

The BAHAR 'Manifesto'

The following short statement was written by Geoffrey Samuel and Richard Roberts in early 2008 as an attempt to specify some of the motivating ideas behind BAHAR. It is not intended to be in any way definitive, but it may suggest some of the thinking behind our research group.

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The **Body** in BAHAR implies our material embodiment, with its biology and physiology, including the hormonal and neural levels; our human existence as a material presence in the world, human life as a central component of the planetary ecology. It also refers to bodies as emotional, affective and cognitive presences. As embodied selves, we have feelings, intentions and understandings of the surrounding world, critically including our fellow human beings.

Our bodies are also cultural bodies. How we interact with and make sense of our environment, including our fellow humans, has to be understood in social and cultural terms as much as in those of biology or human ecology. Our orientation is essentially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, building on the work of theorists such as Gregory Bateson, Victor Turner and Francisco Varela.

Health for BAHAR involves not just absence of disease or recovery from physical trauma but the achievement of optimal human functioning at all levels. Biology and culture together enable or obstruct our differing individual presences within the world. As embodied selves, each of us learns to be a human being, but also acquires the limitations that are an intrinsic part of that learning: limited ways of working with our bodies, limited repertoires of feeling, awareness and consciousness. Whatever our personal mode of embodiment, suffering, pain and death are ultimately inescapable. Societies and cultures have developed various resources in response to those limitations. Biomedicine emphasises the material and physiological. Other healing modalities, such as the shamanic or yogic, may place more weight on other aspects of human existence, such as the psychological, affective, social or spiritual. These various healing traditions can appear as competing and antagonistic. We prefer to see them as vital human resources, whose partial perspectives can contribute towards fuller and more adequate approaches to health and healing, in the widest sense.

Religion and the spiritual dimension exist as an everyday presence within human lives throughout the world, as a primary mode of experiencing the embodied self, and arguably as an intrinsic part of any human embodiment. Shamanic healing practices in Tibet, village rituals in Bangladesh, 'New Age' therapies, suburban yoga classes or hospices for the terminally ill may have as much to tell us about religion as Buddhist philosophy or Christian theology. At the same time, religion points towards the social, cultural and ecological dimension of human life, and towards the issues intrinsic to living together within the context given by our biology and ecology. Modernity has brought into question and pathologised our ancestral modes of embodied ecological adjustment and life transition, with modernist, commodified forms of 'religion'

such as the new fundamentalisms further destabilising a precarious social and ecological balance. Yet religion remains a vital link to the primal issues of human embodiment, and to the resources that humanity has developed through the ages. It can still help direct us, alongside the world's healing traditions and alongside the understandings of modern science, social science and the humanities, towards the achievement of a more just and more equitable world in which all may enjoy health in the fullest possible sense.