Summary of Homer Barnett's Ideas

By Bruce Rigsby

VIII Homer Barnett, Sociocultural Change and Innovation

Barnett, a cultural anthropologist and student of Kroeber, was a maverick, and his relations with his old professor were ambivalent. He engaged with and opposed Kroeber's views and positions to the end of his career, sometimes openly, other times not. Barnett was much opposed to grand theorizing. He read widely and wisely in classical experimental psychology, which provided a background for developing his interests in the mental processes which organise and structure our everyday ideas, thoughts and experiences. He also read deeply in epistemology and the philosophy of science.

Barnett's *magnum opus* was *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change.* He later published some thoughtful essays on change, then updated and presented his final thought in *Qualitative Science*. Barnett was not an armchair theorist, but very much a fieldworker: Siletz and Yurok, Coast Tsimshian, Yakima, Coast Salish/Indian Shakers, Palau and Dutch New Guinea. He frequently used examples from his own fieldwork in his theorising and writing. Barnett spent his academic career at the University of Oregon. Arguably, he was their most prominent anthropologist in the past century. Some of us Australianist anthropologists were his students or colleagues and were influenced by him: Bruce Rigsby, Lee Sackett, Jerry Schwab, Myrna Tonkinson and Bob Tonkinson. He did not encourage or sustain acolytes and advocates, and I believe he was disappointed towards the end of his life by his apparent lack of impact on anthropology.

In a little known paper, Robert Murphy argued that there is no principled way to distinguish the phenomena of acculturation from social change generally. Similarly, I argue that we cannot distinguish the process of tradition (whether conceptualised as the handing on of whatever across the generations or as the interpretation of the past in the present) from the interpretive mental processes we humans operate with in our everyday experiences. This is not to say that acculturation and tradition are chimeras. Instead, they are the terms we use to label particular qualities or parts of processes or their products.

Barnett looked to the individual human mind as the source of all social and cultural change. Favouring methodological individualism, he saw individual adaptation as the ultimate source of social and cultural adaptation. The cognitive, conative and affective processes of the mind are the bases for our perceptions and for our sorting, synthesising, categorising, ignoring, discarding and recombining all our sensory input into new configurations. Innovations, whether viewed as new combinations of ideas or as things resulting from new ideas, are entirely the products of mental activity, itself culturally constituted and socially constructed. As Barnett wrote:

> [M]ental content is socially defined; its substance is, in major part, dictated by tradition. But the manner of treating this content, of grasping it, altering it, and reordering it, is inevitably dictated by the potentialities and the liabilities of the machine which does the manipulating; namely, the individual mind.

Barnett also contrasted processes with histories. First, a process is recurrent, and it can be made to repeat itself, continually so if its instigating conditions persist. But the history of something is whatever happens to it during the time it is that thing, bearing in mind that its 'thingness' is not natural, but arises from our apperception of it. Processes have a beginning, a course of action and an end – and so they are discontinuous action systems, ie, closed dynamic action systems. They occur in time and space, but it is recurrence that makes them processes. In contrast, 'time is intrinsic to history; its essence is that of events occurring in a temporal dimension'. Second, processes are the mechanisms that transform things from one state to another, and so they produce histories. 'History is … not a process; it is the product of the action of a very great number of processes'. It is not processes that are changes; instead, it is their products which may be changes. And their products change when the processes that produce them change, and this happens through the operation of the process Barnett calls 'innovation'.

By 1953, Barnett had developed a model of the mental processes by which we humans register and interpret in our minds present experiences against past ones. The former activate or call up past experiences from memory and we interpret the present with respect to the past – and vice-versa. The innovative process constantly produces changes – *innovations* – even when we do not recognise them and call them changes or innovations.

Barnett (1953) and later works dropped the use of *(culture) trait*, *thing, idea* and the like, preferring instead *configuration*, which has four characteristics:

1. It is a mental composition of sensory stimulation.
2. It is complete in itself, a homogeneous unit without parts or internal structure and with uniform qualities throughout its extent.
3. It has shape or form whether it be the perception of an iron bar, the sound of a musical tone, or the mental image of a fictitious character.
4. It protrudes from its matrix as does a figure from its ground in ambiguous designs, or the face of a friend in a group photograph.

> Basically, configurations are mental activity systems that are somehow the counterparts of external referents. But any perceived quality of a thing is a *mental* composition. It is a configuration, an organization of lesser activity systems.

Anthropologists have long argued over the character and nature of the basic units of culture and the kinds of processes they might be impli-

cated in. Earlier generations of anthropologists talked of culture traits, trait-complexes, customs and patterns, their independent invention or diffusion and their evolution perhaps. Functionalist anthropology spoke of the sharing of customs, norms, institutions, statuses, roles and such and of the integrative role of value-sharing and even conflict. More recent generations seem to have given up the quest for or concern with units, although *identity*, *agency*, *reflexivity*, *voice* and *power* are often heard. One would think that we humans go through our lives in a constant reflexive state and that such structure as we can identify are always contestable and transient. However, we are not always fully conscious of our actions – sometimes, perhaps more often than we care to admit – we are on automatic pilot, so to speak, while we may even be contemplating something else.

Some natural scientists like Richard Dawkins (1976) write about '(cultural) memes' and their evolution by processes of natural selection and such. Barnett was quite clear that it was at the level of pan-human mental processes, operative in all normal minds, we should focus our attention. He thought there were strong constraints on the operations of mental processes, ignoring matters of content, that made it possible to find regularities and laws in the combination and recombination or amalgamation of old configurations into new configurations. If memes are intended to be more than descriptive units, then surely their psychological properties and characteristics are relevant to understanding their evolution (ie, their 'descent with modification') in the same way that the hereditary and phenotypic expressions of genes (and now their molecular composition and properties) are relevant to understanding their evolution. Configurations are structures, but they are not ultimate molecular units. They break down when we focus on them and they dissipate on analysis, but they can also be synthesised as parts of larger configurations.

Here follows my exposition of Barnett's model of the innovative (or interpretive) process.

1. The process begins with the registration or storage in our mind of a past experience having the properties of a configuration (wholeness, unity and an external relationship which is as background to figure or context to focus). This prototype configuration 'provides a medium for the processing of future experience'.

Here is my graphic modelling of the first stage of the process when a past experience is registered or stored in memory as a prototype configuration.

A ——— R_1 ——— B
stimulus – relationship – correlate

2. The process continues when a present stimulus, whether external or internal (by memory or whatever), activates or 'redintegrates' the prototype configuration in our mind. That is, a present experience acti-

vates or awakens the prototype configuration.

X ——— R_2 ——— Y
stimulus – relationship – correlate

3. It continues when we 'internalise' the present experience by equating it with the prototype (are they the same?) or discriminating (Barnett it from the prototype (are they different?). We can equate or discriminate it by axiomatic or conventional equation or discrimination, convergent or divergent analysis or by convergent or divergent incorporation, respectively. If we successfully equate the present experience with the prototype, we produce a new configuration. If we discriminate the present experience from the prototype, we cannot produce a new configuration, but we may activate another linked prototype configuration from memory that does lead to successful equation. In other words, one or both elements of the present experience is/are equated with their correlate(s) in the prototype – we ignore the possibility of its discrimination here for heuristic purposes.

A ——— R_1 ——— B
stimulus – relationship – correlate

X ——— R_2 ——— Y
stimulus – relationship – correlate

4. The process ends when we produce a new configuration, whether directly or indirectly. In any case, we produce a new configuration by substituting one or another element of the stimulus and prototype configurations for another through assimilation or projection. That is, one or another element of one configuration is substituted for its counterpart in the other configuration, thus producing a new configuration which amalgamates past and present experience. There are six basic patterns of innovation, which are:

A ——— R_1 ——— Y by assimilation

A ——— R_2 ——— Y by projection

X ——— R_1 ——— B by assimilation

X ——— R_2 ——— B by projection

A ——— R_2 ——— B analogy by double projection

X ——— R_1 ——— Y parallel by double assimilation

Let's first consider the ANZAC Day parade. In 1916, one or more Australians might have had the present experience, configurated as:

Australians **X** ——— remember **R_2** ——— their ANZAC dead **Y**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

which recalled the past experience or prototype configuration:

Australians **A** ——— honour with a parade **R_1** ——— their Boer War dead **B**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

From these two configurations, they amalgamated a new configuration as a parallel by double assimilation:

Australians **X** ——— honour with a parade **R_1** ——— their ANZAC dead **Y**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

So, although the specific celebration of ANZAC Day with a parade was a new practice, an innovation, its link with the past honouring of the war dead with a parade made it customary practice, if not also traditional. The dawn service innovation apparently had different antecedents.

But for an innovation to catch on and become customary, other people must adopt and practice it. Such history as we know indicates that individuals and groups took up the ANZAC Day parade in increasing numbers from 1916; the dawn service emerged and spread later. In Barnett's view, the innovation of a new configuration involves the same processes as those involved in its spread (adoption/acceptance or rejection) through a population, and both can be analysed and described in the same framework:

> [I]mitation is innovation, for when it happens that one person identifies himself X with another person Y and instead of doing what he is accustomed to do Y he does what his paragon B does. The reason this seems [not] to be … innovative is that in many instances no one questions the equation of the one person with the other. But there are numerous occasions on which the equation and its consequences would seem to be scandalous, presumptuous, or ridiculous … [such as] children behaving like adults and vice-versa; natives incongruously garbed in alien finery; social climbers and passers of class boundaries – not to mention outright imposters.

A further example. We can be sure that at contact on eastern Cape York Peninsula, any number of Aboriginal people would have had a prototype configuration something like this:

Aboriginal men **A** ——— hunt and kill game animals with **R_1** ——— spears **B**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

But on seeing white men hunt and shoot game animals with rifles (or shotguns), one or more Aboriginal men might have the experience:

White men **X** ——— hunt and kill game animals with **R_2** ——— rifles **Y**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

They might have related that present experience to their past experience by equating rifles (or shotguns) with spears through convergent

analysis via assimilation on the basis of function, producing a new configuration:

Aboriginal men **A** —— hunt and kill game animals with $\mathbf{R_1}$ ——— rifles **Y**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

And then acted on it by substituting rifles for spears in their hunting.

Or they might have related that present experience to their past experience by equating themselves with white men through convergent analysis via projection, say, on the basis of whatever similarity, producing a new configuration:

Aboriginal men **A** — hunt and kill kangaroos and wallabies with $\mathbf{R_2}$ — rifles **Y**
stimulus – relationship – correlate

And then acted on it by hunting and killing kangaroos and wallabies with rifles. These are events which we anthropologists also call *diffusion*, *borrowing*, *mimesis*, the spread of an innovation and the like.

Our courts have been willing to accept such innovations as not disruptive of hunting traditions, as in the *Yanner* case where Murrandoo Yanner used an outboard-powered dinghy and steel tomahawk together with a harpoon to take young freshwater crocodiles (but see Callinan J's reflective comment above). During the Lakefield and Cliff Islands National Parks land claims under state law in 1994, the claimant witnesses emphasised the continuity of their norms of taking only what they required ('not too much'), sharing it with others and not letting anything go to waste. They clearly rejected the argument that the adoption and use of firearms and such disrupted or qualitatively transformed their hunting and fishing traditions.

IX Conclusion

In Barnett's view, the terms *tradition*, *custom*, *habit*, *convention* and the like characterise the qualities of the prototypes we humans use in axiomatic equation. In other words, the process of equating new experiences with old ones not by convergent analysis or incorporation, but simply by convention (ie, by and large unconsciously and automatically). which 'means that X and A are parts of … a third and independent configuration that are bonded by the relationship of sameness or similarity'. Conventional equation and discrimination are doubtless much more frequent than analytic and incorporative equation and discrimination.

The conventions that we employ in our processing of new experience are a good part of the phenomena we also call culture, but they do not spring up anew and afresh everyday from nothing. Conventions, customs, traditions and the like lie at the base of:

> the necessary economy of everyday living for all of us to assume that there is constancy in the objects of our experience … [T]he room in which we awake is the same as the

one in which we fell asleep … [W]e are the same person asleep and awake. The assumption of continuity and stability in such contexts is not only essential to our sanity, but is a prerequisite for the least measure of effective reaction to our environment. It is also basic to the learning process, because it would be impossible to build upon past experience if every moment brought an entirely new order of events. Despite these[,] … we cannot fail to be aware that not only do things change over time, but that they are apperceptively transformed in the context of other things and events …