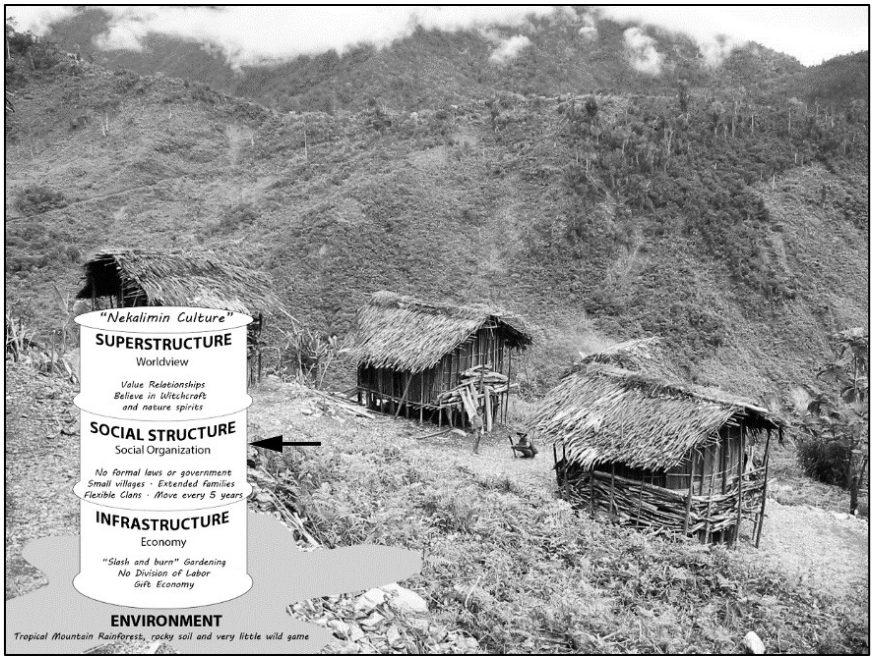


The nutrients from the burn will last about five years. After this, the area must be left alone so the forest can regenerate for about 30 years and then be cleared and burned again.

One immediate impact of this gardening practice is on the size and location of villages. A typical village has no more than 10 houses and a total population ranging from about 30 to 80. Anything larger requires longer and longer walks to access gardens and sources of firewood. Villages also move about every 5-10 years as the nutrients from a burned area are depleted and left to regenerate.

There are no markets or money exchanges. Food and goods are shared and exchanged as gifts rather than bought and sold as

commodities. When someone gives a gift, they do not expect immediate payment. As I discovered, offering immediate cash payment can be offensive, as it suggests that you are trying to end the relationship and not have to remember them.



In this gift economy, it is the relationships that have lasting value, not goods or money. People work hard to maintain strong relationships because they know they can then call on them when they are in need. There is no incentive to hoard goods, since most of their goods (like sweet potatoes and bananas) would rot and wither away.

As the nutrients of their current gardens are depleted, people have to think about where they will make their next garden. This gives them still more incentive to maintain good relationships. They will have to make a claim on land and with no written records or deeds of ownership, those claims will depend on a general consensus that their claims are valid. These claims are made through clan membership, which is flexible enough to allow people to move from

one clan area to another as long as their claims are recognized by current clan members.

With such a strong emphasis on good relations, there is no need for formal or written laws, rules or policies. There are no lawyers, rulers, or police. All people have a natural incentive to be good and to build and maintain good relationships with others because their livelihood depends on it. Since nobody has any official power over anyone else, and there is no division of labor, it is mostly an egalitarian society, with very little difference in status and wealth.

So unlike the American worldview which is dominated by the ideas and ideals of individualism and independence, the Nekalimin worldview is dominated by a focus on relationships. This focus on relationships dominates their consciousness and allows them to see and think about the world in a very different way than we do. They see and understand their connections and relationships to each other and their land much more sharply. They are keenly conscientious and aware of the complex relationships that link them to others and are able to do extraordinarily complex relationship calculus as they try to solve social problems. They believe in spirits of nature with whom they must maintain strong relationships, offering small bits of pork to the spirit of a grove or hillside in hopes that they will have good health and a good harvest. They do not see themselves as individuals separated from the world. They see themselves and their bodies as intimately connected to other people and the world around them.

And they believe in witchcraft. As Kodenim grew ever more ill, a shaman was called in to investigate. He went into a trance, the house started shaking, and a small bundle of food, smaller than a golf ball, fell in front of him, as if it had fallen from the spirit world and right into our own. He picked it up and confirmed Kodenim's worst fears. He had been bewitched.

The shaman explained that the small packet of food that came to him in a trance was a piece of sweet potato that Kodenim had eaten. It had been placed under the spiky roots of a pandanus fruit, which was now causing his stomach pain and swelling. The shaman could

not identify the witch, but suggested that Kodenim try to find out who the witch might be, address the core problem between them in order to heal the relationship, and ask the witch to stop. Every night until he could solve this problem, the witches would be feasting on his body, and he would continue to wither away and die.

Despite my growing capacities to "see big" and understand these beliefs within a larger cultural context that places strong emphasis on relationships, I simply could not go along with the idea that Kodenim was being consumed by witches. I begged his family to let me take him to a hospital on the next flight out, but Kodenim himself refused. By his reckoning, his only chance of survival was to stay and fix his relationships. As a compromise I took pictures of his swollen belly and skeletal-thin limbs and attached them to a letter to a friend of mine, a doctor at the Mayo Clinic specializing in tropical diseases. Maybe he would know what was wrong and we could still save Kodenim.

Meanwhile, I knew that I was failing as an anthropologist in my efforts to truly "see" and understand my New Guinea friends. Humans are meaning-makers. We make sense of the world. The anthropologist has endless faith that no matter how odd or exotic a

belief might seem, it will make sense once all the details are laid out and understood. For this, I would need yet another tool.

SEEING SMALL

Anthropologists are passionate connoisseurs of the little things. We want to understand the blooming, buzzing complexity of life in all of its nuance and detail. There are no details to small. Clifford Geertz calls it "thick description," and in the seminal article of the same name he famously spends several pages describing the many meanings one might imply or infer from something as simple and small as the wink of an eye. Our goal, as Geertz writes, is to see the "Grand Realities" of "Power, Change, Faith, Oppression, Work, Passion, Authority, Beauty, Violence, Love, and Prestige" in the give and take detail and minutia of everyday life so as to "take the capital letters off of them."

We must pay close attention not only to what is said, but also who said it, how they said it, who they said it to, when, where, and if at all possible to decipher, why. Long-term fieldwork of many months or even several years is a must for this kind of seeing. It takes time not only to learn the language but also to tune your senses and start to see what matters and what does not.

Understanding a culture in its own terms (following the foundational premise of cultural relativism) means that we must understand all the details and nuance of their worldview. Just by using the word "witchcraft" to translate their beliefs, we are already putting them into our own terms. For us, witchcraft is a backwards superstition standing against a more rational and scientific understanding of the world. We associate it with beliefs wiped out by the Enlightenment several hundred years ago.

The more I started paying attention to the little things, the more I understood that these local beliefs that I was categorizing as witchcraft were actually just one piece of a much larger, richer, and more convincing worldview. I started noticing the care and concern given to analyzing each and every gift exchange. I noticed how each

gift was given along with a short and carefully delivered speech about where the materials came from, who made it, who delivered it, and who cared for it along the way. I noticed how they talked about such gifts as "building a road" or "tying a string" between the two parties so that they would always remember each other. And soon, this careful attention to relationships and the gifts that bind them was helping me understand why dunking a basketball or otherwise showboating, or looking to crush your opponent, is not valued. I started noticing a great deal of concern about jealousy and other elements that could eat away at a relationship.

What eventually emerged from these close and careful observations was an entirely different understanding of health and well-being. They understand themselves to be physically made up of their relationships. It starts from the basic recognition that the food they eat becomes who they are. This is, of course, actually true. We process the food we eat and its energy fuels our growth. For them, every piece of food they ever consume from the time they are a small child is a gift, and they are taught to know where it came from and all of the people that helped bring it into their hands and into their bodies.

The food was created through the hard work of others tending the gardens and is itself made up of the nutrients of the earth. The nutrients of the earth are in turn made up from the death and decay of plants, animals, and their own ancestors. As they take in this food it literally becomes them, and as the food itself is made up of the relationships that made it, so their bodies are made up of the relationships that made the food and brought it into their being. They understand that every last element – every atom – of their body was in one way or another given to them by their relationships. They literally *are* their relationships.

It makes perfect sense, then, that when they get sick, they would turn to an analysis of their relationships. From our Western perspective, based on a model of the body as a separate individual, we think that it is impossible that one body could magically harm

another body simply by willing harm and placing their food in a bundle at the base of a pandanus tree. We call it "witchcraft." But if you see yourself as actually made up of your relationships to others and the land, it makes sense. So when Kodenim became ill, he and his closest friends started analyzing his relationships, taking inventory of all the times Kodenim had wronged another person. He had stolen a pig from my father, so my father was at the top of the list. He had also lied to Kenny, killed and eaten Ona's chicken, and had a strained relationship with his in-laws, who were especially upset with him.

My father offered to wash Kodenim as a show of his innocence. Washing is a ritual thought to "cool" the witchcraft. If my father was the witch, the soap and water would cool his witchcraft and remove it from Kodenim.

Kodenim knelt before my father as he stirred the water, and my father began to wash him. He prayed as he washed, calling on God to be his witness that he had no reason to harm Kodenim, that he loved him, and that they were really just one family. He reminisced about how Kodenim's father was like a brother to him, and that he had always looked upon Kodenim like a son of his own. I swallowed hard with emotion, knowing their history and the gravity of the situation, and noticed that Kodenim's friends and family who were standing nearby were also in a somber reflective mood, their eyes moist as they held back their tears.

Kodenim's health did not improve. So a few days later, a much larger ritual was arranged. Kenny (whom he had lied to) and Ona (he stole her chicken), as well as all of my father's extended family, attended. The event started with an open admission of the wrongs Kodenim had done, followed by heartfelt statements of forgiveness forgiveness from Kenny, Ona, and others he had wronged. Then Kodenim took a seat on a log as dozens of people lined up to wash him. This time there was no holding back the emotion of the moment. One by one, those he had wronged as well as their extended families moistened their hands and washed his head, often saying a prayer of care and forgiveness as they did this. Kodenim looked especially ill. People

lingered long after the ritual, like they didn't want to let Kodenim or this special moment go.

The next day, the plane came in with news from my friend at the Mayo Clinic. He said that they would need to do blood tests to find

out more, but even then he was not confident that anything could be done. He recommended staying in the village.

Kodenim died two days later.

The aftermath was difficult. Kodenim's family was hurt and angry, as we all were, and came to my father asking for compensation. They wanted a huge amount of wealth by local standards – several bushknives, two axes, clothes, bags, bows and arrows. Altogether, their request was many times the wealth of any single individual.

The request deeply offended and angered me. It challenged my most fundamental understandings of justice. Kodenim had stolen a pig from my father, causing a rift in the relationship. His family was sure it was this that had killed him. Maybe my father did not work the witchcraft himself, but he should have been looking after him more carefully, especially since Kodenim lived in the same village as my father. On my scales of justice, we were the ones who were wronged, and we were the ones who deserved payment. Kodenim had stolen from us, not the other way around.

I felt lost and confused, and tried to drift into the background and grieve Kodenim's death in my own way. I started spending more time alone, and when I was around other people, I always brought my camera and just hid behind the viewfinder. In this way, I could pretend to be doing "work" and hope to not be bothered, but my father called my bluff. "My son," he said, looking into the camera, "why don't you use that thing to show them I am not a witch!" and then gave a hearty laugh. He liked to play the "stupid old man" who didn't understand these new technologies like cameras, but he knew perfectly well that my camera could not exonerate him. He just wanted me to stop hiding. I realized something very important in that moment:

Participation is not a choice.
Only how we participate is a choice.

Sitting back and doing nothing is in itself a form of participation. You can't pretend like your actions do not matter and stand off to the side of social life.

But what to do? I did not want to contribute to the compensation as I was being asked to do. I would need to finally put it all together and practice the full art of seeing.

SEEING IT ALL

No matter how good you get at seeing your own seeing, seeing big, and seeing small, you can never really see the world as they see it. You can't "go native" and be just like them. Despite my best efforts, I could not really bring myself to believe that Kodenim had been killed by witchcraft, and that the death could have been avoided if my father had nurtured a healthier relationship with him.

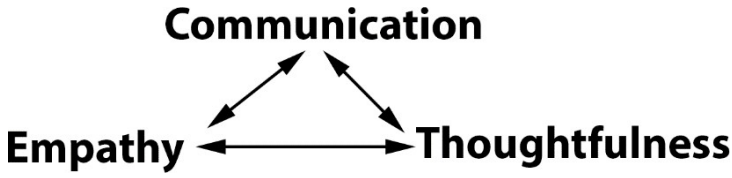
"Being true to yourself" is an equally troublesome strategy. If you simply stick to your own ideas, ideals, beliefs, and values, then you are refusing to learn and grow. You fail to nurture any true empathy and understanding.

What is needed is some method that can be practiced day in and day out that slowly moves us closer and closer toward understanding. It has to be something we can remember when times get hard, something that can keep us on track even when our own feelings, emotions, fears, and biases start clouding our vision.

It was during hard times like these that I turned to the most important tools in the anthropologist's toolkit: Communication, Empathy, and Thoughtfulness. We have to keep talking to people (communication), work toward understanding them in their own terms (empathy), using and revising our knowledge and models as we go (thoughtfulness). As we improve in each one of these areas, the others improve as well. Communicating helps us understand their

perspective (empathy) and revise our analytical models (thoughtfulness).

As our empathy improves, we can communicate better and improve our thoughtfulness, and as our thoughtfulness improves we are better able to imagine our way into their perspective (empathy) and communicate more clearly with them. We can summarize these relationships like this:



Seeing small had allowed me to understand their logic. Seeing big allowed me to see how this logic fit in with other elements of their culture. The more I communicated, empathized, and thought through the matter, the more I started to understand – not as an academic studying the matter, but as a human being deeply enmeshed in the matter myself. From that insider perspective, I now realized that witchcraft beliefs were an integral part of a much larger system that had remained hidden until then.

What was apparent as an insider was that our choice to pay or not pay the compensation would have life and death consequences for the village. We could pay the compensation, thereby reconnecting two family networks and saving the village, or we could simply choose to move out and start a new village. It turns out that witchcraft, more than the depletion of nutrients in the soil, is the engine that keeps people moving. Most villages trace their origin to a witchcraft accusation. If you stand on a high peak and look at the villages dotting the landscape, you are looking at a history of accusations, deaths, and failed compensations.

Most villages are made up of no more than a handful of families. When someone gets sick or dies, they analyze their relationships to find a strained relation. Usually one of the most strained relationships

is between two families within the village. In this case, Kodenim's family blames my family. When Kodenim died, it was not just Kodenim that died. Kodenim, like anyone else in the culture, is also seen as a node in a vast network of relations. His death leaves a vast void in the network that must be repaired, or it threatens to tear apart the fabric of the society. Large compensation gifts can repair this void by reconnecting the extended families and networks that Kodenim once connected.

The entire model of culture we laid out earlier now makes sense in a whole new way. "Witchcraft" is not just this strange belief. It is an integral part of their entire culture.

"Witchcraft" makes sense at every level of culture. First, at the level of superstructure we can say that it is logical in that it makes sense within a sound and logically consistent worldview that focuses on relationships. Furthermore, witchcraft is generally called upon to explain *why* someone is sick, not *how*. Many people can offer sophisticated biomedical explanations for how someone died, but this only explains how; it does not explain why this particular person died at this particular time. Nobody has an answer for "the big Why" of death. Many in the West turn to explanations such as "it was God's will" or it was just "bad luck." These are no more scientifically verifiable than witchcraft.

Second, at the level of social structure, we can say that it is sociological. It makes sense socially. Witchcraft beliefs encourage people to be kind to each other and take care of their relationships in the absence of formal rules and laws. Furthermore, if a relationship does sour, there are rituals such as the washings described earlier that heal relationships.

And finally, at the level of infrastructure, we can say that witchcraft beliefs are ecological. They make sense for the environment. As villages grow to over fifty people, they tend to break up and split apart due to witchcraft accusations. This is ecologically sound, because it keeps people spread out and well within the total carrying capacity of their land. Rather than suffering massive

ecological collapse and starvation during a drought, their low population density spread over many miles of land is sustained even through hard times.

Being able to truly see and understand this put me at ease. I now realized that my contribution to the compensation would heal the relationships of a village I had come to deeply love and care about. The size of the gift forced my father to call in debts of friends and friends of friends, his whole network of relations. The gift was large not only as a sign of respect and love for Kodenim and his family, it also assured us that they would never forget us and that they would one day give something in return. These gifts would make their way back through the vast network we had to call upon to bring this gift together. Still more gifts would then be given in return, and so on. We were retying the ties that once bound us together, filling the void left by Kodenim's departure.

The gifts were set out at the center of the village early one morning. Kodenim's father led his entire extended family down the path and into the village to collect the bounty. There had been much strain in these relationships ever since Kodenim first stole my father's pig. Kodenim's father examined the pile of gifts that had been brought forth. All the wealth in the world cannot replace a son, and no father wants to bury their child. But the sentiment was strong and well- received. He thanked my father and they extended hands for a handshake, tears in their eyes. The handshake soon collapsed into a hug which others joined in on, while others clapped and cried.

My own spirit was still aching from the loss of Kodenim. But as I watched the tears flow down the cheeks of my father, Kodenim's father, and the others who had gathered for that hug, I realized something that filled my soul with gratitude and peace:

This was a beautiful death.

In his final days, Kodenim was able to publicly admit his every sin. He was offered heartfelt forgiveness from those who he had

wronged, all because of their beliefs in witchcraft. It may not have cleared his body of whatever it was that killed him, but it sure seemed to cleanse his soul. He died at peace.

And the hole he left in our world was filled with gifts, kindness, and good will.