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## *Usans: "The Real People" Confront Globalization*

**Clare L. Boulanger**

*Mesa State College*

*The frog that lives under a coconut shell thinks that the shell is the sky.*

— Malay proverb

Like other peoples that anthropologists have studied, Usans are wrestling with the question of how to maintain cultural identity in a world where territorial boundaries are becoming increasingly permeable to capital, labor, and the media. Usans reside within a huge swath of territory that cuts across the North American continent and then some, as outlying lands were colonized as well. As the last phrase indicates, Usans arrived as invaders, and the conquest of their present-day territory was world-renowned for the ruthlessness with which native peoples were dispatched. Formerly, anthropologists referred to Usans as the Nacirema, but it should be mentioned that, as is so often the case in the anthropological literature, neither of these terms is what Usans use to refer to themselves. Many anthropologists initially eschewed the indigenous term ("American"), fearing it might cause resentment among peoples to the north and south who could legitimately lay claim to it as well, but neighboring peoples, by and large, seem willing to cede their rights to the term, not least because they do not want to be equated with Usans. "Usan" is arguably the least controversial among the three terms and hence will be used throughout this essay, with apologies to those who might prefer otherwise. At the very least we all can rest assured that none of the terms mentioned above is derived from the derogatory opinions of Usan enemies.

Oddly enough, however, it is also true that none of the terms means what such terms so often mean in the local language: "The Real People," or "The Only People." This is especially strange in light of the fact that the Usan ethos certainly tends toward exceptionalism. Given their central location on the continent, Usans have absorbed countless foreigners into

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"The Dream"

their population over the centuries (via intermarriage and migration), but it is strongly expected that these newcomers will quickly divest themselves of their origins and take on an exclusively Usan identity. The regularizing device par excellence is a corpus of ideologies known as "The Dream." The Dream is not a religious concept per se—there is no necessary reference to the primary deity most Usans worship—but rather, a program of "right behavior" which, if scrupulously followed, is said to guarantee the dedicated practitioner supreme happiness and security, with a measure of that security deriving from the existential satisfaction of knowing that one is fully a member of "The Real People." It should be noted that some Usans, such as those whose ancestors were subject to forced migration and those who were themselves forced migrants, are not always given a good-faith opportunity to pursue the Dream, and hence cannot be entirely sure that they are as "real" as other Usans.

Usans are hardly untouched by globalization; on the contrary, they have been instrumental in shaping the trend. But the Dream intensifies ethnocentrism, which skews Usans' impression of their impact on the world, and obscures any impact the world may have on Usan society. There is no indication at this time that Usan ethnocentrism will lessen; indeed, in response to recent violent events that virtually demand some attention be paid to world affairs, it has, almost pathologically, deepened.

One reason Usan ethnocentrism today verges on obsession is that it is adaptive. Ethnocentrism justifies a prerogative that Usans have claimed for quite some time—a disproportionate share of the world's resources. While other societies have long known of this situation and have begun to voice objections more openly, most Usans remain untroubled, and even unaware. Within the protective shell of their ethnocentrism, they are sheltered from the complaints of outsiders. On those few occasions when they are exposed to such complaints, they may hear them as merely envious or petty. They are generally firm in their conviction that Usan society, given its exemplary qualities, is only receiving its just due.

Usans apply this "just due" to a favorite cultural pastime—that of accumulation. Usans value accumulation for its own sake—indeed, they celebrate it in lavish rituals called "game shows"—and this sets their society apart from others anthropologists have studied. In non-state societies, individuals may have the leeway to accrue goods, but they are also enjoined by their fellows to be generous with their wealth. If the New Guinean "big man," for example, hoards his pigs rather than redistributing them, their numbers are of no consequence—his people will not only strip him of his rank but actively vilify him; in some traditions he may even be killed. In contrast, the Usan "big man" (and he is usually a man, though "big women" are not unknown) may or may not be generous with his wealth. If he adopts the first course of action, he may inspire a reaction akin to awe, but he is not reduced to a "rubbish man" if he chooses the second. Ordinary Usans may natter about him behind their hands but cannot levy overt accusations of stinginess to any worthwhile effect, since Usan society largely supports the "big man" and his quest for accumulation.

It should be pointed out, however, that Usa is a state society, and state societies frequently feature a different attitude toward the individual prerogative to pursue wealth. Even so, in many state societies there is an ambivalence about such ambitions, which sees expression in practical terms by governments imposing redistributive mechanisms on the wealthy and in ideological terms by spiritual proscriptions against greed and selfishness. Both institutions, in fact, exist in Usan society as well, but are severely undercut by the dazzling lure of accumulation. Wealthy Usans must set aside a portion of what they accumulate for the

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government, but this portion is not excessive and can even be reduced by a variety of legal and quasi-legal means. Because ordinary Usans are themselves liable to government tax and are often less than convinced that the ends toward which this is applied benefit society as a whole, they do not always begrudge the efforts of the Usan "big man" to escape the burden. As for ideology, sacred writings revered by most Usans do in fact inveigh against accumulation. The most exalted of Usan holy men, regarded as the embodiment of divinity, is reputed to have said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich man to enter Heaven (an idyllic place where the virtuous dead reside). For years, Usans have wrestled with this statement, seeking an interpretation that could bring virtue and accumulation into harmony, but their efforts have borne little fruit, and what there is of it has tasted vaguely of hypocrisy. In desperation, some Usans, at the time of this writing, have unearthed an obscure passage from an earlier text in which one Jabez successfully petitions God to increase his wealth, and in this Usan "big men" and their supporters have found validation and spiritual solace.

While Usans prize accumulation for its own sake, this does not mean that the "big man" is merely a means through which it is accomplished. His ability to accumulate is believed to follow from additional culturally valued attributes, notably his desire to achieve and his capacity for "hard work," a mystical quality whose characteristics are elusive, though they would *not* seem to include the strenuous manual labor to which the expression literally refers. In short, the career of the "big man" is the Dream made visible, and thus ordinary Usans can rest assured that it is attainable. They are always haunted, however, by the fear that they may not have applied sufficient quantities of desire and "hard work" toward the realization of their goals, and it is these alleged faults in themselves, rather than the economic and political structure of the cultural system in which they are embedded, that they tend to blame for failure.

So, via ethnocentrism, Usans manage to preserve a key cultural value in these globalizing times, and this in itself is standard and even admirable human behavior. However, in this instance, as in many similar instances around the world, we must pose an age-old anthropological question: What happens when the vigorous pursuit of a cultural practice in one society actually constitutes a detriment for others? Are we called upon to act when culture generates oppression, both within and between societies? For most anthropologists, it is likely still debatable as to whether the Usan case has become extreme, let alone in need of redress, but while we argue, we should not be surprised if figures we consider to be far less rational seek to rectify global inequities in far less rational ways.

### ***Acknowledgments***

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