

# The Applied Anthropologist

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INSPIRED BY FRIEDL: LESSONS TAUGHT,  
LESSONS LEARNED **KENNETH KELLER**

## ABSTRACT

Gottfried O. ("Friedl") Lang was an inspiring teacher and educator. His expertise in applied anthropology was reflected in his abilities to communicate with his students. As my field research unfolded, involving the Asmat people of Indonesian New Guinea, several key lessons emerged. One covered the avoidance of paternalism, a second the pervasive role of reciprocity, and a third creative decision-making. Under Friedl's guidance, these lessons' immediate meanings and broader implications became clear.

**KEY WORDS:** Gottfried O. Lang, mentorship, community development, cooperatives

Dr. Gottfried O. Lang (or Friedl as he was affectionately known) introduced me to applied anthropology. I took my first applied anthropology course from him at The Catholic University in the summer of 1967. Unfortunately for me, he moved that fall to the University of Colorado in Boulder where he was awarded tenure and a position in the allied Institute of Behavioral Science. Fortunately for me, I followed the next year after applying to the graduate anthropology program at C.U.

My introduction to applied field work followed soon after completing my M.A. One of the books Friedl used for his applied class was Ward Goodenough's *Cooperation and Change* (1963). It was a bit like his bible, especially the last two chapters on the "Pitfalls of Cultural Ignorance." These simple words inspired me:

It is important, therefore, to have some warning of the kinds of cultural difference that exist in fact and of the pitfalls to understanding and communication that they create (Goodenough 1963: 453).

In his lectures, Friedl often added a footnote to this and emphasized that one would have problems in looking at another culture objectively until they had a clearer understanding of their own culture. He often spoke about how one had to understand one's own culture before developing ideas about that of others. In reality it was more like coming to understand how much a person had "bought into" their own culture.

I think this perspective came from Friedl's intense experiences leaving Germany and coming to the United States before World War II. Carla Littlefield references this in her article in this section. His arrival in the U.S. was a major adjustment for him at the time. He came to realize that it is important to arrive at some deeper understanding of yourself as you emigrate; immersion in – and reflection about – the host culture can help.

These insights carried on, as Friedl worked with dozens of graduate students and fellow faculty at C.U. My time spent with the Asmat of Irian Jaya (now Papua), Indonesia, especially working with cooperative development, drove home the importance of these points and made me appreciate his teaching and mentorship all the more. With my M.A. completed I was off to work with the Asmat, a people who became well known to Friedl. I would return to complete my Ph.D. three years later. In the meantime I was to learn some important lessons about myself. Lessons are presented here, which complement points made by the other authors in this special section commemorating Friedl's life.

## LESSON ONE: AVOID PATERNALISM

By way of background, the Asmat have lived in the lowland mangrove swamps of southwestern Papua for many generations. Today they number about 70,000. They traditionally were gatherers, especially reliant on sago, with significant involvement in hunting and fishing as well. Village size ranged from about 50 to as many as 3000 people. The larger villages were few in number and usually coalesced for reasons of protection. Warfare was endemic, well-planned, and culturally attuned. Dutch missionaries who moved into the area in the 1950s were intent on ending the fighting and associated headhunting, and slowly made inroads. As subsequent Indonesian control was exerted, dramatic changes unfolded. A local government system was introduced. Peter Van Arsdale covers one of the indigenous, reactive responses in his article herein on a prominent cargo cult that emerged.

A small group of American Catholic missionaries settled in the area in the late 1950s, and along with religious activities, began a lumber enterprise. Planks were needed for churches, schools, administrative buildings, and houses.

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In several villages, Rev. Delmar Hesch, an American Crosier priest, began to develop this lumber cutting into a cooperative venture. He hoped to engage young Asmat men in an enterprise which would benefit them both economically and socio-economically, by providing wages and by removing incentives for out-migration in search of work. The people wanted to obtain supplies (Asmat, *pok*) such as soap, fishing line, and especially tobacco (which, since the Dutch era, had become a kind of money, readily sought and readily exchanged). They seemingly wanted to “modernize.”

When I arrived in the village of Ayam to work with the emergent cooperatives (“co-ops”), I found both Catholic and Protestant missionaries living there. In addition to introduced economic enterprises, there were two denominations and two associated schools at work, and, in competition.

After I had been in the Asmat area for several months, I thought I was developing an understanding of the culture. However, I still had a tendency to get lost going from one village to another. The maze of waterways can be tricky to navigate. (Yet, from an Asmat perspective, only outsiders are “crazy enough” to get lost.) A personable young man named Kanke became one of my guides. He and I became friends. He mentioned to me one day that he would like to buy a pair of tennis shoes from the co-op. The co-op store was primarily for people who brought in lumber or worked there, so I would have to serve as an intermediary if he were to succeed in his purchase. At that point I suggested that he really did not need a pair of tennis shoes. I said, “It never gets much below 68 degrees in this forest environment, it rains a lot, and the shoes will probably rot soon after you buy them. Plus, you’ve never worn shoes before, so you’d probably find them uncomfortable. Your feet are large and there aren’t good sizes available.”

Kanke listened very patiently to me for 10 or 15 minutes, while I rambled on. He waited until I had run out of wind and said to me in a fashion that was similar to a frustrated son replying to his father: “I understand what you are saying. I don’t care if the shoes fall apart in week. You have always had shoes and can choose to wear them or not. I have never had shoes before, and just want to wear them for awhile. I want to have a pair of my own.” Obviously, I still had a lot to learn about Asmat culture and its socio-economic nuances, as these were playing out in a rapidly changing Indonesian context.

## LESSON TWO: RECIPROCITY PREVAILS

The second lesson stems from my work in the Asmat village of Mnanep. Villagers there had been asking me for quite some time to help them establish a lumber co-op. My work in Ayam had set the stage. One day a delegation consisting of several head men and other members of *jeu* kin groups from Mnanep called on me in Ayam. Once

again they requested that I come to their village and assist them in this venture; a man whom I’ll call Bayim was especially adamant. We talked for a while and I finally suggested to the co-op leaders of Ayam that they provide the Mnanep delegation with a tour of their coop and explain the work involved. (What I didn’t know was that Mnanep and Ayam had been enemies at one time, and that some men from Mnanep had been killed by men from Ayam not many years before I had arrived.) They seemed somewhat nervous about the whole “tour” concept, but agreed to it anyway. The federal government was harping on the notion of “advancement” (Indonesian, *kemajuan*), and the men were trying to be responsive.

The tour was completed without incident and the men from Mnanep decided, since it was late, to stay overnight in Ayam. They asked if they could sit on the porch of my house for the evening. I said yes and sat with them for some time while we chatted about various things. It seemed clear that one form of reciprocity, mirrored in the tour give-and-take, was playing out nicely. They then asked if they could sleep on my porch as well. (Again, I didn’t realize at the time that they would feel safer there because of the previous killings.)

To further facilitate the co-op development process, shortly thereafter I traveled to Mnanep with the men and began instructing them in the intricacies of Western-influenced lumber cutting. They had some previous experience, so lumbering proved less challenging than the notion of co-op development *per se*. From measuring, to marking with a snap line, to sawing, to rough and final planing, we worked together for about 10 days. We set up an administrative structure, from the head (*kepala*) on down; links to the cooperative store were arranged. I told them to proceed, and that I would come back in a week to help transport the cut lumber to the river; they would then be paid. The men agreed.

I went back to Ayam, then returned to Mnanep a week later as promised. I was pleased with the large pile of sawdust I observed under the saw pithouse. I didn’t see the lumber itself, but thought it was probably being stored elsewhere. The newly minted sawyers greeted me enthusiastically, did not mention the lumber, but immediately asked when they would get paid. I replied that they would receive their money after the lumber had been transported downriver to the town of Agats. There, the Co-op Center would take over. *Pok* also could readily be purchased there with the money they had earned.

I asked again: “Where’s the lumber?” They asked again: “When will we be paid?” We went round and round for several more minutes. When I said that I needed to “see” the lumber they finally took me to the headman, Bayim, who had been so adamant earlier. There was most

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of the lumber, already employed in the construction of his brand new house with plank flooring and nicely structured support beams. I was stunned to say the least.

My notion of market development and exchange had readily been trumped by the Asmat notion of reciprocity. The co-op tour had demonstrated one type, the house construction another. I had not understood Bayim's role and the obligations that had accrued to him. Lumbering would need to be re-framed.

### LESSON THREE: CREATIVE DECISION-MAKING

My third lesson, the last to be presented here, was by no means the final one for me. I continued to be amazed at how my culture was so much a part of my life and so different from that of the Asmat, and yet it was their culture that was constantly demonstrating this to me. Reflecting on the value of the classic anthropological method of participant observation also becomes important here.

I had decided to call a meeting of all the co-op members in Ayam. It seemed that most of the men were losing their enthusiasm for working in the co-op. They were showing up later for work, leaving earlier, and production was definitely declining. While I had several ideas as to why this was happening, I felt it was important to hear their version as to why. It became clear during the discussion that part of what was happening was tied to reciprocity once again.

After three weeks of working they would get paid and take three weeks off to gather food in the jungle and engage in other activities, while another group would rotate in. The first group then would return. The problem the men seemed to be having involved *pok*, readily available at the co-op store. As soon as they were paid they would purchase such things as long pants, tennis shoes, tobacco, fishing line, and hooks. As they walked back from the store, within minutes, they would run into an uncle, an aunt, or a cousin, and quickly be reminded that there was a previous obligation still owed. Soon the things that they had worked so hard for had disappeared; some items did not even make it home. The co-op members were put in the position of offering a pick of the items they were carrying in return for previous favors performed. This was becoming a real stumbling block.

This was the frustrating part for me. Now that the men seemingly knew the reason, they then decided that the next step was to listen to me tell them what to do about it. I tried to explain that this was not my role and so I simply said "no;" they needed to come up with an answer. They did not believe me and indicated that this was just a foreigner's ruse. Again I found myself going round and round. What they were saying, in essence, was: "What is it you really want us to do? The co-op was your idea." What I

was saying, in essence, was: "Do what you will. The solution must be yours."

After nearly two hours of "cross-cultural manipulation," the co-op members' solution was to take the *pok* they purchased from the store at the end of three weeks and leave it at the back of my house (which was located next to the store). They then would wait until dark to come and get it. This way no one would see what they had when they walked home. This would work well as long as there was a full moon, but after that it would be too dark and too many spirits would be out. That plan deteriorated before it could be enacted.

It slowly dawned upon me that the type of decision making that I was asking of them was difficult if not impossible. These were bright people, adept at surviving in the harshest of jungle environments. The problem was that they were having extreme difficulty in "getting outside" the culture they had grown up in, one featuring "traditional" practices being overridden by first Dutch and then Indonesian colonial government proscriptions. Missionary influence was also strong. Outsiders were constantly telling them what to do, and, how to do it. I, on the other hand, had grown up in a Western culture where everything was being questioned, where policy criticism was fair game. Government practices were not immune. I was able to arrive at my own answers by an infallible, rational logic. My logic did not match theirs. I was wrong to push them so hard to think my way.

### REFLECTIONS

In each of these cases Asmat people were attempting to adjust (short-term) and adapt (long-term) to the processes of induced change they were encountering. They were employing "traditional" coping skills in the face of "modern" pressures.

The lessons learned living among the Asmat for two years have served me well in the years that I have taught anthropology and continued other field work in the Denver community. They also have benefited me in my roles as an administrator at Metropolitan State College of Denver. These lessons were enriched by Friedl's insights and inspirations. Ultimately, they taught me something about myself. He had been quite right. My insights into Asmat culture did not really jell until I began to peel back the layers of my own culture. I had to reflect on the value of what I was witnessing.

Friedl visited me in the Asmat area in 1981. He was doing research of his own and I was helping him by doing some translation. At one point he asked a single Asmat person a question and I translated. It went something like this: "How do you feel about the co-op?" and – rather than the one respondent – an entire group answered with a 10-minute flurry. I turned to Friedl and summarily said: "They



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enjoy it.” This then happened a second and a third time. After a few more minutes he turned to me and frustratingly said: “If you learn anything from this experience, it’s that you gave me a *summary* and not a *translation*. I want a \$\$\$%%&& *translation*.” He had just sworn in fluent German without realizing it. We looked at each other for a second, then burst out laughing so hard that the Asmat thought we were crazy.

My work in rural Indonesia served me well in urban America. Urban anthropology became central to my later research. A real strength of Friedl’s lay in his work as a thesis advisor. I thought that the first draft of my Ph.D. dissertation was fantastic. I gave it to Friedl to review. When he handed it back, there was not a page of the 300+ that did not have a comment or correction on it. I was devastated. How could that be. English was his second language and it was my mother tongue. He had given me some hard love and humble pie to eat. The final dissertation was much the better for it.

When teaching his seminar classes he would say, after digging deep into that intellect and reflecting: “But, it seems to me...!” You knew in your heart that “here it comes...time to look further at the other side.” Friedl and the Asmat had helped in starting me on a wonderful journey and I owe them much for that. Friedl was truly what the Germans call a “Doktorvater,” a father doctor and advisor, a fictive parent who made his students part of his extended family. By contrast, the Asmat had simply been themselves and had taught me much in how to be myself.

*Ken Keller received his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the University of Colorado – Boulder. He taught for many years at Metropolitan State College of Denver, where he also served as Chair of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Behavioral Sciences. He later served as Acting Dean of Letters, Arts, and Sciences at the same institution. He is now retired. A former President of the High Plains Society, he can be reached at [kellerk@mscd.edu](mailto:kellerk@mscd.edu).*

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