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***The Business of Anthropology:
Communication, Culture and Japan***

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The Business of Anthropology: Communication, Culture and Japan

Introduction

Let me start by outlining what I perceive the purpose of an inaugural lecture to be. The word 'inaugural' is in many ways like a common coin, with two faces that together constitute a social, cultural and economic exchange value. One face – the 'head', on which is engraved a crown, a royal or presidential profile, or other emblem of state rule – tells us that the person delivering the lecture has been appointed, or 'inaugurated', professor of an academic institution. The other face – the 'tail', which usually carries the monetary denomination of the coin – should ideally display that same professor's vision of a field of study, outlining the contribution that s/he intends to make thereto. Unlike a coin, the tail's face of the inaugural coin has no fixed value prior to its being put out into the market of intellectual exchange. It does not tell you if the coin that you are about to grasp is worth 20 kroner, ¥500, €1, or an American dime. As a professor newly appointed in this institution, therefore, it is my task to create value by means of this inaugural lecture. You are the merchants who will decide how much my ideas, and thus I myself, are worth.

Because I have been appointed Professor in Culture and Communication, I wish to talk today about what I do, and the way that I do what I do. Hopefully, this will enable you to get a better understanding of advertising business culture and communication in Japan, and me to show that what I do and how I do it can prove far more informative than much of the research conducted by others employed in business schools all over the world. This inaugural lecture, then, will be an example of what Erving Goffman (1959) has called 'impression management'. Hopefully, at the end of it, you will decide that I am worth more than a dime.

What, then, do I do? I am an anthropologist – strictly speaking, a social anthropologist – trained in England in a tradition that emphasises the analysis of social processes (a tradition, incidentally, that is particularly strong in the Scandinavian countries and that is quite close to sociology). This means that I am interested in the study of social worlds – a pottery community, department stores, fashion magazine publishers, and so on – and in all the cultural and linguistic baggage that members of organisations in these social worlds carry about with them and put into effect in their everyday lives. The primary reason for my employment in the Department of Intercultural Communication and Management at the Copenhagen Business School is my long-term study of a Japanese advertising agency (Moeran 1996)¹ – a study that demanded, and still demands, special skills in communication and cultural understanding.²

The question that underlies this lecture is what can an anthropologist who studies business organisation bring to the teaching and research environment of a business school that his colleagues cannot bring? One problem is that most anthropologists involved in the study of business organisations are hesitant to promote themselves or their discipline, precisely because their work is rather personal, relies a lot on subjective interpretation, and makes use of a haphazard methodology that refuses to confine itself to particular issues. As a result, anthropologists know that they cannot provide the 'quick fix' answers that businessmen generally expect and that their colleagues in management studies provide. Occasionally, however, we get help from an unexpected quarter. Another social anthropologist employed in a business school, Malcolm Chapman (2001:19), tells the story of how he was chairing the final address at a conference on 'Managing Global Change' and was heartened to hear Bruno Leblanc, a distinguished scholar, researcher, consultant and teacher in the world of management education, sum up the contributions of other disciplines to business studies and then say:

“Looking back, it amazes me that we have never had anthropologists in our faculties of business and management; we need them and their ideas.”

But what ideas, exactly, was Leblanc referring to? Alas! Chapman does not enlighten us on this. It could, perhaps, have had something to do with culture. Given the hazy idea prevalent among my colleagues that anthropologists study ‘culture’, I suspect that it is this concept that they would like to have clarified. After all, culture is rather like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*: “Now you see it, now you don’t”. This is problematic for those who like to think of organisations as ‘objectively existing, capable of being studied by value-free science, and explained by analysing their constituent parts as elements of a functioning whole’ (Waldo [1961], quoted in Wright 1994:14). Compared with anthropology, organisation, management and business studies in general are predominantly behaviourist and positivist. They do not know what to do with ‘culture’ because they still tend to believe in ‘hard facts’ and statistical (and graphic) analysis as a way of ‘understanding’ what is going on in the world of business. For them, culture is something to be taken up, constructed as an independent object isolated from context, and then used as one among a number of ‘independent variables’ that can ‘explain’ behaviour.

Unfortunately, social anthropologists don’t think of culture in this way, if they think about it at all. For them, culture is infinitely *divisible* (and therefore must be plural). Not only do whole societies have cultures; so do different kinds of business corporations, concert orchestras, drinking establishments, families, film studios, golf clubs, health spas, hotels, media organisations, political activists, schools, and soccer teams. Moreover, cultures are infinitely *flexible*. The meanings of cultures are always being negotiated and renegotiated by those involved: politicians, citizens, media, managers, employees, unions, teachers, students, administrators, and so on. Thus, so far as anthropologists are concerned, the concept of culture can fast become a black hole in which we become intellectually immobilised unless we are first careful to define the terms in which we wish to analyse it.

Given this considered wariness of the one concept that almost everyone is probably convinced is important in both the management and analysis of business practices and organisations, you might retort that anthropology in that case can offer very little to the study of business. To add weight to your argument, you might – to some degree, justifiably – claim that anthropologists are for the most part only interested in the study of ‘primitive’ or ‘third world’ societies and that they studiously ignore everything that goes on in the ‘real’ world of contemporary market economies. But I would make two objections to this line of argument. In the first place, some anthropologists have been involved in studies of industrial organisation and factory shop-floor organisation from very early on³ – an initiative that has been continued through the post-war period.⁴ In addition, a number of anthropologists have conducted long-term fieldwork studies of and written about business corporations, particularly in Japan (Dore 1973, Rohlen 1974, Clark 1979).

A second line of objection would point out that, even though a large number of anthropologists have worked predominantly in ‘primitive’ societies in which the institutions of modern capitalism hardly existed, this does not mean that they have ignored economic relations in such societies. On the contrary, they have highlighted the role that social and cultural variables – such as kinship, community, age, gender, power and authority, to name but a few – play in people’s economic relations, especially those to do with exchange. As a result, they have argued, *contra* economists, that it is virtually impossible to disentangle the economic from the social and cultural.⁵ The issue that remains relatively unexplored, however, is *how much* society and culture do or do not determine the economy.

It is precisely this kind of approach linking culture and economy that can be brought to bear by anthropologists in the study of modern business corporations. Corporations are in many respects bounded entities. They have particular buildings of one sort or another in which people gather and work together every day, five days a week, for all but a few weeks a year, for something like 40 years of their lives. Corporations have fairly fixed structures, in

which some people are placed in positions of authority over others and given the power to make decisions. The buildings in which they are housed often reflect spatially the hierarchical social structure of their occupants, with managerial staff located in private offices, by windows, on upper floors, and so on, while ordinary employees find themselves in darker, less personalised, and less elevated quarters. To all appearances, a corporation is rationalised in terms of a division of labour, work units, employee time and so on to provide goods or services at the lowest reasonable cost to ensure the maximum economic return. Even though it may be concerned with the economic costs of raw materials, labour, machinery, facilities and so on, a business corporation is primarily concerned with the organisation of people. It is the unpredictability of 'human chemistry' that is the stuff of anthropology (and also, let us add, of some research in sociology and cultural studies).

And yet anthropological studies have not as a general rule been taken up by those working in organisation studies. This is no doubt partly because anthropology's philosophical tenet of participant observation, together with the holism that such a method demands and supplies, has not been conducive to the positivist agenda of organisation studies.⁶ It is also partly because an anthropologist's research is shaped as much by accident and happenstance as by planning and foresight (Van Maanen 1988:2-3). Then there is the fact that, in their determination to carve out an intellectual niche in the academic and business worlds, scholars in organisation and management studies have consciously or unconsciously ignored existing scholarship (e.g. Drucker 1993:ix).⁷ Finally, while anthropology has for the most part been concerned with the study of other cultures, contemporary business studies are 'predominantly monocultural (and effectively USA-centred)' (Chapman 2001:21).⁸

Nevertheless, I want here to bring organisation, management and business studies together with anthropology and ask each to take the others more seriously than they have done to date. There are at least two important arguments in favour of such an alliance – apart from the mutual benefits each would gain from the other's insights. Firstly, the world's second largest economy (Japan's) and one of its most rapidly expanding economies (mainland China's) are neither American nor European. Moreover, Indian, Korean, Taiwanese and many other Asian economies have specific social, cultural and structural characteristics that seem to mark them out as different in some ways from those hitherto focused on in business and management studies. It is precisely these cultural specifics that anthropologists have studied in these societies over many decades and can thus help explain and put into context.

Secondly, one kind of business organisation – the joint-stock company – is probably one of *the* most prevalent social institutions to be found anywhere in the world today. What such business organisations do, how they distribute wealth, where they choose to locate their premises, how many and what kind of people they employ, what kind of research they carry out, what sporting or cultural events they choose to sponsor, and so on and so forth, have enormous financial, economic, administrative, governmental, environmental, social and cultural consequences (Clark 1979:1) (which include the awarding of a Nobel Prize to one Japanese *sarariman* company employee). It is anthropology's theoretical ability to deal with the holistic nature of a company's activities and its relations with the wider world (and vice versa) that makes it so valuable to organisation, management and business studies. Not only can anthropology examine social norms, and formal and informal relations within a company, as well as the industries, fields, institutions, networks, and regulatory spheres in which it operates. It can analyse organisational environments in terms of change, conflict, ethics, gender, identity, morality, power, symbolism, and values – to name but a few of the discipline's interests and proven abilities.

Studying Organisations

Although, as a discipline concerned with cultural and social life, anthropology has much in common with other social sciences and humanities, it is particularly characterised by two features. One of these is *theoretical* and emphasises *comparison*. The other is *methodological*

and stresses the role of *participant-observation* in the close-up study of social and cultural environments (Eriksen 1995:9). It is these two features that I wish to discuss here in the context of business organisation in Japan.

The study of business – and, indeed, of all other – organisations is fraught with various kinds of difficulties, not least of which is the fact that managers are often disaffected from the practices of business research (Chapman 2001:2). For a start, it is often very difficult to get initial *access* to an organisation. Even when this has been achieved, and as a researcher you get one foot in the corporate door, the *kind* of access you are permitted is often problematic. Will you be able to watch people in their working environment – at their computers, in meetings, having lunch together, visiting customers, and so on? Or will you be confined to interviews with selected employees of the organisation? What will be the nature of those interviews? Will you be obliged to submit questions in advance and structure them accordingly? Or will you be able to roam more freely from one topic to another in an unstructured manner that allows those you are interviewing to talk about what is closest to their hearts? Who exactly will you be able to talk to? Top management? Middle management? Clerical staff? Union representatives? A combination of these and other representative groups? Will you get no further than being allowed to administer a questionnaire? In which case, what percentage of respondents will actually take the trouble to answer your carefully thought-out questions? Will they even think those questions relevant to what they actually do in their everyday lives? And how are you to find out?

In the time that I have spent considering the potential difficulties facing a researcher of business organisations, I have come to realise that the profession of the anthropologist is not entirely unlike that of an advertising executive (cf. Malefyt and Moeran 2003). This can be seen both in the ways in which they need to interact with all kinds of different people and in how they zigzag between the observation of facts and theoretical reasoning. Both anthropologists and advertising executives, therefore, are ‘folk ethnographers’ (Kemper 2001:4)⁹ who

Listen, observe, participate, converse, lurk, collaborate, count, classify, learn, help, read, reflect and – with luck – appreciate and understand what goes on (and maybe why) in the social worlds they have penetrated.

(Van Maanen 2001:240)

To take the analogy between anthropology and advertising further, I suggest that there are seven *basic principles* involved in undertaking research in a particular organisation or ethnographic group – principles that are also crucial to those working in advertising. True to business school form, I have arranged these principles according to an acronym: *Target Pascal*, which I use merely as a mnemonic device. Briefly, an ethnographer (and advertising account executive) has to:

- *Target* the right person in the group being studied;
- Learn to make a successful *Pitch*;
- Display an appropriate *Attitude*;
- Take advantage of *Status*;
- Make use of *Connections*;
- *Accept* what is offered, but *Aim* for more; and
- Turn the *Lucky break* into a golden opportunity.

Needless to say, these seven elementary lessons in fieldwork do not necessarily occur in the neat order in which they are presented here. Connections, for example, may well be the principle that provides initial access to a business organisation, while recognised status may make the initial self-presentation, or pitch, less important to successful entry into an organisation. However, I will take each of these as outlined here to show how they affected my own fieldwork experience in ADK.

Firstly, given the problem of access, it is extremely important to know whom to *target* in the organisation in which you intend to study. For example, when I first decided to conduct a study of an advertising agency, I used to mention the idea to Japanese friends and colleagues during my comparatively frequent visits to Japan in the late 1980s. One of these was a Mr. Mizutani, the foreign correspondent of a Japanese provincial newspaper in London.¹⁰ Mizutani and I had first met when he contacted me as Chair Professor of Japanese Studies at London University to ask whether I would contribute the occasional column to the *Hokkaidō Shimbun*. This I did three or four times a year, and continued to do so after Mizutani was recalled to Japan in 1987. I used to call on him when visiting Tokyo – both because of past relations and because I was at the time involved in setting up a student exchange programme between London University and the Hokkaido University of Education. The *Hokkaidō Shimbun* proved to be an active supporter of the initiative. In late 1988, I mentioned my advertising agency project and, during my next visit early in 1989, Mizutani introduced me to the advertising manager of the newspaper.¹¹

Here I come to the first aspect of targeting. The person who introduces you to the fieldwork group or community must be the ‘*right connection*’, and not just anyone who happens to know somebody in the targeted group. Thus I could have tried to gain access to the agency by way of Mizutani, but the latter was smart enough to realise that it should be his newspaper’s advertising manager, Tanaka, rather than an international news journalist, who should act as the go-between. The former asked me a few questions about what I wanted to do and why, before suggesting that I study an agency of which I had never heard: Asatsū (now ADK). “It’s very Japanese”, he said proudly, “I’ll try to arrange a meeting with the CEO while you’re here. Asatsū is a very good customer of our newspaper.”

This marked the second aspect of targeting. An ethnographer must be introduced to the *decision-maker* in the group to be studied (and, as every account executive knows – often to his cost – those in official positions are not necessarily the ones who make the decisions [cf. Moeran 1993]). In the case of an earlier study of folk potters, for example, I was introduced to a younger potter and not to the elected leader of the potter’s cooperative. Although the community was so small that I was able to address them all together and explain my aims and objectives, before going to ask official permission to do my research from the cooperative leader, there were later occasions when some of the elder potters expressed their resentment that I had not come through ‘official channels’.

In the case of the agency, this was not a problem. The *Hokkaidō Shimbun*’s advertising manager took me straight to the top. Two days later, at 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning, I found myself with Tanaka visiting ADK’s CEO, Inagaki Masao. He was joined by the chief of his ‘President’s Office’, a Mr. Hayashi, and his personal secretary. Tanaka introduced me to Inagaki, and then I was on my own. I suddenly found myself faced with a third basic lesson in ethnography: *how to make a pitch* (that most crucial of all advertising practices). Instinctively realising that this was a make or break situation, I mustered as much self-confidence as I could and embarked upon a three to four minute presentation of myself and my research plans. I kept things fairly simple and as much to the point as I could, explaining that, as a scholar, I was tired of impressionistic accounts and interpretations of advertisements by other scholars (who were often biased against the commercial world) and that I wanted to find out how the world of advertising worked: in short, how ads were made. It was the social processes of advertising as a business, and personal interactions among people in an agency that I thought would be fascinating.

Inagaki watched and listened to me carefully throughout, and I was conscious of being judged, of having every phrase carefully weighed by a shrewd businessman who had established his own agency 40 years earlier and taken it to the Number 6 spot in Japan’s advertising industry. When I had finished, he picked on something that I had not said (indeed, something that I was keen to avoid, if at all possible), but that he himself implied from my discussion of social processes. “Yes, we Japanese are always being misunderstood,” he said

quickly. “Just look at the way in which the Americans are complaining about unfair trade practices. Somebody has to explain to them what we Japanese really are about.”

I was not all that keen to get involved in this kind of discussion in my research, unless there was some obvious connection between international trade friction and domestic Japanese advertising practices. However, what I later realised was that a question that most decision-makers surely ask themselves, when approached by a request to do research is: “What’s in it for us?” Inagaki was looking for a way to justify my presence in his company, should he decide to accept me as a researcher. This he was doing primarily for his two subordinates (and possibly for himself), rather than for me. Although, it took some time for me to understand this, I did at the time instinctively make use of another basic lesson in ethnography and advertising. This was one of *attitude*: make sure to agree (or, at least, not to disagree) with the client. So, I made various sympathetic comments about the plight of Japanese trade negotiators and criticisms of American cultural practices, before steering the discussion back to my project.

Inagaki asked various questions – presumably to get more factual information, as well as to give himself more time to judge if I was acceptable as a person, or not. How was I going to survive financially in Tokyo? It was an expensive city to live in. Did I know that? Was I sure I manage on my own salary? Hopefully, I replied, especially if I was awarded a research grant. And how long did I wish to stay in the Agency doing fieldwork? One year? He paused for a few seconds, weighing up all that I had said. Well, he concluded, I could stay for three months perhaps. One year was a very long time to be there. He suggested that I start out by doing three months and then he could see how things were going before committing himself further. That was the best offer I could get, but it taught me another lesson in advertising (or in Japanese advertising, at least): *accept* the little that a client first offers you and make sure you get more later.

Yet another lesson in advertising, I learned a few months later when I was awarded a Japan Foundation fellowship. This not only assured Inagaki that I would not be a financial burden on the Agency in any way. It also convinced him that I was a recognised *bona fide* scholar who could add (just a little) prestige to his organisation by my presence there. In short, I learned the lesson of the contagious magic of *status*. During the entire period of my fieldwork, people in the Agency would refer to me as a ‘professor of London University’ and ‘Japan Foundation scholar’ when introducing me to clients (at formal presentations or informal meetings). That was what was in it for ADK. I could be classified in such a way that brought credit upon the agency, since the ‘symbolic capital’ (to use Bourdieu’s term [1984]) of my own academic institution and financial guarantor could be used to enhance that of ADK and thereby, perhaps, its economic capital.

Fieldwork practices

It was agreed that I should start my fieldwork in ADK on the first working day after the New Year in 1990. Three or four months before I left England, however, I received a letter from Hayashi, chief of the President’s Office, outlining the Agency’s proposals regarding how my fieldwork should proceed. I was to spend the first two weeks in his office, familiarising myself with the Japanese advertising industry, before spending a month in the Media Buying division where I would learn about magazine, newspaper, television and radio advertising. I was to move from there to the Marketing division, and thence to Market Development. After that, I should join Account Services, before studying in the Creative, Promotions, International, Personnel, Finance and Computer divisions. All in all, I was to spend approximately one month in each division. By the end of my year of fieldwork, I should have gained a thorough, rounded comprehension of Japan’s advertising industry.

This prepared programme both surprised and worried me, although at the time I merely wrote back to confirm Hayashi’s plan and thank him for his time and trouble in

arranging everything on my behalf. I was pleasantly surprised because, for the first time in my fieldwork experience, I did not have to work out for myself where to start my fieldwork enquiries. Whereas, on previous occasions, I had had to learn by trial and error how to go about studying a particular community of people, this time my collective informant, the advertising agency, was itself telling me where to begin. My immediate worry was that the agency's management might be guiding me to examine what it wanted me to examine, rather than what I myself might wish to follow up. After all, as someone 'studying up' (Nader 1969), I was here dealing with a collective organisation that was in an infinitely stronger power position than my own, and with people therein who might well manage the terms of my research engagement (Marcus 1998:121-2). I began to envisage arguments about academic freedom, on the one hand, and an ethical deadlock of some kind resulting in my leaving the agency, on the other. In fact, this worry proved to be totally unfounded, since – once fieldwork had started – I found myself more or less free to study what and where I wanted, provided that I liaised with Hayashi and others concerned to make sure that everybody knew what I was doing and where I was located at any one particular time.

A second remarkable feature of my agency fieldwork was that I found myself frequently being given lectures on the 'theory' of advertising, before being immersed in its actual practices.¹² The advantage of this type of fieldwork was that I was able for the first time to practice a form of 'grounded theory' that should be, but rarely is, characteristic of all anthropological fieldwork. Previously, when in the field in rural areas, I did not have access to books or materials enabling me to apply theories to data gathered during research and to let this combination of theory and data inform my fieldwork investigations as part of an ongoing project. In the agency, however, there was a wealth of statistical detail and case study material to support the stories that I was told during my everyday interviews and conversations. I was thus able to practise a grounded fieldwork that made use of these data and materials continuously to inform my further research enquiries. Such grounded fieldwork was a crucial element in my ability to understand and grasp the complexities of the advertising industry that I was studying.

All of this in itself, however, was not sufficient means to ensure that fieldwork proceeded towards a successful conclusion. And here I come to the *lucky break*. All anthropologists can recount particular moments when they were afforded insights that they might not otherwise have had, or suddenly found themselves closer to informants than might otherwise have been the case.¹³ These moments are in retrospect used to justify or validate particular positions adopted or held by anthropologists. I am myself very aware of such moments in all three of my longer periods of fieldwork. While the first two depended in large part on a particular personal relationship I had with someone in the community being studied, the last came about as a result of a particular business problem to which I was able to make – as it turned out, a successful – contribution. As every advertising account executive knows, one has to create circumstances that allow the lucky break to occur (so that the break is rationalised as being not as 'lucky' as it might at first glance appear); then one must take maximum advantage of the opportunity offered.

Let me now turn to describe how this combination of contact and opportunity coalesced during the fourth month of my fieldwork. As a general rule, I have found that this is usually a crucial stage in fieldwork. The first three months are spent asking all sorts of questions of everybody one meets in a particular area of enquiry, and learning all that there is to learn in the form of 'textbook knowledge'. However, after this acclimatising period, when informants are usually very helpful (because they know there is nothing to fear from the ethnographer's naïve – and generally superficial – questions), one can end up getting more or less the same answers to different questions. This 'impression management' (Goffman 1990) sometimes makes it seem as if a whole community of people is programmed to react in a uniform way towards one who is in some way an outsider. As a result, I have usually found myself beating ineffectively against a social wall whose well-mortared bricks effectively prevent further understanding of the subject of my research (whether of the economics of folk

craft pottery, or the ‘cultural’ activities of department stores). Although the Japanese advertising industry was considerably more open and more complex than other worlds I had studied, I still had the feeling that a lot was going on ‘behind my back’ and that I would never get to really know how the system worked.

Fortunately, during one of my visits to the agency prior to starting fieldwork, I had been introduced to one of the managing directors, Sato, whose son was by chance going to London to study at my own academic institution. Soon after the young man arrived in England, therefore, I made sure to get in touch and take him out to for an extended drink (or two, or three) one evening. When I arrived to start my fieldwork, his father thanked me for looking after his son, and when it was my turn to be assigned to the Account Services division, it was Sato who, as one of the divisional managers, took me under his wing, gave me a desk beside him, and ensured that I talked to whoever we both felt I should talk to. He also invited me out to one or two ‘unofficial’ lunches and dinners with clients where we deliberately did *not* talk about possible business opportunities, but instead confined ourselves to ‘wide ranging discussions’ of the apparent breakdown of socialism, the European community, Japan’s role in the world, art, literature, and whatever else it took to keep everyone interested and/or amused over a two or three hour meal. I was able in this way to begin to appreciate the informal side of the advertising business and to get an inkling of some of the agency’s ‘back stage’ strategies vis-à-vis potential and existing clients.

The Accounts Services division was a particularly opaque part of the Agency because of the extremely intimate relations developed by account executives¹⁴ with their opposite numbers (product managers, advertising managers, directors, and so on) in client companies (see Moeran 1996). I had heard about the existence of ‘presentations’, which were the events by which ADK gained, failed to gain, and occasionally lost advertising accounts. But I had little idea of when or where or how often they took place; of who attended them; or of what they consisted of by way of substance and social process. Inquiries about them had been met with answers that were either evasive or so general that they might have been taken from a textbook. Yet I was aware from previous experience that what I learned in fieldwork was never as described in textbooks. I had mentioned this point to Sato, but we both knew that presentations might be an even more difficult piece of the Agency’s business to observe because of the recurrent problem of ‘client confidentiality’.

One evening, however, Sato phoned me up after I had got home and asked whether I would be free the following morning at ten o’clock. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “We’ve been asked to prepare an ad campaign for Frontier, the electronics company, to be used in America and Germany, and we need a European to give us his opinion about our visual ideas. Could you possibly oblige, *sensei*?” He asked, politely using an honorific form of address for anyone who professes to teach at all. “There will be an informal presentation to Frontier in the afternoon, and I’ll see if I can get you in on that in exchange.”

I was willing, of course, and, of course, I ‘obliged’. My ethnographer’s antennae were already twitching. Instinctively, I knew that something big was about to happen. The next morning, therefore, I followed Sato downstairs into a small, smoke-filled meeting room where half a dozen men in their shirt-sleeves were discussing a number of story boards (mock advertisements) strewn on the table in front of them and lined up along two walls. Sato introduced me to all present (none of whom I had previously met) and they briefly filled me in on the situation and the assistance they required of me. ADK was due to participate in a competitive presentation for an account with Frontier – a major electronics firm in Japan – which wanted to run an identical campaign in Germany and the United States later on in the year. I was asked, as an English-speaking European, to give my opinion of the various advertising images and ideas that were now lining the room in which we sat.¹⁵

This I duly did. Most of my comments involved correcting English mistakes, although one or two focused on why particular images were being used and what marketing aims they set out to achieve. My attention was drawn in particular, however, to the Frontier

tagline: *The pulse of entertainment*. How had this idea in particular been arrived at? Apparently, Frontier itself had given the Agency this phrase to work with at its orientation two weeks previously. A second choice had been *The art of entertainment*. This, it was agreed, was only marginally – if at all – better. A third alternative, much liked by a senior Frontier director, was *The light of joy and creativity*. We had something to think about.

After long discussion and a hurried lunch, I found that Sato had been true to his promise and arranged for me to attend the pre-presentation that took place early that afternoon. Those present included three members of Frontier's International Division, and, from the Agency, its account team, a creative team from its international subsidiary, the chief of the Agency's International Division, the Agency's executive director, Sato, and myself. During the best part of the following two hours, three different account executives explained the Agency's marketing and communications strategies, and I was able to get my first confused glimpse of what a presentation could be like. There were some sharp questions from the senior Frontier executive present, who – among other things – asked why the Agency had not made use of the 'light' (*hikari*) tagline, even though it had been emphasised by Frontier's managing director at ADK's orientation two weeks previously.

After the departure of the Frontier executives, there was a *post mortem* meeting among those from ADK present at the pre-presentation. There was a lot of discussion of the format of the presentation itself, who was to make the pitch, which of the six series of ads the account team would actually show and why, what the competing agency was likely to do, and so on. This helped me realise the importance of such meetings for the mutual understanding of events by all participants, as well as for strategic planning. I learned how important it was for an advertising agency to target the right person (i.e. the decision maker) in the client company. I also became aware of the close relationships that account executives built up with their opposite numbers in client companies. Not only had the senior Frontier executive acceded to the agency's idea of a pre-presentation. He made an unofficial telephone call during out *post mortem* to advise us which of the ad series he thought most likely to persuade his colleagues to vote for ADK at the competitive presentation. In other words, the agency was on an inside track in the race for Frontier's account.

I also found out how an individual executive's personal likes or dislikes could influence the content of an advertising campaign (something no textual analysis would ever have revealed!). As a result, arrangements were quickly made to check consumers' reactions to the three taglines made available by Frontier. Finally, the fact that the competing agency, J&M, was almost certain to use a couple of foreigners in its presentation encouraged Sato to officially designate me a member of the presentation team the following Tuesday. He had a valid reason for my participant observation.

It was at this point that I suggested doing my own research among ex-pats in Tokyo to find out their reactions to the six series of ads dreamed up by the creative team and the three different taglines. This was readily agreed to. So, later that evening in a Belgian beer pub, I talked to a dozen friends and asked them what they thought of *The pulse of entertainment*, *The art of entertainment* and *The light of joy and creativity*. Very quickly I found out that none of them was particularly good. As one friend put it: "The trouble with Frontier is that it's too frightened of being forthright. Like its name says," she added, "It's at the forefront. It's a pioneering company." This helped me latch onto the taglines, *Like the name says*, *The name says it all* and *It's in the name*. While I sipped my beer, I also scrawled down another phrase that leapt to mind: *Entertaining ideas for the future*.

Advertising, as I was to learn, often advances by means of a process of *post-rationalisation*. I needed to justify *It's in the name* and my other taglines and found myself going back to principles of structural linguistics read many years previously. The following morning I explained to the account executive in charge how Frontier needed to set itself apart from its competitors by ensuring that its tagline did not have any associations with those of rival companies. *The art of entertainment* ran into trouble with Aiwa's *The art of Aiwa*, while

any allusion to the ‘future’ would run foul of JVC’s *Founders of the future*, and a focus on technology would clash with Sanyo’s *The new wave in Japanese technology*. By focussing on *entertainment*, I reasoned, Frontier would merely be falling in line with a set of associations (art, technology, future) that did not really differentiate one company from another, in the way that Sony had succeeded in doing with its *The one and only*. Frontier needed to be incomparable. It had to adopt a tagline that was distinctive, not subject to fashion and timeless. By going for something like *It’s in the name*, *The name says it all*, or *Like the name says*, Frontier would be able to re-enforce its image and turn back on itself in a never-ending cycle. Frontier, the corporation’s name, was the frontier of its industry. In short, *Frontier = Frontier*.

The account executive did not sound particularly enthusiastic, and I had the distinct impression that he knew all about semiotics and structural linguistics. Nevertheless, he asked me to write it all down for a Monday morning meeting, but when I presented him with my ideas then, he seemed far more preoccupied with other matters. It was, as I was to learn from other similar situations, a matter of so much to be done, and so little time to do it. There did not seem to be much that I could contribute at this stage, apart from pointing out one or two spelling mistakes and misprints, so I went off and did other things about the Agency. Maybe I had been a bit over-optimistic about my own potential usefulness as both foreigner and academic in the creation of the Frontier campaign.

Presentation and Result

Still, at least I was going to attend a presentation. That much had been achieved. The next afternoon we took a train down to Frontier’s headquarters in Meguro, heavily loaded with slide and overhead projectors, a couple of dozen bound copies of the presentation proposal, ad story boards, and so on. We were sent up to the twelfth floor and prepared ourselves for the ‘tournament of value’ that was about to take place. The Agency fielded ten people all told (three of them senior executive directors who were not involved in preparations for the presentation), while Frontier brought in almost two dozen – ranging from senior executives to middle- and low-ranking managers. We sat on one side of a long oval table, they on the other and at the end of the boardroom.

Proceedings began with greetings during which a senior manager from each side thanked all present for gathering at such a busy time and outlined the reason for our being there together. Once the stage had been set in this way, ADK’s account executive was given the floor and embarked upon his presentation or pitch. He opened by reiterating points made in Frontier’s orientation to the Agency, moved from there to a market analysis, and then outlined the Agency’s proposed communication strategy. Making use of slides, he distinguished between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ target audiences, and described the campaign aims and basic brand concept, *Towards New Frontiers in Entertainment*, before shifting to a discussion of the tagline. After outlining reasons for adopting *The Pulse of Entertainment*, he suddenly flashed on the screen as an alternative tagline, *Entertaining Ideas for the Future*. This, he said, had been very favourably received in the United States because it attracted one’s attention, gave off an impression of creative products, resonated well, was future oriented and suitable for entertainment-related products.¹⁶

Just as I was praising the creative effects of Belgian beer and wondering whether I might have a future career in an American advertising agency, the account executive giving the presentation introduced a new slide proposing a second series of taglines. These were *Like the name says*, *The name says it all* and *It’s in the name* – all linked under the umbrella concept of *Frontier = Frontier*. He then proceeded to justify the Agency’s reasoning along precisely the lines that I had followed when phoning him the previous Saturday morning. ADK’s creative recommendations that followed were divided into two approaches: one of ‘depth’ (*Frontier = Frontier*); the other of ‘scope’ (*Entertaining ideas for the future*).

Noticing my surprise, the International Division chief, who was sitting beside me, leant over and muttered *sotto voce*: “Very good ideas, *sensei*.”

But would the ideas be good enough to persuade Frontier to choose ADK over its rival, J&M? We found out soon enough. The very next afternoon, I was asked to present myself in one of the Agency’s smartest meeting rooms at 4 o’clock when Frontier’s senior executive was coming to inform us officially that his company had decided to award ADK its international account. About a dozen of us gathered on the ninth floor of the agency’s offices in Shinbashi and heard him inform us that those present at the two presentations the previous afternoon had been involved in fairly lengthy discussions over the de/merits of each of the agencies’ proposals. Two things had had to be decided: the brand concept and tagline; and the communication strategy and ad campaigns to be used. As a result, Frontier had decided to go for *The art of entertainment*, and to turn down all communication strategy ideas and ask for new series of ads to be made. While younger members of Frontier had felt more inclined to support J&M’s vision of *Power technology*, older members had felt that the Agency’s *Entertaining ideas for the future* was closer to Frontier’s vision. However, all agreed that the Agency had *potential* and it was this potential – exhibited in its ability to come up with new taglines in particular – which decided Frontier to award ADK its \$6 million account. Apparently *everyone* present had agreed that the tagline to go for was *It’s in the name*. This, they felt, expressed exactly what Frontier was all about. But those at the top – and, remember, the company’s chief executive was still keen on his ‘light’ idea – had felt that it was perhaps a little too ahead of its time (20 to 30 years ahead in fact) and that it was a mite too close in concept to Sony’s *The one and only*. If Frontier were to be seen as a ‘mini’ Sony, it would be the company’s downfall. So, reluctantly, they had decided to shelve *It’s in the name*, even though the tagline “remained consciously in their minds”.

Concluding Points

So what does this somewhat ‘confessional’ narrative tell us about business and anthropology?

In the first place, I have tried to show the strategic use to which randomly struck up connections can be put by the anthropologist – in the same way that they are regularly used by people in the world of advertising and business more generally. One chance can lead to another, and it is the ability or inability of both anthropologist and businessman to make the most of opportunity that leads to success or failure in the endeavour in hand. Thus, although access to ADK depended to some extent on chance, in spite of what Buchanan *et al.* (1988: 56) say to the contrary, skill was needed to take advantage of initial opportunity.

Secondly, as I have highlighted how access is crucial to success or failure in anthropological, as well as in management, business and organisation studies research. The fact that I had the blessing of ADK’s CEO in conducting my research meant that a whole programme was prepared for me in advance. It meant that I was properly introduced to all the agency’s staff at its monthly early morning assembly (where I again had to introduce myself and state my research aims), and then taken around every section and department in every division by a senior member of the President’s Office. For better or for worse, everyone knew who I was and could approach or avoid me, depending on how they felt.

But access in itself was not good enough to transform research since it had to be renegotiated (Hirsch and Gellner 2001:5) every time I moved about the agency from one division to another. I mentioned earlier the difficulty facing a researcher in all organisations, where people are very willing to talk about things that they want to talk about, but are usually equally competent at not talking about what they do not want to talk about. This kind of impression management may not be noticed by the researcher who is confined to conducting one-off interviews with people in an organisation. But it usually hits the full-time participant observer a few months into research, when s/he comes up against a brick wall designed to prevent further understanding of how an organisation really works. In other words, the

ethnographer somehow has to move from the front stage of impression management where people *tell* you what they do, to the back stage where you can see what they *actually* do.¹⁷ It is for this reason that I have my reservations about research based only on formal and informal interviews. On the basis of past and present practice, I firmly believe that only participant observation and full-immersion fieldwork can provide a means of breaking down this wall and seeing how an organisation really functions and why.¹⁸ In this respect, as a methodology, ethnography offers a broad approach whose 'open-ended flexibility' can incorporate other research methods like in/formal interviews, text analysis, questionnaires, historical research, and so on (Macdonald 2001:78).

Let me illustrate this methodological point. As I said earlier, one of the problems I faced in doing my research at ADK was finding out about agency-client relations, since these were shrouded in mystery. 'Client confidentiality' was the phrase almost invariably used to brush off my questions. And yet it was clear that the advertising industry was structured somehow around agency-client relations. After all, it was the clients who provided the agencies with the accounts, or sums of money, that enabled them to produce the advertising that we see in newspapers and magazines, on television, billboards, airport baggage trolleys, items of clothing, and so on. It was vital that I find out in concrete terms how agencies got those accounts by interacting with clients, if I were to be able to make sense of the world of Japanese advertising.

The Frontier presentation provided me with this opportunity and I was able, by attending the ultimate 'front stage' performance of impression management (in terms of setting, personal appearance, manner [Goffman 1990:32-36]), to see the kinds of things that went on 'back stage' in the advertising industry. But it was only a brief glimpse behind the scenes and much of what I observed did not make all that much sociological sense at the time, until I experienced it again and again in other agency-client contexts. That this in itself was possible was due to the small part I played in the build-up to the Frontier presentation. By coming up with a series of creative ideas that, by chance, fitted in with ADK's own assessment of how Frontier should approach the German and American markets, I showed that I could be more than a visiting 'professor'. I could actually be of use to the organisation that I was studying. Once news of my contribution to ADK's success in securing the Frontier account spread around the agency,¹⁹ others began to come to me to ask if I couldn't help out in this or that project that they were working on. Thus, for the first time, informants came voluntarily to the anthropologist, rather than have the anthropologist come to them (usually at an inconvenient moment). As a result, I learned an awful lot (though never enough, of course) about the world of Japanese advertising, both in breadth and in depth.

During agency-client meetings, I frequently witnessed the kind of 'impression management' that I myself had earlier been subjected to as a not-fully-integrated researcher. The difference now was that my informants-*cum*-colleagues knew that I knew that they were managing impressions of one sort or another. This led to a certain sense of solidarity and rapport between us (of the kind often commented upon by anthropologists in their account of fieldwork). But the fact that I was now more of an 'insider' meant that, when I was part of an account team dealing with external organisations, I had to participate in the very same arts of impression management that I had previously sought to tear asunder. In this respect, solidarity also involved a certain 'complicity' (Marcus 1998:105-131) with, or 'dramaturgical loyalty' (Goffman 1990:207-210) to, my informants-*cum*-colleagues.

However, this sense of complicity, which was enabled by and sustained rapport, did not derive from the kind of 'inherent moral asymmetry' between anthropologist and informant discussed by Geertz (1968:151) and Marcus (1998:110). Rather, it arose from the institutional and financial asymmetry that existed between advertising clients that distributed advertising accounts, on the one hand; media organisations which ran the advertising campaigns, on the other; and the advertising agency itself, which moved restlessly between the two.

This complicity was thus inter-organisational, rather than inter-personal, and was driven by how money – in the form of the split account system – circulated within the advertising industry. By recognising this, I came to realise just how the advertising industry as a whole was structured by the tripartite relationship between these three different players of advertising clients, media organisations and agencies. This then prompted me to examine how the agency itself was internally structured to meet the demands of the industry, or field, as a whole (Moeran 2001). In this respect, my ‘intervention’ in the preparations for the Frontier competitive presentation not only led to immediate interaction with different people in the agency, but allowed me in the long term to work out the social structure of the advertising field and the social mechanisms by which it operated.

In these and one or two other respects, the case study detailed here provided me with the classic benefits of participant observation. By ‘being there’, and being there long enough to make a difference, I was able to hear and structure the multiple voices of my informants. By looking at their interaction during both ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage performances, I became aware of unanticipated details, as well as of the relevance of apparently irrelevant things said and done (cf. Chapman 2001:24). As a result, I was able to arrive at a holistic study with general theoretical implications for the advertising industry both in Japan and elsewhere (cf. Hirsch and Gellner 2001:9-10).

And, with these concluding comments, I bring my own impression management to a close. What I have tried to show in this inaugural lecture is the potential value of an anthropological approach to the study of organisations, management and business, and to question existing methods that rely almost exclusively on (un)structured interviews and questionnaires. I have also pointed to the role that social and cultural relations play in the successes and failures of organisations, and hinted at the importance of communication in those relations. Now it is time for you to take the coin that I have offered and participate in the inauguration of its value. You may then exchange it for a nickelodeon, penny whistle, guinea pig, or whatever you have a yen for.

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Endnotes

¹ The agency in question was at the time of my fieldwork known as Asahi Tsūshinsha (or Asatsū, for short) and ranked Number 6 in Japan. In the late 1990s, it took over another large agency, Dai-ichi Kikaku, to consolidate its position as Japan's third largest ad agency and has been renamed ADK. It is by the latter name that I shall generally refer to the agency in this paper.

² Somewhat surprisingly perhaps (cf. Chapman 2001:32), I am not a consultant, but still an anthropologist who goes to conferences, writes learned articles and gives the occasional inaugural lecture.

³ Radcliffe-Brown's pupil, Lloyd Warner, was brought into the third stage of the Hawthorne experiments conducted between 1927 and 1932, and introduced fieldwork methods to conduct in-depth studies of factory shop floor units. Unfortunately, however, the social explanation of workers' behaviour deriving from these studies was ignored and 'supplanted by an individually-based psychological one' (Wright 1994:8). This confusion of anthropology with psychology continues to this day (see Sunderland and Denny 2003).

⁴ Shop floor studies were pursued in the 1950s and 60s by anthropologists working at Manchester University under Max Gluckman, who, with the support of George Homans who was visiting from Harvard, advocated full participant observation by researchers (rather than mere observation as in the Hawthorne Bank Wiring study). Five studies were conducted to discover what, if any, relation there was between informal group structure and output norms in different factories. Various wider contexts – the organisational structure of industries, class, community and social environment, and gender roles – were drawn upon to explain the differences in management-workers relations found in the five field sites (Wright 1994:10-14).

⁵ This argument gave rise to the well-known distinction between 'substantivists' and 'formalists' in the sub-field of economic anthropology (cf. Wilk 1996).

⁶ We should recognise, however, that some of those in organisation studies, notably Peter Drucker (1993 [1946]), have conducted long-term fieldwork in particular corporations.

⁷ For example, in the 1993 Introduction to his 1946 book, *The Concept of the Corporation*, Drucker claims as part of his impression management that his 'was the first book that looked upon a "business" as an "organization"', even though at least one business historian, Ralph Hower (1939), had already described an American advertising agency in these terms.

⁸ Drucker also claims, in total disregard of the comprehensive literature on Japanese corporations based on extensive fieldwork, that since he wrote his book almost 50 years ago, nobody has tried to do anything similar – 'whether with one big business enterprise or with any of the big organizations in and through which the social tasks of modern society are being discharged' (Drucker 1993:ix).

⁹ McCreery (2001:4) suggests that advertisers and market researchers are more like 'guerilla' ethnographers.

¹⁰ I have changed the names of all individuals mentioned in this paper, except for that of ADK's former CEO and now chairman, Inagaki Masao, since it would be a little ridiculous to try to conceal his name..

¹¹ I made it clear, incidentally, that I did not want to study the largest agency, Dentsū. This was, firstly, it was too big an organisation; and secondly, because I have always believed in the 'Avis principle': that those behind the leading organisation anywhere are probably 'trying harder'.

¹² Hine (2001:65) reports a slightly similar experience upon her arrival to do fieldwork in a science laboratory in England.

¹³ Clifford Geertz's (1973:412-417) famous opening description of the Balinese cockfight is a case in point.

¹⁴ In Japanese, they are called by the rather more down-to-earth title of 'salesmen' (*eigyō man*).

¹⁵ A formal analysis of this case study may be found in Moeran (2003).

¹⁶ I discovered after the presentation that people in ADK's Los Angeles branch office really had taken to the streets the day before and asked people what they thought.

¹⁷ This is one of the essential 'commitments' of fieldwork (cf. Miller 1997:16-17).

¹⁸ My current research on women's fashion magazines in France, Hong Kong, Japan, the U.K. and U.S.A. is based on the kind of 'multi-sited' research advocated by George Marcus (1998), but which, as a concept, totally fails to get to grips with the problem of impression management and back stage manoeuvres.

¹⁹ The account was primarily won as a result of the close personal relationship developed over some time between ADK's account executive in charge of the presentation and his opposite number in Frontier.