

What is an exotic culture?

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Abstract. This brief paper distinguishes between two intuitive concepts of what an exotic culture is. The first concept applies when the customs and beliefs of others are very different. The second concept applies when there is a significant departure from a natural baseline.

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“Space investigators: measurements you see.

Now tell us the zone of this triangularity!”

The question of what is an exotic culture occurred to me when contemplating images of the social anthropologist and valuations of their research. In Britain at least, there is an image of such a researcher as studying a faraway exotic culture. Also, faced with anthropology at home, some might value anthropology away, amongst the exotic (see Edward 2022b). But what is an exotic culture?

I have tried to answer the question from the perspective of an anthropologist’s system of thought (Edward 2022a). Here I wish to present two intuitive concepts of an exotic culture, without taking a stand on their legitimacy. On one concept, what counts as an exotic culture is relative to one’s own culture. If others have customs and beliefs (or shared orthodoxies) very different to one’s own, then they count as exotic. That is the straightforward case.

On another concept, what counts as exotic is relative to a baseline of natural behaviour. The exotic depart significantly from that baseline, such as only walking on one foot indoors. An exotic people! It seems even they can agree, rather than “exotic” being something one only applies to others. I wonder whether you can apply this even to verbal

behaviour. Imagine a people who follow the rule: never use the word “area” if you can use the word “zone” and still make sense.

References

Edward, T.R. 2022a. “Writing the exotic”: a pastiche of Marilyn Strathern. Available at:

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