

On the Idea of a Personal Anthropology

There are a variety of social groups in the United States. Not only are there upper, middle, and lower class divisions, there are sub-cultures and different ethnic groupings within those classes. People belonging to these different groups are brought up with certain expectations and with value systems that stem from their social situation. In other words, they belong to a certain "habitus" (Bourdieu 1977) in which they root their opinions, and their "models for" and "models of" reality (Geertz 1973: 93).

People's opinions and political views of the social system as a whole are underscored by their categorization of experiences and the ingrained 'common sense' value systems into which they are socialized. While this gives people a sense of stability there is usually a lack of reflexivity about the ways in which views of other people are formed.

Generalizations, though a useful and necessary means of organizing information, become very powerful and problematic when not questioned. Through my training in anthropology, I have gained an awareness of the importance of reflexivity in forming interpretations of other people's social situations (Varela 1994 and Williams 1994). In this paper, I intend to show the importance of critical, reflexive thinking by looking at an African-American church service, a sacred event that strongly contrasts with my own religious upbringing.

Although I bring to this examination an element of personal anthropology (Pocock 1994), through critical and reflexive thinking I can employ this idea in a positive manner by questioning what I think and why I think it. Based on a preliminary fieldwork exercise, I will show how a particular African-American service is structured and what it might mean for its participants.

Upon first glance an individual without any anthropological training may see no structure or meaning in the church service I observed. By taking into account my personal anthropology: that is, by questioning preconceptions and experiences with church services acquired from my own ethnic and class background, I will attempt to show what there is to understand in terms of the roles of the participants in the African-American service I attended. I also attempt to outline the rules pertaining to the organization of space/time that makes it meaningful.

Because the congregation in this church represents lower-class African-American individuals, it is easy for the untrained observer to construct harmful racist stereotypes on a basis of blaming these people for their own socio-economic disadvantage. They might fall into the trap of stereotyping African-Americans as "more emotional," having an "innate sense of rhythm," or, they might even think these fellow humans are less intelligent. What we need is at least an adequate understanding, which calls for adequate generalizations, not racist stereotypes.

My Experience

On May 4, 1997, I attended a church service in a predominantly black neighborhood. This unfamiliar social event therefore involved a mostly black congregation in which I was one of only two white people. A visit to this church was suggested by a close relative, and even though I had fairly specific directions as to its location, I had some trouble finding the building because there were none of the typical signs that I am so accustomed to seeing on and around Euro-American churches.

For instance, there was no steeple, no cross, no stained glass windows, and there was an absence of lush surrounding landscape. Even the architecture of the building did not meet my expectations; for example, there was no church bell. There was a small sign in the front yard of the church specifying the time of the church service, but no denominational affiliation was mentioned. The only way I could identify the building as the church I was looking for (beside the street address) were the open doors and the women in flamboyant dress lingering in the doorway.

The open doors became an important symbol of the overall purpose and meaning of this church-going experience. These doors were open to all creeds and colors, even middle-class whites like myself. I first learned there is a very strong emphasis in this church on inclusiveness and equality.

Spatial Structure

When I entered the church people met my arrival with quickly forgotten surprise and I was soon engaged in friendly conversation with the assistant pastor. I entered the sanctuary and took a seat in the back, politely declining an invitation to sit in the front with the assistant pastor. Like the outside appearance of the building, the physical structure of the inside of the church was very plain with few of the traditional Christian symbols associated with a 'white' church service.

There were no stained glass windows, no crucifix and no banners. In the front of the church there was no altar, just a podium on a raised platform which was only one step up from the floor level occupied by the congregation. About eight feet away from the platform there were pews aligned in a typical fashion, yet they contained no shelves for hymnals or Bibles. In fact, there were no Bibles or hymnals supplied; not even a program for the service. The front of the church which faced geographical north was where the leaders were stationed and they were separated from the congregation by their position on the platform.

People and Icons

There were six people who seemed to be leaders of the church. I assumed this because of their spatial separation from the rest of the congregation. An older black woman whom I shall call 'Karen' occupied the podium, located in

the direct center of the raised platform. To her immediate left was a drum set which would eventually be occupied and played by a young boy. Directly behind him and on the same level, was an organ where eventually the young male organist would be situated.

Behind Karen was a pew on which the pastor of the church sat, slightly to her left. Behind Karen and to her right was seated the "associate" of the pastor. The associate was a middle-aged black man, who never vocally addressed the congregation. The leaders were facing geographical south. The assistant pastor was seated on the same level as the congregation in a tall-backed chair facing east. To his left there was an old organ and conga drum. These appeared to be just 'stored' there as they were not used or referred to at any time.

In most Catholic and traditional Euro-American churches it is normal to find many iconographic representations of the Christ and the Apostles, but in this setting there were only two pictures of Christ. There was one picture of Him walking on water, which is a familiar image described in the New Testament with reference to the concept of faith. The idea that "faith will set us free" and "with faith in God (the Christ) we can accomplish all things," were very important concepts in the service itself and were constantly referred to in testimony. This suggests the reasons for selection of this iconic representation and its particular meaning for this congregation.

Mounted on the wall approximately ten feet to the right of the first picture was the second picture, an icon depicting Christ's baptism. Out of all the popular representations of Christ, especially the traditional and all-important images of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, why would the people in this church choose Christ's baptism? Familiarity with Biblical texts help understand the choice.

Christ the Savior of humankind was baptized by John the Baptist, a mortal man. This suggests that no one is too good (or too bad) to be baptized and saved by faith in God. The Son of God was baptized in his Father's name as we are all to be and the holy act in this case was performed by an ordinary man. There is a certain element of *access* to God implied here.

God is accessible to (and can be called upon) by anyone, especially the generally lower-class and racially disadvantaged attendants of this church. The message is that there are no color, class or racial divisions in God's eyes. Even more important, as was reflected in the sermon and testimonies, God is worthy of these folks' praise and calls for help. I suggest that this choice of baptismal picture, especially in the absence of more ornate decoration, is teaching the idea that God is not unreachable. He is all-powerful, of course, but He has close ties to the common man. He is worthy of fancy architecture and complex ritual procedures, but more important than such signifiers is *what is signified*. The content of the message is what is important -- not the outer presentation.

I hypothesize that it is the informality of presentation and the structure that is the crucial component in this service. Although it might seem that the lack of formal structure and arrangement of the different elements in the church shows an absence of plan and meaning, it is in fact in this informal structure and presentation that the meaning lies and is most powerful.

Time

The seemingly unstructured form of the event as it flowed through time paralleled the non-traditional Christian organization and unadorned structure of this sacred space. By questioning this assumption and looking at the event a bit more closely with an anthropological approach, I was able to see that there is an internal order as well as a lot of purpose and meaning to the event.

As I sat in the rear pew observing my surroundings, I was startled by the loud vocalizing of Karen. Soon after she had sung two or three lines of a song, people in the audience joined in at one time or another. Contrary to my expectations, there was neither organ-playing in the background for meditation in the pre-service moments, nor was there an announcement that the service would begin. It began abruptly, but then gradually gained momentum as people continued to wander in slowly through the open doors of the church and take their seats among those of us who were already there.

A few moments later, a young boy wandered up to the drum set, taking his seat, while the young male organist did the same. The first song was still in progress when the drums and organ joined in. Karen finished singing after a few more verses but the music did not stop. It remained in the background indefinitely. It never stopped even during prayer. The music was continuously rising and falling with the flow of events, reaching crescendos when "praise songs" were initiated by different members of the congregation.

Karen asked the congregation for calls to prayer and this began a series of events that seemed to have no strict delineation. The clear sections of service to which I am accustomed were not present, yet everyone else in the congregation seemed to know what was next and how to go about involving themselves.

Prayer

During the call for prayer, different members stood, asked for fellow members and the 'saints' to pray for them, and for other specific people and conditions. Each person said as much as they wished for as long as they wanted and were then followed by the next person. I noticed that participants knew whose turn it was to speak by whomever stood up next. It was more or less on a 'first come -- first serve' basis. Sometimes, however, participants would inadvertently jump their turn because they didn't see another person stand. They didn't look behind them to see who was next, but everyone still managed to maintain great patience and no two people ever spoke at the same time, even by accident.

After everyone who wanted to had stated his or her prayer requests, the prayer itself began. Every member of the congregation (approximately thirty-five people including all the leaders) prayed out loud at the same time. The organist and the drummer were playing what sounded like a jazz/blues tune in the background. The pastor sang his prayer at times, as did the assistant pastor. Others swayed from side to side with arms raised in the air, reaching toward what I interpreted as "hope" -- or as the pastor mentioned, "over there to the good place." Something very interesting happened next: everyone stopped praying at the same time. For reasons I was unable to discover, all the people knew when to stop prayer and move on to the next phase of the service.

Praise Singing

A woman on the left of the church remained standing and began singing another praise song. As she did so, clapping began and the musicians joined in. Other members of the congregation picked up tambourines and other percussion instruments, and began to play and clap. This singing with actions went on for quite a long time. There seems to be no time limits on the length of the songs, nor were there limits on how many people could sing or how many songs were sung. The timing of this section was loosely structured along lines of how long it took for people to praise, sing and express what they were feeling through music.

Testimony

Next came a time of sharing testimony. Karen was still at the pulpit, and the rest of the leaders were still in their positions. The same procedure for turn-taking was used for the order of testimonials. Those who stood first were recognized first. If someone's turn was missed because they were not seen, they patiently awaited their turn. Once again, no one was limited regarding how much they could say or how many times they could say it. These actions flowed freely and provoked much affirmation and agreement from other congregation members in the form of head nodding, clapping and vocalization such as "Yea -- right -- go on -- mm hmm."

Some people sang songs for their testimonies. It is interesting to note that none of these praise hymns were read from music sheets or hymnals. All the songs were known by memory, and most of the congregation joined in. The assistant pastor played cymbals and the pastor himself would rise from his sitting position and dance a little. When the music reached a crescendo and voices were raised, people began to dance and clap. Sometimes the dancing instigated the volume-increase in the music. It was usually the actions of one of the participants that initiated the rise in excitement level whether it was by increasing their own volume or making very pronounced movements such as jumping or dancing in the aisle. To an untrained observer from my particular

social background, this could have been interpreted as uncontrolled 'frenzy' or 'foolish' acting.

When understood in the context of a sacred event it was appropriate emotional expression, genuine excitement and celebration of the moment. These people were very happy to be there among their friends and praising God. This was clearly expressed in what they said during their testimonies. They weren't acting out of mindless, emotional spontaneity. Their action-signs were carefully chosen, calling upon the cooperation of mind and body.

In contrast, it is a common belief among most Euro-American churchgoers that stillness is a sign of prayer and attentive reverence, whereas motion of any kind, especially dancing, is conceived of as lacking respect and spirituality, possibly evoking ideas about "the sins of the flesh." It is my contention that the action-signs performed by the African-Americans was an intense form of worship involving the whole person -- body, mind and spirit.

As mentioned earlier, each of these smaller events seemed to float into the next and the music helped the flow by providing a background which created a constant sense of moving along. I never noticed the musicians using any sheet-music or books, which led me to hypothesize that improvisation was probably important -- improvisation in the correct key, and in close collaboration with the voices of the people. In the apparent informality and the lack of formal musical structure, there was still order and structure.

It was in this informality that the people's creativity found a structure and the sense of emotion was heightened. Often, it is the more rigid structure of a traditional Euro-American church service that tends to give the congregation a sense of distance from their leaders. The pastor may be in special robes or a 'dog-collar' for example, and this differentiates him or her from the rest of the 'sinners'. But in the African-American context, the leaders wore the same types of clothing and were no more active in their devotions than the other members of the church. In this informal and non-traditional structure, everyone had equally significant things to say and do.

Sermon

Following the testimonies, the music became quieter, and the assistant pastor approached the pulpit. Karen took a seat among the congregation on the right side of the church. The assistant pastor sang a song and as he did so, the musicians joined in. It was relatively short compared to the praises that had been performed earlier, but equally effective in arousing people. After the assistant pastor sat down again, the pastor stood and began his sermon. Compared to the previous events in the service, his sermon did not last long. As he finished, he offered blessings to those who wanted them. Those who were interested approached the stage and waited in line. The people who were too weak to walk the distance remained seated and were approached by the pastor and his associate.

Offerings and Closings

Finally, there was a call for an offering, and those who had money to offer were directed to approach the pulpit and deposit money in the jugs that were stationed there. The order was determined by a young girl who stood at the end of a pew, signifying the next person's turn to go forward. When that aisle was clear, she moved to the next pew, thus regulating the order of offerings.

When all had made the trip to the jugs, the pastor gave a blessing. The music continued. Some sang praises and some of us left. Whereas it is customary in many Catholic and more formal Protestant services for there to be a benediction and a formal dismissal, at this service there was no definite send-off.

Participation

In the African-American church service there was more active, visible participation than in the services to which I have been accustomed. Here, there is no clapping, dancing or story-telling. In the African-American service I attended, people sang praises when they felt so inclined. At one time or another, all members danced, spoke or clapped. Some played tambourines and other percussion instruments, but all participated in their own way. Everyone was given the opportunity to be "in the spotlight" so to speak.

There are three characteristics of member-participation in the African-American service I attended that differentiate it from the traditional congregation of an Euro-American church: 1. repetition; 2. constant motion and 3. story-telling. When someone stood to speak or to witness, they always repeated phrases or repeated a concept using different language. For example, during one woman's testimony, she said "Jesus is His name; *Jesus* is his name; I said Jesus, Jesus, *Jesus*." Or, the pastor claimed: "There's going to be a fire that the firemen can't put out. Did you hear? I said, there's going to be a *fire* -- a fire that the firemen *cannot* put out. He can't do it"

The hymns were also repetitious. There were usually no more than two verses to the songs yet they went on, sometimes for as long as ten minutes. It seems as though the repetition of ideas and action reaffirmed significance and confirmed people's faith in what they said. With each repeated verse or concept, there was increased affirmation and energy among the participants. Some members would shout, "Yes!" while others encouraged the performer with cheers, claps and humming. Often the pastor and other leaders would repeat what the performer said in the form of a musical lyric.

There was always constant motion. Whether the members were dancing, waving their hands, or clapping, there was always a significant amount of bodily movement. This is very different from a typical 'white' church congregation. There, stillness and meditation have been viewed as the means by which an individual achieves spirituality. Stillness is usually assumed to be characteristic of being attentive, whereas in the African-American church,

if you weren't moving, then you somehow missed the point. The movement often signified that the person was caught up in the spirit.

What made movement such a meaningful component in this setting was the absence of a one-to-one correlation between a movement and its meaning. Depending upon the context of the specific situation and person, dancing might mean that he or she was rejoicing or being thankful. In one case, I interpreted the dancing of a woman to signify her repentance and obedience. In her testimony she pointed out how many times she failed to be obedient to God's will. She expressed her regret and repentance in words and then in song. As she gained more affirmation from the congregation in the form of vocalization and hand gestures, the music and the voice level increased. With the increase, she began to dance around the aisle, reaching up to the sky like a young daughter reaching to her father for help or affection. She danced to the back of the church crying and I could hear her repeated statements: "Thanks Almighty" and "I'm not worthy."

For this group of people, 'up' and 'over there' were the sacred locations for heaven and a better life. Their authority came from 'above' as did hope and salvation. 'Up' is a common spatial orientation for heaven for most Christians, yet I haven't heard heaven referred to as "over there" anywhere but in the unique church service I attended in May.

The last characteristic I want to describe of the service I attended is story-telling. During the testimony portion of the service, people stand up and share certain experiences they have had that encourage their lives as Christians. Or, they tell about harmful situations from which they were saved by God. Some of the older members described their illnesses, while the younger members usually talked about different problems they face or have faced. Stories are very powerful ways of conveying ideas and concepts, and it was the form of choice for the pastor in his sermon as well as for those people who gave their testimonies.

In a typical Catholic service, or Euro-American Protestant church it is scripture which provides the reference points for teaching and instruction. It supports the points the priest makes and gives the moral laws of the church a firm foundation. In contrast to this, in the church service I studied, there was very little scripture quoted. It seemed to be replaced by the relating of common experience of oppression and suffering.

The functions that scripture-reading serves in more formal services was instead served by common stories. For example, instead of the Biblical story of Christ saving the lepers, an older woman told us all how she fell down last week and couldn't walk for a few days. But, she prayed to God and when she awoke on Sunday morning, she walked to church. Shared story-telling was the means by which the people related to one another and through the stories, they re-affirmed their faith in God as a loving Father and care-provider.

After careful consideration of the church service in its entirety, the two themes of 'equality' and 'access' were among the more important themes of this religious event. Everyone was given the opportunity to have his or her own moment of praise or testimony. There were no time limits on anybody's performance. They all had equal access to God's eyes and ears, as well as the congregations' senses. In the choice of pictures of Christ that were displayed on the walls and in the plainness of the church, a careful observer can find meaning and purpose. There is a method to the informality, and in my opinion, it is the informality that creates the essential atmosphere for the event. It allowed for the direct contact with the leaders of the church throughout the service.

It is possible for the familiar mind/body dichotomy to rear its ugly head again when (and if) this event is not carefully considered. In using their bodies actively to worship, the members of the African-American church were not acting out of emotional spontaneity, nor were they thinking irrationally. When analyzed in the proper context, we can see that the action signs and order of the service are just as meaningful and structured as any Euro-American church service. The worship experience in this church was spiritually, emotionally and intellectually stimulating. The lack of ornate decoration and clear division of the service did not take away from the effectiveness of it. In fact, I think it enriched it.

Although there are many questions that remain to be answered, one that seems to stand out is, "Why do these people do this?" Without further fieldwork (especially conducting interviews with church members) and participant-observation, I cannot supply an adequate answer, but I can offer a hypothesis: these people come together every week for a couple of hours on Sunday where they have the opportunity to be heard. Here, they can express their feelings and troubles and be supported and reassured, which is something they may not have available outside the service.

After six days of difficulty and not uncommon hardship, they get their time among friends and family to sing their songs, happy or sad, in key or out of key. When they step in the door of this church, they bring their problems and joys to the congregation, with equal access to God and performance. Through story-telling, praises and music they can find reassurance and affirmation for their faith and for other people. In my opinion, it is truly 'food for the soul'.

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