

Feature article: *Anger*

Anger and Anthropology

[Andrew Beatty](#)

[Department of Anthropology, Brunel University
London](#)
andrew.beatty@brunel.ac.uk

Tell me the truth about love, wrote the poet W. H. Auden, in a poem that playfully circles its subject, deferring definition. Is the truth about love to be found in an agony column or a history of Romanticism, a Shakespeare sonnet or the secretions of the endocrine glands? Well, love without biology is certainly missing something. But the sonneteer can, at least, claim to be truer to the *experience*, body and soul. The endocrinologist can't touch it.

The truth about love—or *anger*, our theme—is doubtless complicated. And if we recognize the ontological complexity of emotions, their distribution in words and gestures, social patterns, predicaments, cultural values, faces, voices, bodies, brain functions, and histories, we have to make a strategic choice. It's not about determining causal priority, much less of insanely trying to grasp the whole, but of deciding what kind of account will satisfy our interests as psychologists, philosophers or social scientists. That may mean keeping an open mind about what should count as emotion—a matter of stipulation in any case—and a heuristic willingness to extend categorical boundaries. Where does an emotional episode begin and end? With James's 'exciting fact', the cognition that makes it so, the ego that feels its relevance, or the personal history of similar ego-focused vicissitudes? How far do we need to go back (or forward, proleptically), to make sense of an emotion, or to understand an emotionally inflected episode?

As an anthropologist, I am less interested in the kind of explanation that sweeps away the existential reality—or reduces it to models—than one which places that reality, however fleeting, in a new light. A good explanation, or (as might be) a coherent interpretation, doesn't lead away from the ethnographic field to some higher plane of

abstract emotions, but back into it. A persuasive account of love or anger shows us—in terms which respect the integrity of the experience—more about things we assumed we had understood, filling in what had been shadows. Seeing more, instead of seeing through.

In grasping the emotional life, once we admit the possibility that other people have something like the complexity we take for granted in ourselves—with tangled biographies, criss-crossing relationships, an interior life, a past and a future, a certain place in the world—we begin looking for *reasons* rather than causes, personal resonances rather than common denominators. The anthropologist with an interest in emotion has, additionally, to balance particularities—the *sine qua non*, there being no such thing as a generic emotion—with broader historical and social factors.

One way of doing that is through narrative. Not fictional narrative, of course. We can't make it up. Our accounts have to be empirically robust, the dialogue and events real, not merely plausible. Unlike the novelist, we don't have privileged access to the private doings and thoughts of our interlocutors. But we can listen to them, observe them, live among them; and after a year or two in the field we have a pretty good idea of what's going on, how emotions operate in a given society, what stirs a particular individual. Fieldwork has a way of painfully correcting misunderstandings.

Lest this sound like a retreat from science into bad art, I should note that the goal of a narrative account is to achieve an enhanced realism, not just a good story; to restore the significant factors in emotional episodes that neat case histories and typifying accounts leave out (an argument pursued in [Emotional Worlds](#)); to rehumanise ethnography. Only narrative can reckon with characters in the round, a time dimension, competing perspectives, unfolding situations, reversals of fortune, dialogue, and the hidden factors that make, say, a jealous man unaware of his jealousy; in fact, everything that goes into a living emotional episode. In contrast, approaches that depend on synchronic analysis, the study of discourse, word sorting tasks, and cultural representations—exercises remote from the flow of events—leave out most of *what matters to particular people*, in other words whatever

generates their emotions and gives those emotions their peculiar quality, their tailor-made fit.¹

So tell me the truth about anger! Not if you're seeking a quick anthropological fix, for what could that singular truth be? Nothing that anyone in any real society has ever experienced. What would anger amount to, shorn of cultural context and *dramatis personae*? Definitions and prototypes might furnish a rough orientation; but to penetrate other emotional worlds we need more than the bare essentials. With emotion, the devil is truly in the detail. Who is angry or frustrated with whom? Why? How? To what end? And with what consequences? The answers are culturally and personally specific, resistant to formula. And they call for a more compendious approach, relaxed about definitions and boundaries.

So let's descend to particulars and see how an anthropologist might tackle anger in what, for most readers, will be a very unfamiliar setting. My aim is to sketch a distinctive emotional world: to show how anger-like emotions are performed and exploited in the theatre of formal oratory; and to follow that with a contrasting example of anger at its most raw and unambiguous. Surprisingly, in both cases, considerations of what is natural or authentic and what is culturally constructed are significantly blurred: fieldwork scrambles neat theoretical distinctions. The first part is closer to standard ethnography, with a focus on emotion idioms, meanings in action. The second is straight narrative. The intention here is to braid descriptive density with temporal depth, showing how narrative gives us both structure and history, the warp and weft of the emotional life. Instead of simply reporting on 'anger elsewhere'—a pointless box-ticking exercise—I want to show what makes these examples *anthropologically* interesting: what makes them revealing about social processes and human experience. If they move the reader, or merely intrigue a little, they will have achieved their purpose of enlarging our sense of what anger is.

¹ Very few anthropological accounts of emotion employ narrative as a method (Abu-Lughod 1993; Beatty 2015; Briggs 1998, 1970; Epstein 1992; Wikan 1992). Lutz (1988) and Rosaldo (1980) are the



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The Niha, inhabitants of Nias, a large forested island in Indonesia, have a wide vocabulary for states of the 'heart', some of which refer to anger-like emotions. 'Hot heart' is the commonest, the closest to a broad term for 'anger'; but in the formal debates at weddings and feasts—Niha are avid orators—speakers are as likely to declare their hearts 'scorched', 'swollen' or 'spotted', idioms which convey to their audience, that they are extremely unhappy about *the situation* and expect some redress—ideally the promise of a pig or two—to soothe their tender ventricles.

In Nias, it's no exaggeration to say that all human relationships, especially those deriving from marriage alliances, are conceived as debts—best exemplified in brideprice; and debts, like relations between in-laws, are matters of fervent interest. Oratory is a form of accounting in which not only goods but the provision of labour (in a wife) and life itself (which flows through women given in marriage) are reckoned, and debts rebalanced, the aim of speeches being to exert pressure on certain listeners to give more or

classic studies of emotional discourse, Levy (1973) of folk psychology and psychodynamics. For reviews of diverse anthropological approaches to emotion, see Beatty (2019, 2014, 2013).

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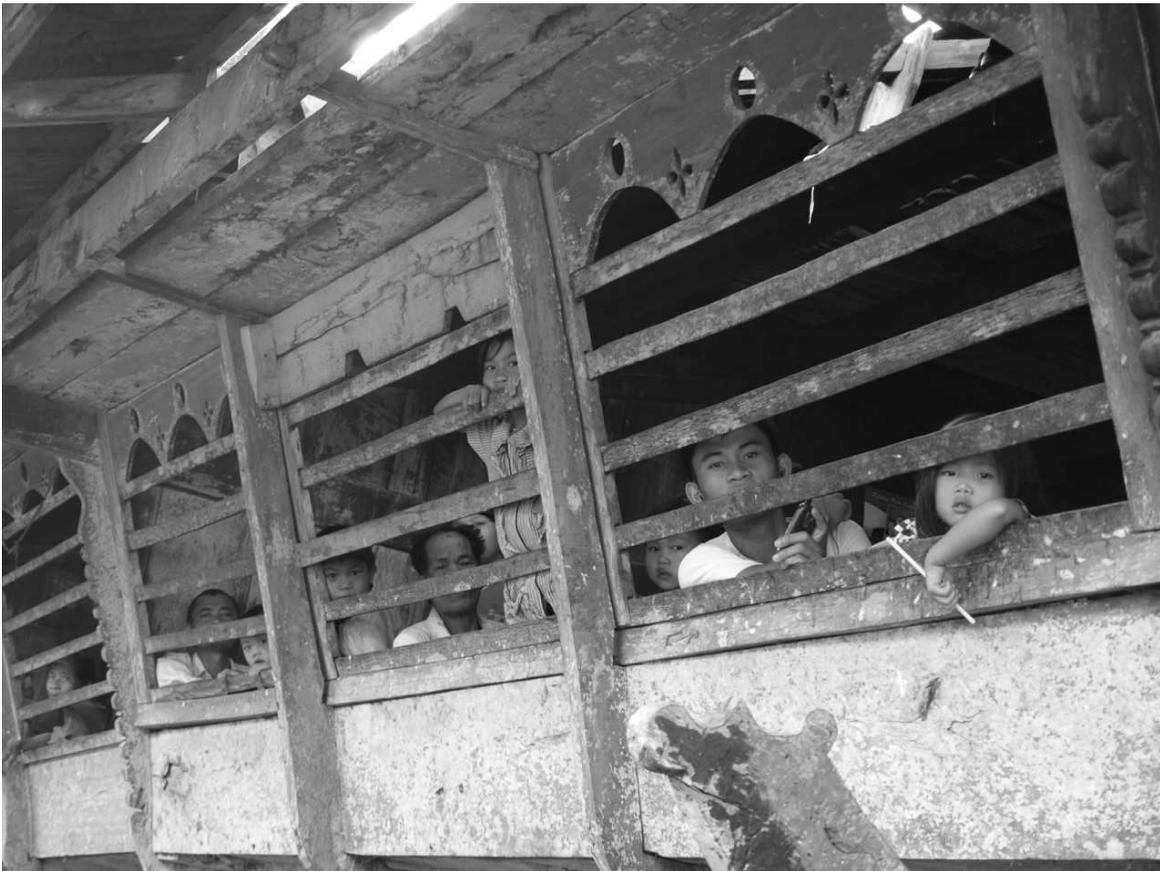
accept less. The medium of debate, the register of progress or failure, is heart speech. *In extremis*—and a society of former headhunters and warriors is not given to understatement—oratory spirals into mutual emotional blackmail, with anger the biggest lever, the surest way to prise concessions from an obdurate opponent or face down a grasping claim.

Niha heart-speech, it transpires, is not a matter of self-report or introspection. Nor is there a folk psychology or anatomy that would explain the logic of the idioms (or still odder ones like ‘having a hairy heart’ or feeling ‘as though you’ve swallowed a ball of cat’s fur’). The actual physical organ is not in question. Unlike the gall bladder of early modern Europe, the ‘hot heart’ does not *exude* anger; nor does emotion connect to some wider spiritual or cosmic scheme, as it does in other Asian civilizations, such as Java, where I have also worked.

Given that emotional manipulations guide calculations of claims and debts—pressing an advantage here, conceding there—it’s curious that Niha heart speech expresses no core

relational themes (in Lazarus’s [1994] phrase). Its idioms are not symptoms of predicaments. Swollen, hairy, or clear hearts fit no specific scenarios. Only a few idioms, like the ‘squeezed heart’ (voiced by someone pressed between competing demands), define a situation. Instead, cardiac distinctions express degrees of displeasure, pegging dissatisfaction at a certain level in negotiation. The idioms are *emotives* (in Reddy’s [2001] term) intended to change the posture of the opposing group, either to win or deny a concession, to extract, mollify or evade.

What, then, of the speaker’s actual feelings? No one assumes or even cares what they are, or whether his appraisal of the situation is genuinely conducive to a swollen heart, whatever that may be. At the end of a long passionate speech filled with sound and fury, I once asked a neighbour ‘what was *that* all about?’ (I was still new to Nias.) ‘He’s asking for more,’ came the blunt reply. In fact, speeches are made by designated spokesmen who, despite the barnstorming manner, the foot stamping, finger-jabbing, and withering tone, may have no skin in the game.



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The hearts that are swollen are usually ‘*our hearts*’, that is, those of the spokesman’s party, which, despite internal differences, usually shares a common interest. But ‘real feelings’ are not the issue. As the target of a speech, auditors respond to the implied threat—of a lowered offer, a break in relations, or an ancestral curse—not to the unused currency of harboured feelings.

Here a striking aspect of the stagecraft needs mention. As he struts the boards, building his passion, the speaker never directly addresses his intended audience but hails a confederate across the room who croons confirmatory cries of ‘Gooooood sense!’ or ‘Truuuuue!’, his voice overlapping, sometimes drowning, the speaker. The effect can be electrifying; but seldom are people actually frightened. Despite the vehement gestures and coruscating tone, the ‘hot heart’ (let’s call it anger), is never discharged on its target. Instead the speaker offers a heart-on-sleeve *commentary* (‘your words impale our hearts’, ‘my heart tells me this’, ‘our scorched hearts urge refusal’). The objects of the parade listen quietly, unruffled, ruminating on quids of betel, perhaps wagging their heads in appreciation at a particular shaft, before *their man* (it’s always a man) rises to reply. Correct procedure ensures that strong feelings, even great anger, can be expressed without risk of violence.

Evidently, this is anger of a qualified kind, more than *pretended*, but never less than *performed*: a skittish, sometimes dangerous horse, taken through its steps then put back in the stable. It would be a mistake to see it simply as acting. The stakes are too high for mere pretence to succeed; auditors could feel safe in ignoring it. But the imprecision of reference, the careful staging, and the indirection of oratory—the separation of putatively angry sponsors from visibly angry speakers—combine to create a dynamic quite unlike ordinary everyday emotions. Anger is co-opted, channelled, and mercurially expressed in a score of vaguely-referring heart terms to achieve a certain end.

If the angry words of the orator are chiefly performative, a matter of persuasion not folk psychology, it follows that they cannot serve as neutral descriptors of behaviour. Nobody acts ‘scorched-hearted’ or is ever described as such in ordinary life. There is no way of *being* scorched-hearted. Proclaiming anger is, in fact, a way of

limiting anger’s impact: it puts down a marker and allows for a response. Reference to the ‘hot heart’ might *imply* a follow-through, a dangled threat, but listeners typically bend with a dodge of their own (‘we are shrivel-hearted’), counter-attack, or pacify antagonists with a gift. The naming of hearts is a game of diplomacy, with notional emotions as counters in a debate whose ideal outcome is to bury differences in a state of ‘one heartedness’; or at least, to soften resentment with a down payment—balm for the heart.

Though it often feels otherwise, even Niha sometimes have to stop wrangling; the duelling ends and everyone goes home, whether satisfied (*with pig*) or disgruntled (*without*). Away from the debating chamber, anger of a rather different kind, mostly unnamed and unmediated by discourse, occasionally breaks the peaceful surface of everyday life. Here we find something closer to that universal Anger dear to many emotion scientists, an apparently raw response, prior to the work of culture. And for this a different ethnographic approach is required. While a focus on language and subject positions might do for the set-piece debates, a narrative approach better brings out the complexity of what might otherwise appear to be a straightforward instance of a ‘basic emotion’.

A particular example is branded in memory. One dark rainy night, a year into our fieldwork in the gaunt hilltop village of Orahua, my wife and I were alerted by panicky voices carried by the wind across the square from one of the great clan longhouses. We joined the streams of people converging hurriedly on its feintly glowing doorway, entry to the roar within. Inside the cavernous wooden hall, hazily lit by a pressure lamp and crammed with more than hundred excitable villagers, a woman of thirty-five lay dead on the floorboards, her stricken family bent over the shrouded corpse. She had died in a fieldhut a mile downriver after falling ill. Her two brothers had foolishly given her a herbal purgative which had killed her. They had carried the corpse home to Orahua and a posse was sent out into the night to fetch her husband from a hamlet upstream where he had gone to sell a pig. Now, pressed and jostled by the noisy crowd, in postures of frozen fear, the guilty men—



Niha villagers in front of a clan house preparing pigs for feasting.

outsiders, if not strangers—sat trembling on a bench, awaiting their fate, hardly glancing at their sister.

Until the instant of his arrival, the messengers had kept the truth from the husband. The grimy figure that now burst through the doorway, with mud-spattered face and blazing eyes, was our first sight of his first reaction. Not pausing to look right or left for his wife, wading through the startled crowd, he dived into a rear apartment to grab a weapon, pursued by his fellow clansmen. In the hall, above the clamour, we could hear muffled cries from within. ‘Where are they?’ he bellowed. As brothers-in-law, ‘wife-givers’ with the exalted status of ‘Those who own us’—an epithet shared with God—they could not be attacked. Wife-givers are the source of life and prosperity: they bless your crops, provide you with heirs; their curse is lethal. Yet givers of life had become life-takers. The incalculable debt betokened by brideprice now ran the other way. A debt of blood. Collective anger, urging revenge (to ‘repay’, in Niha parlance) and embodied in the raging husband, competed with everything that Niha held sacred: the reverence due to wife-givers, the decrees of the ancestors, life itself.

In the enclosed rear apartment, lit only by firelight, a struggle ensued, punctuated by dull thuds and groans as bodies buffeted the wooden walls. It took half an hour before the desperate man could be led docilely out by his minders, their shirts torn and an expression of sour triumph on their faces. For the next hour or so, he sat stupified by the corpse until the whole episode was repeated with the entrance of his younger brother, who ran to the body and threw himself full length upon it. Then he too dashed to the rear for a weapon. Again the sounds of struggle as bodies bounced off the walls. After he had been brought under control (one thought of a wild horse broken), he emerged tearing his hair and groaning piteously, which set up a general commotion of wailing and keening. He lay down beside the body, peeled back the sheet and began stroking his sister-in-law’s thin hair, pressing his face to her grey cheek. ‘Ah sister, they’ve killed you. Ah, my sister! Where are you? Where are you?’

One hesitates to turn such tragedy to any use other than that of a plain record, an eye

witnessing of a great and terrible moment. I have written a fuller account in *After the Ancestors*, an ethnographic narrative which is also a kind of memorial. I revisit the scene here, after a lapse of thirty years, with a lump in my throat for people I had become close to, but also in the consoling knowledge of how things later turned out. When I returned in 2011 I found the bereaved man happily remarried with a second clutch of children, and eager to host me for a meal. We stood side by side for a photo in the exact spot where we had stood for a similar picture in 1987, shortly before the tragedy.

What can one distil from this recitation? Here was anger elicited, enacted, expressed, tamed, and extinguished. At no stage was it named or discussed; indeed, it would have been pointless to do so, the tactical manipulations of debate over reparations still unthinkable in the volatile atmosphere of the hall. My friend's turbocharged anger looks as close to raw unmediated passion as you can get, a maximal response to a maximal offence. Yet what seemed like unstoppable, single-minded fury—a raging bull—did not convert into a direct assault on the guilty men. As he must have expected, he was held back, disarmed, neutralised. Deflected from its true target, his anger expended itself in the unseen struggle. And the same pattern was repeated with his brother: anger diverted and drained of power, giving way to grief. In the days that followed I saw no trace of anger in either man, only sorrow.

There are crucial social and cultural factors pervading—not merely framing—the whole episode. The vital relation between affines—the central institution of Niha social structure—was a decisive factor, both in the construal of offence (the terrible paradox of the life-taking life-givers) and in the indirection of response. No less culturally shaped was the drama within the drama—the harsh imposition of control by seniors, the assertion of authority and correct form. And not least, one must recognize the personal bond between the husband and the mother of his five children. The dead woman had been the mainstay of a three-generation extended family, her loss all the greater.

So if there are instantly recognisable symptoms of anger (as we conceive it), they do not take us far in appreciating the layered meaning of the emotion in context, the cultural

elements that are woven into its texture and realisation; indeed, into every moment of the sequence—from appraisal, affect, action, reverberations, management, through to the possibility of recovery and renewal, for which the whole episode must be depicted, the crisis placed within the larger scheme of interwoven lives. In short, to take us beyond a painting-by-numbers approach to emotions that can only confirm what we already know, we need a *narrative* account, fleshed out with biographical and cultural detail, a history of persons.

O Tell me the truth about anger! The truth, as ever, is in the telling.

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