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# Human Adaptability in Northeast India

by R. K. KAR

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An all-India seminar entitled "Cultural and Biological Adaptability of Man with Special Reference to Northeast India" was held at Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, on February 17, 18, and 19, 1977. It was organized by the university's Department of Anthropology with grants received from the University Grants Commission of India.

The seminar was inaugurated by R. C. Boroah, Honorable Speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly. M. Aram, Director of the Peace Centre, Nagaland, was the chief guest. A. C. Bhagabati, Chairman of the Seminar Committee, welcomed the delegates and outlined the theme and scope of the seminar. The inaugural session was presided over by J. N. Das, Vice-Chancellor, Dibrugarh University. Over 30 participants representing various universities, colleges, and research organizations took part in the seminar.

There were five sessions spread over the three seminar days. Most of the 30 research papers presented were subjected to discussion. A number of the papers covered useful ground on various problems of human adaptation in Northeast India. The concluding session was devoted to review and recommenda-

tions. In the light of the discussions and deliberations, the participants came to a consensus on certain general recommendations.

The delegates also considered future research needs in Northeast India. Some of the major foci of research identified were (1) primatological studies, with special reference to the gibbon, the only anthropoid ape in Northeast India, and its adaptation to changing habitats; (2) bio-anthropological and genetic investigations among people of diverse ethnicity and socioeconomic background in varied ecological settings; (3) studies of intercommunity differences in the sphere of socioeconomic levels; (4) studies of education and literacy among the simpler communities and their socioeconomic implications; (5) projects directed toward assessing the implications and impact on society of some important and wide-ranging public policies; (6) examination of the nature of radicalism giving rise to violence in the unique historical, geographical, and demographic context of Northeast India; (7) study of the emergence of different types of socio-political-religious movements in Northeast India; (8) studies of the rapid growth of urban centres and industries and their impact on adaptation, including the possibility of a secular trend; (9) exploration of the potentialities of the Garo Hills for yielding evidence of early human settlements; and (10) ethno-archaeological studies among different ethnic groups relating to the prehistoric-historic continuum.

The proceedings of the seminar are being edited for publication by A. C. Bhagabati.

## The Value of the Human

by JOHN R. MACCORMACK and PAUL A. ERICKSON

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The long-range goal of the Institute of Human Values is the development of a universal science of the human based on an empirical, eclectic, and problem-centered approach such that the problem provides the program and the method the message. Human problems must be understood in human terms, and their appropriate context is the world historical experience of the human.

Before a science of the human can be achieved, the intelligibility of the human must be affirmed. In order to make progress toward that affirmation, in September, 1976, the Institute held its first international conference, "Beyond Relativism" (MacCormack and Erickson 1977). On that occasion, the Institute brought together a collection of thinkers, including anthropologists, all of whom can be described as working at the cutting edge of constructive change in this area of thought and research.

Building on this experience, the Institute held its second international conference May 12-14, 1977. Speakers from several disciplines, again including anthropologists, discussed the theme "The Value of the Human." Mornings were devoted to formal papers with discussion from the floor, while the afternoon sessions featured symposia followed by group discussions and a plenary session. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a scholar of world religions, delivered the keynote address. He stressed the necessity of developing a mode of knowing different from that of the physical sciences if knowledge is to be linked to the value of the human. Anthropologist David Bidney criticized the concept of cultural relativism, pointing out its implications for ethnocentrism, cultural absolutism, and devaluation of the human. Bidney was followed by historian Wei-ming Tu, who highlighted both Eastern and Western

philosophical contributions to the value of the human and explained the relevance of Confucian concepts to the conference theme.

On the second day, mathematician and psychologist Anatol Rapoport situated the theme in the context of his own scientific thought and experience, emphasizing that to value the rational understanding is to value the human and to provide the precondition of freedom. Modern tyrannies, he pointed out, begin by devaluing and corrupting the understanding because they regard it as their most formidable enemy. Philosopher Henry Pietersma followed with a paper in which he considered the relationship between the problem of certainty in knowledge and moral commitment.

Philosopher Donald Verene opened the third day with a paper on Giambattista Vico in which he argued for a new approach to knowledge based on Vico's "imaginative universals." He was followed by literary scholar T. Edward Flynn, who gave further point to Verene's ideas on the role of the imagination by demonstrating the way in which a consideration of the moral dilemmas and predicaments of Charles Dickens's characters can illuminate the central theme.

Paper titles and authors were as follows:

- Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Dalhousie University: Persons
- David Bidney, Indiana University (Emeritus): Cultural relativism and the value of the human
- Wei-ming Tu, University of California, Berkeley: The value of the human in the Confucian tradition
- Anatol Rapoport, University of Toronto: Scientific knowledge and the value of the human
- Henry Pietersma, University of Toronto: The value of the human as knower
- Donald Verene, Pennsylvania State University: Vico and the value of the human
- T. Edward Flynn, Saint Mary's University: Dickens and the pathos of freedom

Symposium discussants of the first three papers were Yuri Glazov, Dalhousie University; Ping-ti Ho, University of

Chicago; Anthony Johns, Australian National University; Jamshed Mavalwala, University of Toronto (Anthropology); Laura Thompson, Fort Lee, N.J. (Anthropology); and John Spellman, University of Windsor.

Symposium discussants of the fourth and fifth papers were John Barker, Trent University; Michael Chance, University of Birmingham; Marlynn May, University of California, Berkeley; Philip McShane, Mount Saint Vincent University; and Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Institute for Vico Studies.

Publication of the conference proceedings is planned. The

third in this series of international conferences will be held in May, 1978, devoted to the theme "The Freedom of the Human." For information, write: Director, Institute of Human Values, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, N.S., Canada B3H 3C3.

## Reference Cited

MACCORMACK, JOHN R., and PAUL A. ERICKSON. 1977. Beyond relativism. *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* 18:132-33.

## Child-Holding Patterns<sup>1</sup>

by RALPH BOLTON

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Several studies have demonstrated the existence of a marked tendency for mothers to hold their infants using the left arm and hand rather than the right arm and hand, and for the child being held to be positioned to the left of the mother's midline on or near the precordial area. Indeed, it has been postulated that this preference for holding infants on the left side of the mother's body is cross-culturally universal (Richards and Finger 1975:1003). Evidence supporting the hypothesis of a universal left bias in mothers' child-holding techniques has been obtained, but for only a limited number of societies.

Salk (1960, 1961, 1962, 1973) discovered a left child-holding bias in works of art from Western cultures (specifically, in Italian icons, in paintings of the Madonna and Child, and in the mother-child art of Henry Moore) and in Bateson's published photographs of Balinese adults and children. Finger (1975), attempting to replicate Salk's findings, carried out a more extensive analysis of child-holding patterns in the productions of 34 American and European artists. His results did not lend unequivocal support to the hypothesis of a left bias in mother-child holding patterns generally, but they did suggest that for certain periods and artistic schools (i.e., early Christian, Impressionist, and Post-Impressionist painters) such a bias existed. Richards and Finger (1975) examined 268 photographs of children being held; these photographs portrayed settings in Western (European and North American), Eastern (Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese), and North American Indian cultures. An analysis of these materials favored the hypothesis of a universal tendency for women to hold children on the left side of the body. The hypothesis was confirmed with respect to all three sets of photographs.

Both Salk (1961) and Weiland (1964) have conducted observational studies of child-holding patterns. Salk (1961) observed 287 mothers with their newborn infants in a hospital and found that approximately 80% held the baby on the left side. Weiland (1964) observed women in a pediatric outpatient clinic and concluded that these women, too, held their babies on the left significantly more often than on the right. Finally, Salk (1973) has reported the results of an experiment in which the experimenter handed the child to its mother and then noted the side on which she placed the child: 77% of the mothers who had not been separated from their infants for a prolonged period immediately after birth (i.e., those who had had normal

births) placed the infant on the left, thus further substantiating the hypothesis of a left bias.

The publication of a series of photographs of men, women, and children from a South American Indian tribe in the Amazonian lowlands, the Yānomamö, makes it possible to test the hypothesis again, this time utilizing data from a single village in a society in a different ethnographic region. In *Studying the Yānomamö*, Chagnon (1974) presents photographs containing 44 instances of infants or small children being held (Appendix E). The photographs include 38 examples of women holding children, and in all but 4 of these cases the women are indicated as holding their own offspring. (None of the previous ethnographic studies on this problem has provided information on the relationship between the child and the person holding him.) In 29 cases women are shown holding infants on the left, in 7 cases they are holding them on the right, and in 2 cases they are holding them in front or on the back. The left bias exhibited by Yānomamö women is statistically significant (binomial test, one-tailed,  $p < .0002$ ).

Previous investigations dealing with male child-holding patterns have failed to detect a directional bias (cf. Finger 1975; Richards and Finger 1975). That is, males are as likely to hold infants on the right side as on the left. Since only 5 of the Yānomamö photographs show males holding children, firm conclusions on the child-holding preferences of Yānomamö men cannot be reached. It should be noted, though, that 2 men are holding children on the left, 2 in front or on the back, and 1 on the right.

Two explanations for the tendency of mothers to hold infants on the left side have been offered. Salk argues that what is important is the fact that by holding the infant on her left side the mother places the infant in proximity to her heart. He maintains that the sound of the maternal heartbeat has a calming effect on infants because they have been imprinted to this sound during the prenatal phase of life. Mothers, too, may experience a reduction in anxiety as a result of holding infants on the left because this pattern of holding enhances their perception of their own heartbeat. Additionally, the infant's tranquillity may be reinforcing for the mother. According to Salk, there is a critical period right after parturition when a woman will develop a left bias if she has contact with her infant. The left bias is not found among women separated from their infants during the critical postnatal period, e.g., mothers of premature babies, or among males, who generally spend little time in close contact with newborns.

The second, and perhaps more obvious, explanation involves handedness. Since most women are right-handed, they hold their infants in the left arm and hand in order to keep the right hand free to perform other tasks. Holding a child normally requires little dexterity, and therefore the hand with the greatest dexterity will be reserved for actions demanding manual skill. This explanation has been attacked as inadequate because a left child-holding bias has been found among left-handed women as well as among right-handed ones (Salk 1961,

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank my research assistants, William Roden and Ernesto Silva, for their help in analyzing the Yānomamö data. Further, I am grateful to Charlene Bolton, Stanley Finger, James J. McKenna, Robert L. Munroe, Ruth H. Munroe, Susan Seymour, and Lynn Thomas for constructive criticisms and comments on an earlier draft of this paper.