

Complexity in the Use of Culture Concepts

Re-thinking Concepts of Cultures. Example: Fishing/Foragers Neolithic Cultures in NE Europe

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This paper deals with the general pluralism of opinions concerning the concepts of Neolithic cultures. Variations within the contents and concepts of cultures can represent a great potential, but they are essentially restrictive. The positivist division of archaeological cultures is a familiar error of the exponents of "objectivity" of cultural studies – "Neolithic cultures", "Subneolithic cultures". Between the 1970s-1990s researchers could not agree upon the economic, ceramic or other aspects of the identifying features of cultures and sometimes referred to them as "Subneolithic", "Paraneolithic," or even "Ceramic Mesolithic". All these terms, also including the cultural context, are incomplete, although they do contain information about the prehistoric past, which is real.

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Concepts of culture occur in different contexts. There does exist enormous pluralism of opinions within the concepts of Neolithic cultures, as well as contamination of concepts; new-language is also common. (The term "proto-Neolithization" is one example of the new-language. Another one is: "Proto-Linear-Band-pottery agrarian experiences", to cite directly from modern literature about Neolithization). *Variations within the contents and concepts of cultures can represent a great potential but are basically a restriction.* The significance which we attempt to interpret in human actions of the past is their own special significance. It is unique to each particular society and to every given period. It is, consequently, possible to understand this significance only by studying it in the context of its own culture. The positivistic division of distinguishing archaeological cultures is a familiar error of the postulates of

"objectivization" of culture studies – "Neolithic" cultures, "Subneolithic cultures". To distinguish an archaeological culture like a "real" existing culture system involves not only the problem of definition, but also identification (see also Czerniak & Koško 1988; Gurevich 1992:143). "These divisions will always change, depending on our opinions concerning the culture-creating role of individual "organizers", and depending on our ability to identify them" (Czerniak & Koško 1988:62).

Interactions and exchanges between societies with different economies undoubtedly existed in the areas surrounding the Baltic Sea - the circum-Baltic during the fourth and third millennium bc. The fishing-forager peoples living in the societies from ca 3000-2000 bc, which existed in Finland, Russia, the circum-Baltic as well as in eastern and southeastern Scandinavia, indicate sedentary settlements and large vil-

lage communities. The economy, however, was conservative or "Mesolithic". The population was, in my opinion, permanently resident in a favourable ecological environment, and the societies and groups of peoples were of a sedentary nature. The society members were not forced to adopt farming, and the fact that the bones of domesticated animals and sometimes grain occur on the forager settlements from ca 2700-2200 bc in the eastern and Middle Sweden can be interpreted, I think, as exchange relations between the "full-Neolithic" societies (Funnel Beaker Culture) and "Subneolithic" fishing/forager societies (Jennbert 1991: 87 ff.; Werbart 1993 *in print*).

Mesolithic sites and Mesolithic technology continued to be used in the Neolithic: the reason to really re-think the so called agricultural transition is in fact justified. The Mesolithic groups of peoples and the later "Neolithic" forager and fishing groups adopted ceramics but not agriculture in some regions. We cannot understand this adoption in terms of population or environment, but can we do so in terms of social and cultural change? Ceramics are often found at sites with distinctly Mesolithic stone or flint implements.

The cultural differences between North East Scania and the rest of Scania were accentuated during the so-called "Subneolithic" or Middle Neolithic (Wyszomirska 1983; 1984; 1986). Differences can also be seen in dates, for example, between North East Poland and other parts of the country. However, what is "Neolithic" or "Subneolithic"?

The so-called Niemen and Narva societies, which can be traced from ca 3500 bc, are characterized by their pottery, but they do not have "Neolithic" economic system. On the Dudka settlement, which has a great number of fish and hunted animals, we do not find domesticated animals (only about 1,5% of all bones; Gumiński and Fiedorczuk 1990). Strictly "Neolithic"

cultures (defined by an economy based on agro-pastoral farming) are of very little importance. Here, as in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, Mesolithic traditions and conservative economies survive until the early Iron Age (Werbart 1993 *in print*).

Consequently - what do the terms "Neolithic", "Pottery Mesolithic", "Submesolithic", "Subneolithic", "Para-neolithic", "Proto-Neolithic", "Epimesolithic" mean? Short of total confusion!

(Examples of archaeologists who use such terminology include in chronological order: Gimbutas 1956; Meinander 1961; Kempisty 1970; 1973; 1983; Kempisty & Sulgostowska 1991; Loze 1970; 1979; Kozłowski S. K. 1971; 1991; Kozłowski J. K. & Kozłowski S. K. 1975; Piggot 1979; Gumiński & Fiedorczuk 1990; Kukawka & Małecka-Kukawka 1991, among others). Even the terminology causes a lot of problems, for instance the archaeological "labelling" of the different terms. We must discuss the use of the culture concepts! Do we really mean the same thing when we talk about Neolithic and "Subneolithic"? The material culture does not necessarily reflect reality. The meaning of the past does not belong to the past, but just to us, and to the present. The frontiers of language must also be discussed. A dream about the perfect language is a very beautiful dream, even amongst archaeologists. Relations between "things" and "words" is our, archaeological language.

Archaeologists often understand "culture" as a "patchwork quilt" of different things or objects. "Culture" is, however, a complex phenomenon. The archaeological "dry" and "labelling" concepts of cultures with a drastic example of "Kulturkreislehre" (Kossinna 1909) has been transmitted to some more flexible functionalism (Malinowski 1944). The complex phenomenon of cultural requirements can also be composed of other requirements - economic, political, ritual, social or psychological

considerations, the requirements of ritual and time (see for instance Bradley 1991: 211).

The desire to avoid labelling is particularly justified when we observe 36 different names (!) of the similar, related or quite identical cultures of the Baltic region during the fourth and third millennia bc. The concepts of cultures are consequently used in different contexts: as chronological descriptions, descriptions of finds, in popularization terms, in diffuse terms. But here are hesitators and rationalists among those who formulate the terms. Today we also have the extremists, who wish to abolish the concept of culture.

What does a "group" mean? The culture group or group of people in the given society? What is Comb Pottery? Does it mean pottery ornamented with a comb? Hardly. Or pottery ornamented with comb-stamps or tooth stamps? And does it mean pottery

with pit ornamentation? What is Pitted Ware? These ambiguities are embarrassing and illogical. The concept of "culture" in contexts like the "Pitted Ware Culture" was always used in the traditional way, without an adequate ground, and only as an assemblage of artifacts that occur together in settlements, and in graves. The content of the culture concepts is in this way quite hollow, and archaeologists talk about "Comb Pottery Culture", "Pitted Ware Culture" or "Corded Ware Culture", and they are perfectionists in labelling these unknown structures in our "rational" way. The historical outline of the concepts of "those" cultures termed "Subneolithic" between 1907 and 1958 is an example of the prevailing total confusion (see Table 1). Concepts of "Subneolithic" culture occur in three different contexts: as a "culture", a "period", and as an "ethnicity". It is important to consider the 36 (!) different names of

1907	ALMGREN: <i>Stone Age culture of Åloppe-Gullrum type = "East-Swedish Settlement Culture"</i>
1910	FRÖDIN: <i>Alvastrå "East-Swedish Settlement Culture" = "proletariate" (!) against the "Megalithic culture"</i>
1911	ALMGREN: <i>"Finnish Comb Pottery Culture"</i>
1917 & 1930	ÄYRÄPÄÄ: <i>Comb Pottery Culture, Pitted Ware ("Die kammkeramische kultur", "Grübchenkeramik")</i>
1927	GAERTE: <i>"Comb-marked Pottery Culture"</i>
1928	JAŹDŹEWSKI: <i>Proto-Finnish Culture ("Kultura prafińska")</i>
1929	RICHTHOFEN (after Kossinna 1909): <i>Comb- and Pitted Ware Culture ("Kamm- und Grübchenkeramische Kultur")</i>
1938	FOSS: <i>Pitted-Comb Pottery Culture ("Kultura jamotjno-grebentjatoj keramiki")</i>
1938	LIDÉN: <i>The South-Swedish Settlement Culture ("Den sydsvenska boplatskulturen")</i>
1941	FORSSANDER: <i>The South-Swedish Settlement Culture ("Den sydsvenska boplatskulturen")</i>
1950	BECKER: <i>Danish Pitted Ware Culture ("grubekeramisk kultur")</i>
1956	GURINA: <i>Russian Pitted-Comb Pottery Culture ("Kultura jamotjno-grebentjatoj keramiki")</i>
1958	GARDAWSKI: <i>Polish Comb-Pitted Pottery Culture ("Kultura ceramiki grzebykowo-dot kowej")</i>

Tab. 1. Historical outline of the concepts of the "Subneolithic" cultures.

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|----------|---|-----------|---|
| 1. GR/KA | (Pitted Ware/Comb Pottery) culture | 6. KA/GR | (Comb Pottery/
Pitted Ware) culture |
| 2. GR/KA | - " - culture complex | 7. KA/GR | - " - circle |
| 3. GR/KA | - " - circle | 8. KA/GR | - " - culture circle |
| 4. GR/KA | - " - culture circle | 9. KA/GR | - " - group |
| 5. GR/KA | - " - group (Siiriäinen 1969) | 10. KA/GR | - " - culture complex |
| | | 11. KA/GR | - " - technol. complex |

(Clark 1969; Hagen 1971)

and conversely:

- | | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| 12-13. KA | culture, culture complex | 21. Neolithic hunter-gatherer cultures |
| 14-15. GR | culture, culture complex | (BW) |
| 16. | "Settlement culture"
(Boplatkultur) <1940 | 22. Forest Neolithic |
| 17. | "Culture of the sand-dune
settlements" <1960 | 23. Forest Zone Neolithic |
| 18. | "Paraneolithic" (Kempisty and others) | 24. Marine Neolithic (Zvelebil) |
| 19. | Ceramic Mesolithic (S. K. Kozłowski) | 25. Coast Neolithic |
| 20. | MN (Middle Neolithic) coast
economy (Janzon) | 26. Subneolithic < 1970 and now > 1990 |

and more rarely:

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| 27. | Baltic culture | 33. Eastern Comb-marked culture |
| 28. | Submesolithic culture (Loze 1970) | 34. Mazovian culture |
| 29. | Proto-Finnish culture | 35. Dnjepr-Elbe culture (Kossinna 1909) |
| 30. | Arctic-Eurasian culture
(L. Kozłowski 1923) | 36. The Comb-Marked and Pit Pottery
Culture (Kempisty 1970) |
| 31. | Comb-marked culture | |
| 32. | Proto-Ugro-Finnish culture
(Richthofen 1929) | |

Another example is provided by the Middle Neolithic cultures (MN B) and Late Neolithic cultures in Northern and Middle Europe:

Corded Ware Culture
Battle Axe Culture
Single Grave Culture
Rzucewo Culture
 but....

Late Neolithic
 no culture??

Tab. 2. Different names of the "Subneolithic" forager cultures within the circum-Baltic area. GR/KA = Pitted Ware/Comb Pottery, KA/GR = Comb Pottery/Pitted Ware, KA = Comb Pottery, GR = Pitted Ware.

the Subneolithic fishing-forager cultures within the circum-Baltic area and southern Scandinavia, the so-called "Comb Pottery and Pitted Ware Culture", see Table 2.

The terms of numbers 29-30 and 32 in Table 2 are the "ethnic" terms. Ethnicity cannot, however, be treated as one variable, but must be considered as many.

Throughout the solidarity between members of the group of society, the identity of a social group can be strengthened. A very complicated and complex exchange system-kula can be mentioned as an example of this solidarity (Malinowski 1944).

So called "culture shocks" or "culture crocks" do not properly exist. It is impossible to separate and segregate the peoples from each other only because they are different. In historical times specific groups of human beings were isolated just to avoid so called "culture crocks". The Indian or Saami reservats were a tourist attraction even in the not so distant past and in modern times. Anyone can isolate peoples in reservations or in ghettos. But the irrevocable social processes cannot be isolated or closed. Should we, in fact, devote our time to the study of ethnicity in archaeology? I agree with B. Olsen and Z. Kobyliński: "We believe that the focus of ethnicity studies in archaeology should be shifted from attempts to identify and name particular ethnic groups to studies of the phenomenon of ethnicity" (Olsen and Kobyliński 1991: 22). Our own human visions and estimations, ideologies, ethics and politics, and our understanding of history, determines likewise our attitude to the question of ethnicity in archaeology.

How are we to explain the total confusion in the meanings and concepts of cultures? What does the term "an archaeological culture" mean? "Archaeological culture" or "archaeological society", "group" or "complex", "element" or "type", and maybe "style" and "focus"? Different taxonomic unities

(for instance "cultures"), which are distinguished intuitively or by numerical methods, do not need to reflect different culture systems, but, however, can reflect quite different non-cultural interactions. De facto, it is very difficult to refer to a phenomenon as an archaeological society, were the term "culture" should not be incorporated. Or, according to L. Klejn, shall we call a cat as "the cat"? (Klejn 1991:125 ff; Kobyliński 1991:22).

"Like its sister discipline, socio-cultural anthropology, archaeology has a tendency to invent a term for its own sake, and then argue about what it means for twenty years, rather than defining the term in the first place" (Dunnell 1971:4). But can we really delimit the terms of archaeological cultures? And do we really need all these terms? Archaeological doubts oscillate today between black pessimism (Gren 1993) and light optimism (Malmer 1993). I am not so pessimistic as Leif Gren, and I do not believe in the three Sisyphian tasks of archaeology, nor in the fact, that "we should search for the constant in man" (Gren 1993:87 ff) ...and I do not like and I am not fascinated by Nietzsche's ideology!

All these terms, also including the cultural context, are incomplete, although they do contain information about the prehistoric past, which is real.

Confusion still exists even today. Between the 1970s-1990s, researchers could not agree upon the economic, ceramic or other aspects of the identifying features of cultures, and sometimes refer to them as "Subneolithic", sometimes as "Paraneolithic" and in some cases as "Ceramic Mesolithic". There seems to be an almost *paranoid necessity* to constantly devise new terms, such as, for example, "Coastal Neolithic", "Marine Neolithic", "Forest Neolithic" (!) or "Forest Zone Neolithic" (among others Zvelebil 1986). If we can call a culture "Forest Neolithic", why not "Lake Neolithic", "Dessert Neolithic", or even "Ritual Neo-

lithic”? Most important is the fact that, behind these 36 names, there *were* existing societies, women, children and men who were living within a distinct ecological and cultural environment.

The changes in social interactions and connections, more than in the economic area, and the importance of interactions between different forager societies and/or between these communities and farmers can perhaps explain the existence of the contact

zone between “Neolithic” and “Subneolithic” cultures.

Instead of constantly creating new and “exciting” names and terms, and “labelling” the concepts of cultures, I suggest that it is more useful, and easier, to accept the long survival of the foraging, fishing and gathering way of life in the inter-Baltic area than were the case in more southerly areas.

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