



# Ward H. Goodenough

1919-2013

BIOGRAPHICAL

# *Memoirs*

*A Biographical Memoir by  
Patrick V. Kirch*

©2015 National Academy of Sciences.  
Any opinions expressed in this memoir are  
those of the author and do not  
necessarily reflect the views of the  
National Academy of Sciences.



NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

# WARD HUNT GOODENOUGH

May 30, 1919–June 9, 2013

Elected to the NAS, 1971

Ward H. Goodenough, one of the 20th century's leading cultural anthropologists, passed away on June 9, 2013 in Haverford, Pennsylvania at the age of 94 years. During his long and productive career Goodenough advanced a linguistically-based model of how cultures operate; he developed scientifically-rigorous ethnographic methods to document the structures through which particular cultures operated. His approach to cultural anthropology was empirically based through intensive fieldwork in Oceania, especially in the Chuuk Islands of Micronesia and in New Britain. Goodenough also made major contributions to the field of applied anthropology, to Oceanic linguistics and language history, and to a phylogenetic approach in historical anthropology. During his teaching career at the University of Pennsylvania, Goodenough influenced several generations of anthropologists. In addition to his academic accomplishments, Goodenough was a true renaissance man, conversant in several languages, a poet devoted to the sonnet, and a musician who specialized in keyboard fugues.



*Ward H. Goodenough*

*By Patrick V. Kirch*

## Early years

As a young child Ward had lived for a time in both England and Germany while his father (who later became a professor of history at Yale) studied for a doctorate at Oxford University. By age four young Ward was fluent in German, displaying a fascination with—and a talent for learning—languages that would later influence his career as an anthropologist. After his family settled in New Haven, Connecticut, Ward studied Latin, Greek, French, and German. He later recalled that a fourth-grade teacher piqued his interest in ancient Egyptian civilization, after which he was soon fascinated by the Scythian, Thracian, Celtic, and German “barbarians” presaging his later interest in anthropology and diverse cultures (Goodenough 2003:1).

After graduating from the Groton School, where as a junior he became enthralled with Old Icelandic (Old Norse) literature, Ward enrolled in Cornell University. According to

his own account, the decision to attend Cornell rather than Yale or Harvard was because “I could take Beginning Old Icelandic there as a freshman and not wait until my junior year for it” (Goodenough 2003:1). Rather than literature as literature, however, it was the information he could learn about old Scandinavian culture and history that drew him to study Old Icelandic. But he did not neglect his other linguistic interests, continuing to study Latin, Greek, and German, as well as expanding into Old High German, Gothic, and Swedish. A course in Indo-European historical linguistics introduced him to formal linguistic methods that would influence his later work as an anthropologist.

Ward’s introduction to anthropology did not come until his senior year at Cornell. Realizing that the possibilities for academic employment in Scandinavian literature were essentially nil, he asked his father for advice. When the senior Goodenough suggested anthropology, his son replied that he had never heard of the subject! When asked what the field comprised, his father replied: “As I understand it, you can be interested in almost anything, and it’s all right” (2003:2). Ward enrolled in a course in cultural anthropology taught by Lauriston Sharp and never looked back. It was also at this time that he met his future wife, Ruth Gallagher, as they were both officers in a campus organization.

### **Yale, World War II, and fieldwork in Chuuk**

Having decided to pursue a career in anthropology, Ward was inevitably drawn to Yale as an obvious choice for graduate study, as it had one of the most distinguished doctoral programs in the field, headed by the famous Bronislaw Malinowski, who had recently come to Yale from the London School of Economics. Ward took Malinowski’s seminar during the 1940–41 academic year; he would later credit Malinowski’s “structural-functionalist” approach as a significant influence on his own thinking about culture.<sup>1</sup> He also took a year-long course from linguist George Trager, in which he learned about phonetics and phonemics, the rigorous methods that structural linguists had developed for describing the content of a language. This exposure to the method of systematic contrastive analysis would greatly influence Ward’s future fieldwork and theoretical development.

World War II interrupted Ward’s doctoral studies at Yale; like many graduate students at the time, he enlisted in the armed forces, where he served as an army noncommissioned officer from November 1941 to December 1945. During this period he did social science research in a unit reporting to General George C. Marshall, including work on the feasibility of integrating the armed forces and on the needs of returning soldiers and the stabilization of civilian society, leading to the GI Bill. By the time Ward returned to Yale in

Ward had at first been stymied by a seeming conundrum: an account of the kinship system seemed first to call for a description of property, while describing property rights seemed to call for describing kin groups first.

1946 to continue his doctoral studies, Malinowski had died. George Peter Murdock, with whom he had worked on Murdock's Cross-Cultural Survey in 1940, became his advisor.

At the end of the war, the U.S. Navy found itself administratively responsible for the many Micronesian islands that had comprised most of the former German colonies in the region and become Japanese Mandated Territory after World War I, assigned by the League of Nations. In 1947, under

United Nations authority, the United States took formal control of this vast island realm through the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. At the instigation of Harvard anthropologist Douglas Oliver and of Yale's Murdock, the Office of Naval Research agreed to launch the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA). The concept behind CIMA was that anthropological knowledge regarding Micronesian peoples and cultures would make for more enlightened administration. During 1947-'48, 41 researchers were put into the field in various islands under Murdock's overall direction.<sup>2</sup>

Murdock himself led the CIMA field team assigned to Chuuk (then known as Truk), inviting Ward to join him in studying traditional social behavior and religion there. Other members of the team included linguist Isidore Dyen and anthropology graduate students Thomas Gladwin and Frank LeBar. Ward's linguistic abilities paid off in Chuuk, as he rapidly developed a facility in the Chuukese language. (He would continue his study of Chuukese for many years, eventually authoring a dictionary of the language [Goodenough and Sugita 1980, 1990].) Murdock, who was struggling with Chuukese, enlisted Ward to help with the study of Chuuk social organization, which became the topic of Ward's dissertation.

### **A linguistic model of culture**

Influenced by his exposure to formal linguistic methods, Ward realized that the task of the cultural anthropologist was analogous to that of a structural linguist attempting to analyze the grammar of an unwritten language. As he later put it:

*Learning how to behave, it seemed to me, must be much like learning how to speak. For culturally appropriate behavior to be readily learnable,*

*its content had to be reducible to organizational principles analogous to those of a language's grammar. I presumed, therefore, that the methodological strategy of descriptive linguistics should be applicable to getting at those underlying principles. So I proposed as my doctoral dissertation project an exploration into the possibility of formulating a "grammar of social behavior" while doing ethnographic fieldwork (Goodenough 2003:3).*

Stated another way, Ward wanted to produce an “emic” description of Chuuk social organization, rather than an “etic” description couched in terms of Western categories.<sup>3</sup>

Ward's dissertation, published in 1951 as *Property, Kin, and Community on Truk*, was not only a brilliant exploration of the traditional system of Chuukese property rights but a systematic account of kinship and corporate groups. While working up his ethnographic data, Ward had at first been stymied by a seeming conundrum: an account of the kinship system seemed first to call for a description of property, while describing property rights seemed to call for describing kin groups first. He resolved the problem by focusing on property *transactions*, treating entitlements and kin groups as “emergent forms resulting from previous transactions” (2003:4). Ward's monograph still stands today as perhaps the most thorough analysis ever done of property and kinship in a traditional Oceanic society.

Ward's exposure to the methods of structural linguistics and his application of these methods in working out the emic categories of kinship and residence in Chuuk soon led him to a more general statement of the importance of what he termed “componential analysis” in ethnography (Goodenough 1956, 1967). Through contrastive analysis of terms within a particular domain (such as kinship terminology), the semantic structure of those terms is revealed. As he later succinctly put it, componential analysis is “a method for forming and testing hypotheses about what words signify” (1970:72). Ward's demonstration of the importance of componential analysis was a major contribution to the emerging subfield of ethnoscience (or what was sometimes called “the new ethnography”) during the 1950s and '60s.

### **Applied anthropology**

Owing in part to his involvement in the CIMA program—in which anthropological knowledge was to be used in the service of better-informed administration—Ward held a life-long interest in what became known as applied anthropology. In 1952 the Russell Sage Foundation invited him to prepare a guidebook for people engaged in community

development in different cultural settings. This seemingly simple task grew into a decade-long project ultimately resulting in the publication of *Cooperation in Change* (Goodenough 1963).

The book (which Ward assigned as a textbook in his introductory cultural anthropology courses) was far more than a handbook for development workers; the first 370 pages were a major exposition of a functionalist theory of human cultures. Beginning with “wants and needs,” Ward proceeded to explore how customs, values, beliefs, and identity all interrelated, as well as how cultures could undergo sometimes radical change and reorganization (as in so-called “revitalization” movements). In essence, *Cooperation and Change* provided development workers with a crash course in cultural anthropology, asserting that any development project not founded on a thorough understanding of the client culture was doomed to failure.

### **Nakanai, New Britain**

Seeking a different ethnographic experience within the Oceanic context, in 1954 Ward led a University of Pennsylvania field team to the Nakanai region of New Britain Island, in the Bismarck Archipelago. Other members of the expedition included graduate students Ann Chowning and Daris Swindler, who worked on, respectively, social organization and physical anthropology, thus continuing the CIMA model of a multi-disciplinary study. Ward spent considerable time on this field trip obtaining linguistic information on the Lakalai, as well as continuing his interest in kinship and residence patterns. The linguistic data he obtained eventually led him to reconstruct Proto-Kimbe, an early Austronesian language of the New Britain region (Goodenough 1997).

### **Controlled comparison and cultural phylogenies**

Ward was solidly in the tradition of anthropology that regarded ethnography as the scientific description and analysis of human cultures, a tradition that has declined in recent years as postmodernism and an anti-science turn have taken hold in much of American cultural anthropology. His application of the formal methods of componential analysis to working out the signification of emic categories was one example of this scientific approach to culture. Another was his emphasis on controlled comparison, a topic that he explored in some depth in his 1968 Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures (Goodenough 1970). Ward pointed out that controlled comparisons were useful for two different purposes in anthropology. One was to test hypotheses about patterns of relationship between particular cultural variables, or about so-called “cultural universals.” A second use was

historical, “to establish what cultures belong together as traditions deriving from a common ancestral culture” (1970:126). As in much of his work, Ward’s approach to comparison in order to infer cultural history was strongly informed by his training in historical linguistics.

Ward’s interest in using comparison to reconstruct cultural histories in Oceania was first expressed in his classic paper on Malayo-Polynesian social organization (Goodenough 1955), in which he showed that the organization of descent groups in Oceania could change over time in relation to the availability of agricultural land on small islands. In later work (Goodenough 1997a) he demonstrated that Oceania, with its phylogenetically related cultural traditions and languages, was an especially suitable area for conducting systematic comparisons of “structurally homologous traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

...traditional religion in Chuuk was not oriented toward the veneration or worship of gods so much as toward obtaining from the supernatural powers the effectiveness that made life secure.

### Chuukese language and religion

Although he carried out fieldwork in Kiribati (then called the Gilbert Islands) in 1951 and in New Britain in 1954, Ward’s main focus within Oceanic ethnography always remained the islands of Chuuk. He returned there for a second period of intensive fieldwork from July 1964 to May 1965, accompanied by his wife, Ruth, and their two sons. Building upon his earlier familiarity with the Chuukese language, Ward compiled extensive lexical data, eventually resulting in a definitive Chuukese dictionary (Goodenough and Sugita 1980, 1990). His command of Chuukese was such that in later life he composed poetry in the language (Goodenough 1997c).

During his initial CIMA fieldwork in Chuuk, Ward had begun to work with older informants on what was known about the pre-Christian religion; during his 1964-’65 fieldwork he continued those inquiries. The ethnography of religion held particular interest for him, as his father had been a historian of religion.<sup>5</sup> Ward worked on his ethnographic corpus regarding Chuuk religion for many years, finally publishing a detailed monograph on the topic, *Under Heaven’s Brow*, after he retired (Ward 2002). In this work he took a functionalist theoretical approach, which harked back to the views of his early mentor Malinowski. Thus Ward defined religion as the set of beliefs and ritual practices “by which people seek to maintain their personal and social selves, repair damage to those selves, or transform those selves in desired ways” (2002:8). As he



describes in exquisite ethnographic detail, the traditional ritual practices of Chuuk were designed to deal with such conditions of their daily existence as the risk of insufficient food, the risk of offending demons and falling ill, or the risk of being subject to sorcery. Other rituals were designed to ensure efficacy in crafts, in courtship, and in the conduct of war. Thus traditional religion in Chuuk was not oriented toward the veneration or worship of gods so much as toward obtaining from the supernatural powers the effectiveness that made life secure.

### **Teacher and humanist**

After a brief teaching stint at the University of Wisconsin while he was completing his doctoral dissertation, Ward was hired by the University of Pennsylvania as an assistant professor in 1949. He remained at Penn his entire career, being promoted to associate professor in 1954, full professor in 1962, and University Professor in 1980, a post he held until his retirement in 1989. Ward also served a stint as chairman of the Anthropology Department from 1976 to 1982.

My first encounter with Ward was as a freshman in his Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class during the 1968-'69 academic year. Taught at an early hour in the dimly-lit basement auditorium of the University Museum of Anthropology, the course put many a sleep-deprived student right back to sleep, especially as Ward had a tendency to read verbatim from his lecture notes. He was not, it must be confessed, a dynamic lecturer. But outside of the lecture hall he sparkled. He loved to hold court in the museum's cafe, sitting at one of the tables, surrounded by eager graduate students and such precocious undergraduates as I, who had the temerity to approach him in this setting. When I told him that I had spent the previous summer in the Loyalty Islands of Melanesia, where I had collected ethnographic data on indigenous house forms and settlement patterns, he encouraged me to write up my material, suggesting that I apply his method of componential analysis. After a patient and detailed critique of my original draft, Ward suggested that I submit the manuscript to the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*; it became my first scholarly publication.

Ward, like many of the Penn anthropology faculty, also held an honorary title as Curator of the Pacific ethnographic collections in the University Museum. Although material culture was hardly his main interest, he possessed impressive knowledge about the traditional arts and crafts of Oceanic peoples. One memorable day he invited several of us to join him on a tour of the collection storage area in the Museum's basement. Opening rooms closed to the public, he showed us hafted adzes collected by early European



explorers in Tahiti and Hawai'i, kava bowls from Samoa, and inlaid shields from the Solomon Islands. This was the way Ward most liked to teach, and he excelled at such face-to-face mentoring.

Later, after I had obtained my doctorate and taken up a professional position at Honolulu's Bishop Museum, I became reacquainted with Ward when he was a visiting professor at the University of Hawai'i. Ward and Ruth enjoyed inviting graduate students and junior colleagues to their apartment for evening gatherings filled with intellectual banter as well as music. Although I had chosen to become an archaeologist rather than a cultural anthropologist, Ward followed my work over the years, and my wife, Therese, and I visited him and Ruth several times in Philadelphia. In 1993 he invited me to participate in a special session on Austronesian cultural history at the American Philosophical Society (Goodenough, ed., 1996). After my election to the National Academy of Sciences we also interacted frequently at the Academy's annual meetings, which Ward never failed to attend as long as he was in good health. He was deeply committed to the work of both the Academy and the American Philosophical Society; the latter now holds his professional archive.

In his spare time Ward enjoyed writing poetry and composing music. His favorite form of poem was the sonnet, and later in life he self-published a small book of sonnets written after he turned 65 (Goodenough 1997c). It included two poems composed in Chuukese, "following a traditional metric form there." Here is the English translation of his Chuukese poem "Ikenen Wúkúnné," or "The Fish of Sufficiency:"

*I am groping man.  
I have come, I,  
from my land,  
my town there Search Place.  
We meet hither now  
in order to stone-grope  
under feeling stone,  
core of the middle.  
Grope we not crazily,  
let us grope truly,  
groping grasp out  
the fish of sufficiency,  
food of Lady Learned,*

*food of Lady Skilled.  
It shall be food of chiefs,  
it shall be food of commoners,  
to be learned  
and skilled.*

This is how I like to remember Ward: “groping man,” the consummate ethnographer, groping truly for the “fish of sufficiency,” for cultural understanding and knowledge. He was truly one of the greatest anthropologists of his generation.

**PRINCIPAL AWARDS AND HONORS**

- 1957-1958 Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences
- 1971 Elected to the National Academy of Sciences
- 1973 Elected to the American Philosophical Society
- 1975 Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- 1979-1980 Guggenheim Fellow
- 1986 Distinguished Service Award, American Anthropological Association
- 1997 Malinowski Award, Society for Applied Anthropology

## REFERENCES

1. Malinowski, B. 1994. *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
2. Kiste, R. C., and M. Marshall. 2000. American anthropology in Micronesia, 1941-1997. *Pacific Sci.* 54:265-274.
3. The distinction between emic and etic approaches to culture was formally laid out by Kenneth L. Pike, 1967, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*. The Hague: Mouton.
4. Ward's phylogenetic method of controlled comparison was systematically applied to Polynesia by P. V. Kirch and R. C. Green, 2001. In *Hawaiki, Ancestral Polynesia: An Essay in Historical Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. See Irwin R. Goodenough, 1965. *The Psychology of Religious Experiences*. New York: Basic Books.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1951 *Property, Kin, and Community on Truk*. No. 46. New Haven: Yale University Publications in Anthropology.
- 1953 *Native Astronomy in the Central Carolines*. Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania.
- 1955 A problem in Malayo-Polynesian social organization. *Amer. Anthropologist* 57:71-83.
- 1956 Componential analysis and the study of meaning. *Language* 32:195-216.
- 1957 Oceania and the problem of controls in the study of cultural and human evolution. *Jour. Polynesian Soc.* 66:146-155.
- 1962 Kindred and hamlet in Lakalai, New Britain. *Ethnology* 1:5-12.
- 1963 *Cooperation in Change: An Anthropological Approach to Community Development*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 1965 With A. Chowning. "Lakalai political organization." *Anthropological Forum* 1:412-473.
- 1967 Componential analysis. *Science* 156:1203-98.
- 1970 *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*. Chicago: Aldine.
- 1980 With H. Sugita. *Trukese-English Dictionary*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- 1981 *Culture, Language, and Society*. Menlo Park, CA.: Cummings.
- 1990 With H. Sugita. *Trukese-English Dictionary. Supplementary Volume: English-Trukese and Index of Trukese Word Roots*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- 1996 Editor, *Prehistoric Settlement of the Pacific*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 86, Part 5. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- 1997 (a) Phylogenetically related cultural traditions. *Cross-Cultural Res.* 31:16-26.
- (b) Proto-Kimbe: A new analysis. *Oceanic Linguistics* 36:247-311.
- (c) *Sonnets from After Middle Age and Other Verse*. Haverford, Pa.: Privately printed.

- 1999 Outline of a framework for a theory of cultural evolution. *Cross-Cultural Res.* 33:84-107.
- 2002 *Under Heaven's Brow: Pre-Christian Religious Tradition in Chuuk*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.
- 2003 In pursuit of culture. *Annual Rev. Anthropology* 32:1-12.

---

Published since 1877, *Biographical Memoirs* are brief biographies of deceased National Academy of Sciences members, written by those who knew them or their work. These biographies provide personal and scholarly views of America's most distinguished researchers and a biographical history of U.S. science. *Biographical Memoirs* are freely available online at [www.nasonline.org/memoirs](http://www.nasonline.org/memoirs).