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Intro to Cultural Anthropology 212

The Irish Countryman

*By Conrad M. Arensberg*

*The Irish Countryman*, written by Conrad M. Arensberg is an ethnography that gives one a glimpse into the life of a hardworking, traditional people; the rural family of Ireland. This ethnography was first published in 1936, and then was reissued in 1968. The latter is the ethnography that this book report is a product of. Within the preface, Arensberg describes *The Irish Countryman* as being one of the first ethnographies to explore the “Old World of Europe” (pg 10). In this sense then, it was a sort of pioneer in establishing the anthropological invasion that would soon follow. The style of writing and information given can be better understood after realizing that it was one of the first of its kind. For, there is not as great a depth of information as one might find in *Yanomamo Fifth Edition* by Napoleon A. Chagnon, or *The Isthmus Zapotecs: A Matrifocal Culture of Mexico* by Beverly Newbold Chinas. Further, Arensberg mentions that although changes have occurred within the life of the Irish countryman, such as an increase in industrialization and less emigration, this ethnography still greatly portrays the life of the Irishman, as well as Irish rural custom. Specifically, he provides an introduction for, “explaining the cultural system, the work, the family life, the loyalties, and the values” (pg 12) of Irish rural life. Through the anthropological approach of participant observation, Arensberg lived in Luogh, an Irish west-country farm community located in County Clare. It was here that he was able to experience first-hand the Irish countryman and his way of life. Dr. Lowell, president-emeritus of Harvard University asked Arensberg to lecture at Lowell Institute in Boston in March 1936 due to his research and expertise of the Irish culture. This ethnography is a collection of those lectures.

While the main idea and direction of this ethnography has already been discussed: rural Irish life and custom, the central focus, what the ethnography’s purpose in demonstrating is, has yet to be identified. The central theme of *The Irish Countryman* is a dedication to understanding

old custom and belief, and how they affect the present; how they seem to still exist and are essential in comprehending the reasons behind the behaviors of today's (of that time period, 1930s) Irish countryman. Verbatim, Arensberg depicts his central theme in question form. He asks this, "What do the old customs alive today mean for the countryman? What is the way of life of which they are still a part after centuries of existence?" (pg 30).

This ethnography does not provide an explicit section detailing the types of methods used by Arensberg to collect data, therefore a deep discussion of his methods will not be provided. However, throughout the book, Arensberg does implicitly mention techniques that can be understood as methods of data collection. Therefore, this is what will be explored in better understanding what this ethnography is all about. These "methods," for this purpose, are worth noting. First of all, the most important method used to obtain data was Arensberg's direct living in County of Clare, Ireland where he was able to observe first-hand the small rural family, their life-style, and what impacts them. Through this, he took part in *participant observation*, the most famous anthropological approach to studying a group of people. His data collection did not stop there, however, for he did not rely solely on his observations. In addition, other professors from Ireland were described as helping him gain a deeper understanding of Ireland. They are Professors Eoin MacNeil and George O'Brien of the National University, Drs. Henry Kennedy and Seumas O Duilearga of Dublin, and Daniel Cohan of Ennis. Also, Arensberg mentions the collection of field data. Mr. Warner of Chicago University and Mr. Kimball of Harvard were his co-operatives.

In detailing the techniques used, again there is no explicit discussion of this. However, one notices quickly Arensberg's style of writing, and his use of examples (these are his techniques). It became the general pattern that first he would explain how a certain ceremony or behavior worked (in broad terms). Then second, he would use specific life examples or quotes of Irishmen or

women to exemplify his findings. In addition to this technique, he also sparingly used statistics from the 1926 census by Ireland's Free State Government to display the population size in the rural parts of Ireland (pg 49). Later, he used statistics again in showing some cross-cultural comparisons of marriage (pg 96).

*The Irish Countryman* is divided into six chapters, each revealing a vital aspect of rural Ireland. The first chapter, "The Interpretation of Custom," does a good job in getting the reader situated. It does not only introduce what is to lie ahead (within the ethnography), but also gives a little background on Anthropology itself. Arensberg starts with a discussion of a shift that recently occurred within anthropological study. It was the shift to participant observation, a direct observation and community living with the group being studied. This then, also brought a change in what was being studied about the group. An anthropologist's focus became an attempt in understanding the behavior of a culture, the social aspect. Also, their approach changed to a holistic one (a study of wholes, rather than chunks). Next, Arensberg dives into introducing the ethnography, and he sets up the central focus of how old custom and belief affect the lives of the present (mentioned earlier). Following that, the reader learns of what Arensberg calls the "Four Irelands." This is his attempt to give the audience a *holistic* read because by understanding each one of these individual Irelands, one can begin to understand Ireland in its entirety. The "Four Irelands" are named as such: The Celtic Ireland (one of tradition and history), the Merry/Happy Go Lucky Ireland (a more stereotypical viewpoint), the Serious Ireland (one of hard work, small farms and towns), and lastly, the Faithful Ireland (the strong-faith Catholics). Arensberg closes this chapter by giving two examples that demonstrate the central focus of this ethnography: the West Room and the Old Man's Curse. The West Room is a room that every rural family has, it is a room located in the dwelling that is of special importance, born out of traditional custom. When

a son marries, the land is then handed down to him from his father. The West Room is where the “old couple” (the father and mother) reside. It is a sacred and honorary tradition of the Irish countryman. The Old Man’s Curse does a good job in displaying folklore. For it is within Irish folklore that men suffer injury due to supernatural forces. The story provided within the ethnography was of a young man who had lost his eye. It was commonly believed, within the community, that an old man, the young man’s neighbor, had caused this injury. Both of these instances were used to show how rural custom and traditional belief still play a major role in the life of the Irishman.

Chapter 2 is titled “Countryman at Work.” Arensberg begins this chapter by discussing the difference of farm sizes in Ireland. He mentions that small farms, averaging about thirty to fifty acres, are the most common among the rural people, “almost eight of every ten persons working in agriculture live by small-farm production” (pg 49). Next, the farm family as an entity is described. The family is portrayed as a working whole; each person has their specific duties and each contribute equally to the success or failure of their existence. Land is vital for the rural Irish family; it bears the name and status of one’s family. Usually one can be identified by the type of land owned. Also, as mentioned earlier, the land is passed on to the son after marriage, with the land goes the status and name of it; the young new couple wear it proudly. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the family to keep the land in as best condition as possible, it is their livelihood, the meaning of their existence. To insure this, there are both men’s and women’s duties. This *division of labor* is deeply rooted within traditional custom and therefore, supports the central theme of this ethnography because it is still very alive in the current life of the Irishman. What is interesting to note though, is that the division of labor is an *egalitarian* one because both sets of duties are seen as vitally essential and necessary. This division of labor, then, is very similar to

that found within the Isthmus Zapotec (Chinas, 2002). Chinas details how the Isthmus Zapotec is a matrifocal society, one in which women (and their roles) are vital to the success of the community. Although there is a division of labor, a difference between what men and women are expected to do, both are regarded as equally important. This is the same with the Irish countryman. Women's duties (within rural Irish culture) mainly consist of cooking, washing, mending, milking the cows, churning milk into butter, and feeding the animals. Men's duties mainly consist of inspecting cattle and horse, tending the fields, fixing and repairing anything, and taking charge of the buying/selling of cattle. While women seem to work from day-to-day, the routine of the man is a more annual one. Also within the farm family, is the very important father-son relationship. First off, it is the father's role to socialize the boy into what will be expected of him as a male adult. Just like a Netsilik father will take his son on his first hunt, showing him both courage and technique (Balikci, 1970), by the age of ten or eleven, the Irish boy will begin his work in the agricultural aspect of the family. To achieve full-adult status as an Irishman, he must marry and inherit the farm. Until then, a fifty-year-old, unmarried man, still living as his father's dwelling is considered a boy.

The last thing Arensberg points out in this chapter is the concept of co-operation between rural families. In this, one can see yet another connection to the Netsilik Eskimo and their custom of *dyadic partnerships*. One purpose of the dyadic partnerships was to establish and maintain social cohesion and a sense of togetherness throughout the larger group, this phenomenon is also very highly valued among the Irish. Rural families are known to support each other and provide help for a neighbor when deemed necessary. Further, Arensberg explains how kinship is a direct result of this idea of co-operation, "reciprocities of sentiment and duty which make up his system of kinship" (pg 73). It is the *emic view* that when one's neighbor is in need of help, someone who

is able, shall provide it, for it is the humanly thing to do. The *etic view* (the outsider's perspective) can see the benefits of social reciprocity through these actions.

Chapter 3, "The Family and the Land" further the discussion on the rural family. Country marriage follows a long traditional pattern, showing yet again the impact of past custom. Once the couple marries they reside in a *patrilocal residence* and the land becomes theirs. Through this, one can see, yet again, a commonality with the Netsilik Eskimo (Balicki, 1970). After marriage, it is the woman that moves into the groom's dwelling (among the Netsilik Eskimo). This is due to the fact that the men are the hunters of the group, and know their land exceptionally well. If they were the ones who had to move, they would have to spend a great deal of time and energy in trying to master a new piece of land. In the same way, the Irishman knows his dwelling and farm exceptionally well. Therefore, in both cases, women are expected to move into the groom's place of residence; both societies require *patrilocal residence*. A *dowry* is also given to the groom's parents because of the losing of a dwelling and land. Before a marriage is settled on, the parents of the bride come to look at the groom's parents' land to make sure it is substantial and can provide sufficiently for their daughter. Once they have decided yes, marriage is the next step. Brothers and sisters of the groom are also affected by this new marriage, for the land is no longer theirs either and they are forced to move. This split, and the new families that they (brothers and sisters) develop, become one's *kinship group* (a supportive group of relatives). Social status again, is reflected in one's ability to marry and inherit land. Further, it is also the responsibility of the new couple to have children. With this is the perpetuity of the community, the continuing of old custom and tradition.

Chapter 4 is entitled, "Boys and Men." This chapter begins with the importance of age and past. Arensberg describes how these two factors contribute largely to the social life of the

Irishman. With age come status and power, honor and obedience. An example we have already seen of this phenomenon is the West Room and how this honorary room is reserved for the “old couple.” Along with age, the past (them “good ole’ days”) is much cherished. In this we can see a phenomenon similar to that of our society, for we always are reminded of how great it was “back in the day.” A major illustration of the superiority of the old is the formation of the “old men’s clique” also known as the *cuaird*. It is within these cliques that groups of old men of similar interest and status meet and discuss current issues. Further, it gives them a sense of identity and power. Once again, we see how tradition comes into play through these cliques, “among them [the cliques] the ancient repertoires of legend, saga and folktale still find an audience” (pg 130). However, one remembers that not all males achieve full-adult status (those who have not married or achieved land). These males, then, are not admitted into the *cuaird*, and instead, form their own cliques. These groups are formed to benefit the individuals who hold membership, but they also play a great deal in the organization of the community. It is through the social behavior of these cliques that community organization takes place (pg 135).

Chapter 5 discusses the relationship between shops and farms. This is a vital relationship that primarily connects the rural farmer to the outside world. “Shops, Pubs, and Fairs,” the title of this chapter, make up the foundation of the towns in Ireland. In particular, within this chapter Arensberg focuses on shops in both explaining their nature, and their relationship to that of the small rural family. First to note is that shops, just like the farm becomes the identity of the family and is run to support the family who owns it. Second, the economic prosperity of the shop depends upon the business of farm family; they are the ones who buy all the goods. Also, the tie that is established is one of kinship and friendship. The relationship between shop and farm is through either family or friends. This economic system is based on *market exchange*, but can be



easily identified, also, with principles of *reciprocity*, for the shop and farm depend upon reciprocal exchange with each other for survival. The countryman needs supplies and the shop would not live without the business of the countryman. This brings about, then, an extreme value of loyalty that Arensberg titles “debt.” Debt in his understanding is one of both literal and metaphorical definition. Literal, because it is very true that the farmer is always in a deficit monetary tie to the shop. Metaphorical, because this debt is characteristic of the strong bond and dependence that is formed between the two entities. If this “debt” were ever to be “paid off,” (the bond be broken) both parties would either die, or have to find another partner.

Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 primarily discussed the Irish countryman’s way of life. “The Good People,” however, the final chapter of this ethnography, is dedicated solely to the phenomenon of the past: folk-custom and folk-belief. This chapter is devoted to the discussion of folklore, folk-custom, and folk-belief, with a focus on the superstitious ideas of fairies. The Irishman is first and foremost a product of his religion. He is a very devout Catholic. However, belief in folklore becomes another strong influence in his life, for the two seem to co-exist in providing knowledge about trouble and how to deal with it. In addition, fairies seem to be both a dangerous and luck-filled phenomenon. Therefore, the people are cautious to not disrupt them, for they are very powerful and are a part of everyday life. For example, fairies can provide prosperity or destruction to one’s farm, and are often involved in fundamental life events such as birth, first communion, and death. Fairies, just as one can see with other folk-customs, have a very big impact on the social life of the Irishman. They shape his sentiments, thoughts, and actions.

Throughout this entire ethnography, it was of great importance to Arensberg to give as accurate, fair, and holistic account of the Irish countryman as possible. Bias and judgment were never identified in his writing. Also, Arensberg would not just give information and leave it at

that, he strove to show the “why,” the reasoning behind the behaviors and traditions that make up this group of people. It became very prevalent that he wanted to make sure that the audience saw the cultural significance in everything he discussed.

As mentioned earlier, there was not an explicit discussion of the types of methods used, however, the ones that were observable (participant observation, reliance on others’ knowledge, and the collection of field data) were adequate in answering the issues he set out to explore. Arensberg’s central focus of this ethnography is that of rural-custom and belief; exploring the phenomenon of past’s influence of the present. In studying this, both his first-hand experience and his conversations with other experts gave him a great wealth of knowledge.

In closing, this ethnography does not only provide an inside look at a fascinating culture, the one of the Irish countryman and his family. It allows for a deeper understanding of human kind as a whole. This ethnography focuses on how one group of people is influenced by their cultural traditions and past. However, if you look cross-culturally, this is true of all humans. The past, one notices, has one of the strongest impacts on how *all* humans think, feel, and act. For, we are all a product of our past. Whether one comes from the north, east, south, or west; from band, tribe, chiefdom, or state; all humans look to their past to determine how one should behave in the future. We learn from our mistakes, and use again the techniques that made us strive. Arensberg wanted to demonstrate this through the discussion of a particular set of people, the Irish countryman. Through this ethnography, one can begin to realize this universal tendency; one can see that perhaps the family of rural Ireland may not be so different from themselves.