# Culture and Superculture in a Displaced Community: Tristan da Cunha[1]

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Anthropologists—and sociologists who have borrowed the concept—have for a long time been talking about "subculture" in the sense of a partially distinct cultural system within a larger system. I am here offering the concept "superculture," which is simply the larger system (or certain aspects of it) as seen from the viewpoint of the subculture.

No matter how isolated both geographically and socially, every human community is encompassed by, and stands in some relationship to, a larger cultural system, of which it mayor may not form a more or less integral part. When this larger cultural system—Redfield's "greater tradition"—is associated with prestige, authority, or power, as it usually is, it takes the form of a superculture, which may be superimposed upon the little community from outside but usually remains more or less apart and aloof from the local culture and interaction. The relationship between these two cultural systems is in itself an important part of the total cultural situation of any community.

The little community of Tristan da Cunha, in the South Atlantic Ocean, with a present population of no more than 270, was founded in 1817 as a utopian community based on the principles of communal ownership, absolute equality, and freedom from governmental control. It was started by three members of a British garrison, which was stationed on the island for less than a year and then withdrawn. The three men were soon joined by sailors or various European origin, but mostly British, and with a good admixture of American whalers from New England. In 1827, five or six women of mixed racial background were brought from St. Helena.[2]

Because of its location, and because most of the settlers were sailors, the community was from the outset—apart from its utopian ideals—an integral part of that cosmopolitan tradition which may be referred to as the cultural heritage of the Seven Seas, a tradition which flourished under the bulging canvas and in the forecastles of the sailing ships and spread to every seaport in the world. Increasing isolation from the middle of the last century, when the steam engine and the Suez Canal combined to divert shipping from those South Atlantic waters, made the Tristan community one of the last living relics of that tradition.

The social structure of this community was simple and informal, consist-



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ing of a number of largely independent family units tied together by bilateral kinship and mutual recognition, but without any formal authority or control. The only formally established principle was that of anarchy, which was set down in a document signed by the original settlers in these words:

> That in order to ensure the harmony of the Firm, No member shall assume any superiority whatever, but all to be considered as equal in every respect. . . .

Although the very existence of this document was apparently soon forgotten, its spirit never died, and the principles of equality and anarchy, although repeatedly put to a test, remained strong enough to withstand pressures and assaults from inside and outside the community and became a living force and a dominant element in the community's total system of values.

To this isolated community, as I saw it in 1938, the whole "Outside World" had become a mysterious and remote superculture, which made sporadic and intermittent appearances in the form of passing ships, resident missionaries, and an occasional visit by the British Navy. Prominent in this superculture, as the Tristan Islanders conceived it, was the powerful authority that came from the prestigeful greater tradition of the British Commonwealth, of which the Tristan Islanders always regarded themselves as loyal members. They had vague conceptions of such institutions as the Colonial Office and the "S.P.G." (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel). But there was little differentiation in their concept of the Outside World as a whole. They tended to regard every stranger as somehow vested with authority and would address him with a humble "Sir," whether he were an Admiral of the Royal Navy or a coal heaver from a passing freighter (Munch 1945: 65). On the whole, although they were constantly on guard against any institutionalized power growing up in their own midst, the Tristan Islanders had a deeply ingrained respect for, and even a submissive deference to, the authority and prestige of the greater tradition of the outside modern world.

Until the Second World War, the impact of the superculture upon the Tristan community was rather limited because, most of the time, it was not represented inside the community. To the British Colonial Administration it was, of course, a vexing anomaly that Tristan da Cunha had no local control in the form of a resident magistrate or other formal administrator. But through the years the Islanders were usually left alone, as appeared to be their preference, and the only reminder of British control was the occasional—not even annual—visits by the Royal Navy.

The resident clergymen, who were occasionally sent out by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, did wield considerable authority, both because of their holy office and because they represented the prestigeful greater tradition. Some of them even tried, quite successfully sometimes, to establish themselves in a more powerful position by taking a hand in the daily affairs of the community and presenting themselves to the Islanders as official representatives of the British Government. But even they were only intermittently present; on the average, a missionary served for a period of three or

four years out of every three decades. And their influence was never of long duration because the Islanders soon developed a pattern of adapting to the presence of heteronomous authority in their midst by playing along when necessary, but ignoring it whenever possible. It took four successive ministers and repeated persuasion over a period of 70 years to make the Islanders build a church.

The Second World War brought an abrupt end to this relative isolation. The British Navy and South African Air Force personnel moved in and established a camp and a meteorological station. They brought a chaplain and a doctor, the first resident physician on the island, who was also appointed the first official Administrator of Tristan da Cunha. Most of the ranking personnel brought their families along, which led to the establishment of a regular school, with a teacher added to the number of "Station people" and with compulsory attendance by the Tristan children as well. At times, the outsiders may have almost outnumbered the 200 native inhabitants of the island. With all this came paid labor for the Islanders, and money. A canteen was established which, according to descriptions, must have looked and functioned like a regular country store.

The Royal Navy withdrew from Tristan at the end of the war, but the island never returned to its former isolation and tranquility. The meteorological station was maintained with South African personnel, and the British Colonial Office established a formal administration of the island under the laws and jurisdiction of St. Helena, continuing to maintain an official Administrator, a clergyman, a doctor, and a teacher, eventually also a nurse and an agricultural officer, most of them with families. In ostensible "democratic" fashion an Island Council was set up, and other governmental and legislative institutions were established. The Islanders participated in these by appointment, and later even by general elections, but always, of course, under proper supervision.

Moreover, in 1950, modern industry moved in. A South African fishing company built a canning factory for crayfish and later converted it into a freezing plant. This not only added another person, the Company Manager, and his family to the "Station people," but it also provided continuous paid labor for the Islanders and gave rise to a fairly regular communication with Cape Town by ship and by radio.

Out of these developments came many technical improvements, such as the installation of modern sanitation and water supply, more rational grazing methods to replenish the impoverished pastures, and the establishment of a refuge for sea birds, which is reported to have replenished the dwindling stock of yellow-nosed albatross, the mollyhawk, which plays a part in the economy of the community. The continued presence of a canteen as well as a "pub," with money available to spend there, improved the general level of living of the Tristan Islanders. With this also came tooth decay and other civilized ailments.

The attitude of the Tristan Islanders to all this was generally one of acceptance and approval. They particularly appreciated the technical improvements, partly because they brought their lives to a material level more in ac-

cordance with the standards of the prestigeful Outside World. Most of them welcomed the factory because it brought money and hence access to many things that previously had been regarded as luxuries. Even the presence of an institutional heteronomous authority, which it became increasingly difficult to ignore, seemed more agreeable to them in the light of the improvements that came with it. Besides, it never entered their minds that they should have anything to say about it.

To the Islanders, the power of the institutional authority from outside was absolute. Although they might be critical of a particular decision made by the Administrator and even hold a particular officer in considerable contempt, they never doubted his right to act as he saw fit and to demand complete obedience from them. They seemed content to accept the administrative machinery of the greater tradition that was descending upon them as a mysterious world beyond their comprehension. It was like the weather: it could be good, or it could be bad, but, although it might spell the difference between "fat times" and "hungry times," there was nothing in the world anybody could do about it.

The Islanders thus continued their old strategy of playing along, doing whatever they were told to do without a question, as if in a game whose rules they did not know and whose goals were determined somewhere beyond their reach. To some degree they even played at sitting in the Island Council, making decisions of minor importance, knowing full well—as at least some of them did—that the Administrator controlled the agenda and that any really important decision concerning the island came from outside, regardless of what they themselves wanted or thought.

In October, 1961, disaster struck. A volcano erupted near the settlement, destroyed the factory, and threatened to engulf the settlement itself. The entire population was transferred to the island of Nightingale, twenty miles away, where they planned to spend the time until the danger was over. In response to distress signals over the radio, a British destroyer, the *Leopard,* was dispatched from the naval base at Simonstown with relief supplies, however, when a Dutch liner, the *Tjisadane,* arrived before the *Leopard,* all were herded aboard that ship, and, as usual, the Tristan Islanders obeyed without a question. As one Islander expressed it afterward in a taped interview, when asked why they did not stay on Nightingale: "Well, you see, Mr. . . . [the Administrator] say he think everybody should leave and go, so—that's all there was to it."'

The *Tjisadane* brought the Islanders to Cape Town, where a chartered ship was already waiting to take them to England. Between the dispatch of the *Leopard* from Simonstown and the arrival of the *Tjisadane* at Nightingale, an important decision had obviously been made. There is no doubt that the volcanic eruption offered an opportunity for the Colonial Administration to effectuate what they had long desired: the complete and final evacuation of Tristan da Cunha.

To outsiders, at least to those of the professions, and particularly to the resident missionaries who were barred from the more intimate social life of the Islanders by a gulf of social distance, the island of Tristan da Cunha had

always appeared uninhabitable. The question of complete evacuation had been brought up for the first time in the 185Os by the first resident missionary, who said he thought it would be "a happy day when this little lonely spot is once more left to those who probably always were. . . its only fit inhabitants—the wild birds of the ocean" (Taylor 1856: 90). And the question was raised again and again throughout the history of the community (cf. Gane 1932: 84-109). Apparently an image had been created in London to the effect that the Tristan community was constantly on the brink of starvation and in need of relief, and that humanitarian as well as economic considerations demanded a complete resettlement as the only permanent solution.

The question of permanent evacuation, however, was exactly the point at which the Islanders' deference and obedience to the authority of the superculture reached its limit. Every time an offer of resettlement was presented to them, the Islanders turned it down—and with increasing unanimity and emphasis as time went on. Obviously the Colonial Administration and its officers were aware of this. But apparently, as representatives of the superculture, they were also convinced, like many others (notably the missionaries), that the Islanders' stubborn determination to stay on the island was due only to their ignorance of the outside world and its blessings. The volcanic eruption thus provided a unique opportunity to lift the Islanders out of their misery without their even knowing what was happening to them. No one suspected that they were here touching some core values of the little community, values that were not shared by the prestigeful superculture.

In England, the Tristan Islanders were temporarily housed in an abandoned Army camp in Surrey, where they suffered much from colds, and where four of them died of pneumonia. Eventually they were resettled at Calshot, near Southampton, a semi-industrial area that seemed to offer a variety of job opportunities. The British Government provided them with good housing in a settlement designed for Air Force personnel, and all who were able had jobs—in garages and service stations, in various kinds of factories where they quickly learned to work on the assembly line, in road construction, at a large yacht club near Lymington, or in a nearby oil refinery. They rapidly acquired familiarity with modern means of transportation and communication; they even learned to find their way around Southampton and London on their own. Many of the younger men acquired motorcycles or scooters, and the teenage boys became bicycle fans. The younger women in particular quickly adopted a more modern style of dress, although some of their elders frowned upon the indecency of short skirts, nylons, and low necks. Lipstick and nail polish became fairly common, and more and more women had their hair cut short and even learned the use of the beauty parlor. In their homes they quickly became used to electric cooking, radio, and television, and after some initial confusion they even learned to buy on the installment plan. On the whole, an amazingly quick adaptation to the patterns and symbols of modern civilization was apparent on the surface.

In this situation the Colonial Office may have felt confident that the evacuation had been successful. The Administrator and the Minister, who had stayed with the Islanders in Calshot for a while, were withdrawn as their

terms of appointments expired, and the Colonial Office closed its files on Tristan da Cunha.

Yet the Tristan Islanders had assumed all the time, as a matter of course, that their stay in England was only temporary. Apart from the work situation, they had very little communication with the English. They seldom left their enclosed village except for work and for shopping trips, and the visitors they had were mostly journalists and reporters, whom the Islanders learned to despise because of the often twisted and sometimes condescending reports that they read about themselves in the papers. If anything at all had happened to the social structure of the very loosely integrated community that I had known 24 years before, it had become tied more closely together as a group, and there had been an increase in the Islanders' awareness of their peculiar identity as a value to be cherished. One new trait that I found when I saw them in Calshot in the summer of 1962 was a fierce pride in being a "Trisst'n."

With their deeply ingrained deference to the superculture as a world still beyond comprehension, it took a long time before it dawned on the Islanders what was happening to them. This came first as a fleeting suspicion that was rapidly dismissed as inconceivable. But the clues accumulated and were slowly pieced together, and the suspicion grew into a fearful certainty that they were not to return to Tristan unless some drastic action was taken. In this desperate situation, completely lost in the face of the intricate channels and pitfalls of a bureaucratic machinery, the Islanders pleaded for help and advice wherever they thought they could get it, and every outsider visiting their village became a potential savior, whether he happened to be a journalist, a brush salesman, or a social anthropologist.

It is interesting to note that the Tristan Islanders really entertained the notion that it might possibly be within the right and jurisdiction of the Colonial Administration (as an agency of the superculture) to evacuate the island at will, even against the wish of the people. It was with no conviction and with great anxiety in her voice that a Tristan woman asked me in Calshot: "They can't keep us here, can they?" It was almost like an echo from 1884, when the old Tristan patriarch, Peter Green, found occasion to write a long letter to the British Admiralty, asking the question: "Can the Rev. Dodgson take our people away without the consent of Government, or the Admiralty to have something to say about it?" (H. M. Statistical Office Blue Book 1904: 34). The only hope for the Islanders that such a decision would not be taken had stemmed from their fundamental faith in the basic benevolence of the Colonial Administration.

It was this faith that was now being shaken. The first open expression of protest came at a meeting of all the Islanders in April, 1962, called by the Administrator to present the results of a Royal Society expedition that had visited Tristan in January to observe the development of the eruption. At this meeting the Administrator let slip, perhaps inadvertently, that the question of return to Tristan was an open question, yet to be decided. He pointed to the responsibility of the Government and said it would not be fair to expose the children to the risk of renewed volcanic activity. He may have meant to pre-

pare the Islanders gently for the bad news that actually the question of their return had already been decided negatively. But the reaction was strong and immediate. The meeting got out of order, the Administrator left, and the Chaplain, who tried to calm the Islanders down, was booed and called names like "a wolf leading his flock!" It was no less than a revolt, as yet unorganized, against an authority which had hitherto been regarded as absolute and whose benevolence had never before been questioned.

Three months later there came a new and decisive crisis. In the meantime, an action elite had grown into being around one of the more prominent families, and petitions were submitted to the Colonial Office asking for the return of "the People." When these petitions remained unanswered, a meeting of all the men was called in the village square in Calshot. It was probably the first time in the entire history of the community that a meeting of this kind had been called at the Islanders' own initiative, and even in this case they had received encouragement and moral support from individuals sympathetic to their cause. At this meeting, twelve men were selected to return to Tristan, partly to fish for the Company, partly to plant a crop and do whatever repair work was necessary for the return of the rest. Their passage, as well as the support of their families in Calshot, was to be paid for by contributions levied on all the families of the community.

It was in the face of this determination that the Colonial Office reversed its previous decision and consented to the return of the Islanders as a responsibility of the Government. The twelve men sailed from England in August, 1962. Their families, numbering about 50, followed in March, and the remaining 200 left for home in October, 1963. Eleven young Islanders, according to reports, chose to remain in England.

The story of Tristan da Cunha is significant from several points of view. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and discuss the emergence of an action elite. It is important to note, however, that when the Tristan Islanders found themselves in a situation where the future of the community depended on their own initiative and action, it entered nobody's mind that this might be the responsibility and proper function of the elected Island Council. This, I think, is an indication of the precarious position and superficial role of institutions that have been superimposed upon a little community by the authority of the greater tradition. Although the bearers of the little tradition may participate actively in such institutions, the latter may still in essence remain a part of the superculture alone, basically alien to the local culture, an external trait to be shed the moment the pressure is released.

The rise of the bearers of a subculture to assert their collective identity over against the pressures of a superculture is not unique in intercultural relations, although it may be rather rare to find a single little community taking such a stand. The Tristan community was in a position to do so because of a complex combination of circumstances. For one thing, it had occupied a territory which the bearers of the superculture deemed undesirable for any purpose and which, because of its location and the complete absence of a natural harbor, was sufficiently removed from the usual lines of communication to remain apart from the mainstreams of cultural diffusion. It is, of course, of the

greatest importance that this territory remained available to the Islanders as a suitable retreat, even after their forced removal from it threatened the extinction of their collective identity.

It should also be kept in mind that the cultural tradition of the Tristan community has sufficient affinity to modern civilization for the Islanders to operate functionally—at least in a modest way—within the social and cultural space of their superculture. Only thus could they conceive of the idea of finding their way back to Tristan on their own as a realistic goal of action, and only thus could they indeed go into action within a strange cultural milieu.

The ethical code of the superculture, which generally disapproves of forced migration and expatriation (although such measures may be resorted to when considered to be in the interest of some overriding value such as "progress"), should also be considered as a factor which, in combination with enormous publicity and a partially sympathetic press, gave the Tristan Islanders considerable moral support.

But the most important factor in this intercultural drama was the Islanders' remarkably articulate awareness, and positive evaluation, of their own peculiar identity as a community. This is what gave them a steadfast and almost unanimous will to return to Tristan, even in defiance of the absolute authority of their would-be benefactors. Although usually expressed by the Islanders in specific rather than general terms, it became quite clear that the fundamental traits and core values in this collective identity are the absence of violence and of aggressive self-assertion and the freedom from superimposed control. It appears that the principles of equality and anarchy are still a living force and a dominant element in the value system of this community.

Through all this, of course, the relationship between culture and superculture was shaken to its very foundations. Whether this has had a lasting effect upon the Tristan community remains to be seen. It could be that, after this experience, the super culture may be considered somewhat less superior and its authority somewhat less absolute. I hope to have more to say about this in a year or two.

## NOTES

1. This paper was read in part before the 62d Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, California, November 21-24, 1963. The author is indebted to the Social Science Research Council for a grant enabling him to restudy the community of Tristan da Cunha at Calshot, England, during the summer of 1962.
2. For further details concerning the foundation and history of the Tristan community, see Munch 1945: 13-47.

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