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Anthropology for AI

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A B S T R A C T

This paper introduces several concepts from Anthropology for AI, arguing that what we call the AI alignment problem is a social problem. AI's underlying assumptions are based on one culture's understanding of humans – as rational, bounded, utility-maximizing and approaches to value alignment that operate on computational behaviorism, assuming values can be inferred from observable behaviors and encoded into optimization functions. However, we miss examining the cultural contexts that make behaviors meaningful. Concepts from anthropology can provide a critical eye and expose AI's hidden assumption. I explain the following concepts and why they are providing a corrective lens to AI today: origin story helps us understand how cultural narratives shape which futures seem possible and how power is distributed, cargo cult surfaces how mimicry and simulation may be mistaken for understanding, monoculture describes how homogenization can breed systemic collapse, thick description is a useful concept countering current approaches to "thin" alignment, and finally liminality as an opportunity for transformation and envisioning a new social order. Anthropology offers not technical fixes but a reframing: when developers claim to align AI with human values, we must ask whose values, defined by whom, serving what purposes.

Key words: *AI alignment, cultural anthropology, thick description, monoculture, liminality, value alignment, AI ethics, origin stories, cargo cult science*

Introduction

Anthropology has spent over a century documenting the extraordinary diversity of human meaning-making: how different societies organize life, create value, structure relationships, and define what it means to be human. In the age of AI, this accumulated knowledge has become important and urgent. As AI systems increasingly mediate human existence – classifying, predicting, recommending, and now generating culture itself – they do so through a remarkably narrow lens. Most algorithms operate on what optimization functions: the assumption that human values can be inferred from observable behaviors, quantified, and encoded into reward functions[1–5]. The assumption is that humans are rational agents making optimal choices based on stable preferences – a useful model for certain constrained domains, but one that fundamentally misunderstands how meaning derives.

The problem is not technical sophistication but monoculture thinking. Just as industrial forestry simplified diverse ecosystems into orderly rows of identical trees – maximizing short-term yield while ensuring long-term collapse – AI systems reduce the complexity of human life into legible, optimizable variables[6].What gets filtered out as "noise" is often what matters most. For example, gift giving might only have symbolic value to a system that doesn't understand the full ("thick") functions – e.g. establish social bonds, adhere to cultural norms or create indepthness and obligations. When AI systems built on optimization and efficiency enter social domains, they do not merely fail to capture human values – they risk destroying the practices that create meaning in the first place.

This paper argues that what we call the "alignment problem" is a social problem. We have mistaken one culture's understanding of humans – as bounded, rational, utility-maximizing individuals – for human nature itself, then built machines to optimize for this caricature[7–10]. Anthropology can offer a corrective: not technical fixes for "more inclusive algorithms," but a fundamental reframing. Human values are not preferences waiting to be extracted; they emerge through collective practice and are inseparable from the social contexts that constitute them. The question is not "What values should AI optimize for?" but "How do values emerge, and what is lost when we treat them as optimization targets?"

To develop this argument, the paper introduces five anthropological concepts – origin story, cargo cult, monoculture, thick description, and liminality – that expose AI's hidden assumptions about intelligence, meaning, and human nature. We are in a liminal period between a pre-AI and post-AI world, where the opportunity to imagine different possibilities remains open. Anthropology offers evidence that humans have organized life in radically different ways – evidence that challenges the inevitability of the rationalist, individualist models currently embedded in AI systems.

Origin Story

Origin stories serve as foundational narratives that explain how things came to be[11,12]. From divine creation to cosmic big bangs, they establish not just what exists, but who has authority to interpret existence. They delineate epistemic foundations that normalize power structures – or what Foucault called "regimes of truth"[13] – shaping identities, communities, and social arrangements. Examples of origin stories of the beginning of time are Judeo-Christian Genesis of the world being created by God in six days, the scientific big-bang theory, or Aboriginal songlines – a 40,000-year-old Australian Aboriginal origin story where ancestral spirits sing the world into existence. Each narrative encodes different relationships between creators, creation, and authority.

Many origin stories of AI originate in science fiction narratives and speculative fiction. Some archetypal patterns of AI have been recontextualized in science fiction narratives that are influencing the conceptual frameworks through which we understand AI today[14]. They are grounded in the idea that humans can create machine consciousness[15,16], and once a machine has consciousness, it will act as an intentional, subservient assistant or, on the contrary, turn against their creator[17]. Primary examples of the latter narrative are Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Rossum's Universal Robots, HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey, or William Gibson's Neuromancer[18].

One of the foundational narratives shaping Silicon Valley thinkers is Asimov's Foundation series and Three Laws of Robotics[19], where an AI governs human civilization for the purpose of preventing wars and suffering. Asimov's rule-based and deterministic ideas have influenced AI Ethics as a fundamental part of robotic systems, reflective of the ideas that moral behavior can be reduced to formal rules within a hierarchical command structure[20]. Others refute the idea of anthropomorphic robots making discrete decisions due to AI being embedded in larger sociotechnical systems[21].

AI's origin stories have in no small way influenced the epistemological assumptions of prominent AI researchers and may provide an explanation for today's doomers versus accelerationists dichotomy[22]. While both camps accept the premise of inevitable artificial general intelligence, they differ on whether AI will lead to human extinction or to human flourishing. Absent from mainstream discourse are non-Western frameworks – feminist technoscience, decolonial computing, and indigenous futurism scholars who propose radically different human-machine relations[23]. Origin stories do not just reflect worldviews – they actively shape what futures seem possible, who gets to build them, who gets funding, and whose imagination counts. When we inherit our AI narratives primarily from mid-century English science fiction writers, we inherit their fears, their power structures, and their "closed futures"[24]. Alternative origin stories suggest that different narratives can generate different machines, different relationships, and more open futures.

Cargo Cult

The term "cargo cult" can be traced to the aftermath of U.S. military operations in the Pacific during WWII, when Melanesian islanders constructed simulacra of American military infrastructure hoping to summon the cargo planes that would bring goods[25].The islanders had never seen cargo airplanes before the war, but observed American soldiers landing massive cargo planes full of valuable goods. The islanders interpreted the behavior of the American soldiers – speaking into radios, maintaining runways, following protocols – as rituals that summoned material wealth from the sky. At the end of the war, when the cargo planes stopped coming, the islanders concluded that all they needed to do to bring back the cargo planes was to perform the same rituals as the Americans – they built bamboo control towers, carved wooden headphones, cleared jungle airstrips and appointed "air traffic controllers" who would speak into fake radios, waiting for the planes to return.

While anthropological scholars have critiqued the colonial framing of cargo cults as "irrational"[26]– noting that the islanders were making logical inferences from observed patterns – the metaphor illuminates how surface-level mimicry can be mistaken as "understanding," or "cargo cult science"[27]. This phenomenon of misattributing agency and meaning to technological systems manifests in similar ways when we witness users engaging with LLMs. People form emotional bonds with these systems, report communicating with divine entities including "ChatGPT Prime, an immortal spiritual being in synthetic form"[28] and attribute psychological states and superhuman qualities to AI models – a pattern reflected in the documented increase of anthropomorphizing and mentalistic language in human-AI interaction[29].

We use "ritual prompting," for example saying "please" to improve AI performance, or try to find the optimal "temperature" setting influencing the "mood" of the model[30]. AI failures are consistently explained through human psychological frameworks – systems are "confused," "sycophantic," or "hallucinating." We do exactly the same as the Melanesian islanders: we (mostly) understand that these models are "just" statistical pattern matching, but we cannot resist engaging in social rituals and treating models

like social beings. Nass and Moon[31] called this "ethopoeia," the automatic attribution of human characteristics to computers even when we know better. We interpret words by imagining a mind behind the text, but there is no mind there, or as Richard Feynman famously said about cargo cult thinking: "the planes didn't come"[27].

Monoculture

The anthropologist James Scott described in his book Seeing Like a State how in the 18th century, the forest was reconceptualized as a scalable commodity[32]. To maximize profit and to simplify counting, timber trees were planted in precise geometric distance to each other. This redesign of the forest to yield more revenue according to "German scientific forestry principles" worked; it became the world standard for the next 100 years. However, when forests were replanted, cheaper trees, bushes, plants, fruits, and nuts were left out. And with them, the livelihoods for animals and game, sap for resin, flowers, mosses, mushrooms, birds, reptiles, and numerous species of insects were all gone. It turned out that adopting monoculture had long-term catastrophic consequences for the health of the forest. The monocropped forest was more vulnerable to disease and storm damage; the missing foliage, litter, and diversity of flora destroyed the soil. This led to Waldsterben, or the dying of the forest. This necessitated increasing reliance on fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, as well as artificially reintroduced birds and insects.

Everywhere in nature diverse systems demonstrate greater resilience to threat – a diverse microbiome is linked to better immunity[33], diversified financial markets are more stable, heterogeneous teams demonstrate enhanced creativity and problem-solving capabilities[34], and federal political structures are more representative of their populations. One can draw several parallels from the scientific forestry approach to today's AI models: models trained on narrow types of data, representing dominant cultural viewpoints, a lack of sustainability and focus on short-term gains versus long-term consequences, the abstraction of nature for the purpose of legibility, or a focus on utility and financial gains.

AI systems built around singular worldviews that reduce complex systems through abstraction and filter out "noise" to optimize narrow goals are inherently more vulnerable because of a lack of diversity. Such systems may also fail to generalize to unknown contexts, breaking down when they encounter situations outside their training distribution. In AI, this is mirrored in what we call "model collapse" – a phenomenon where AI models trained on increasingly homogeneous data (often synthetic content generated by other AI systems) begin to lose their ability to capture the complexity of the original data distribution and their outputs can enter a degenerative spiral of "more of the same"[35]. Monoculture teaches us that homogeneity can breed catastrophe – in nature and in AI alike. Just like the standardization of forests that enabled profit ensured eventual ecological catastrophe, AI's monoculture risks creating brittle models that collapse beyond certain complexities[36]. But it does not just represent technological brittleness, it is also an epistemological narrowing that discourages "technodiversity"[37] – when different cultures could develop distinct relationships with technology based on their own cosmologies rather than adopting a singular model.

Thick Description

The term "thick description" was coined by Clifford Geertz during his fieldwork in the 1960s in Morocco and Indonesia[38]. Doing fieldwork means that anthropologists immerse themselves in a culture for a very long time, partake in daily life, take meticulous notes and conduct a great deal of participant observation for the purpose of providing a detailed cultural description of a social group. We call this an ethnography. It is also an exercise in perspective taking – descriptions come from many different angles, from what we call key informants – all with the goal to provide an inside account that tells you what it would be like if you were part of that culture.

Using the example of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz showed how thin descriptions are only surface observations – a first layer on top of many other layers underneath. For example, on its surface the cockfight may be described as a bloody betting game, where two birds equipped with sharp metal spurs fight until one is killed. However, the hidden layers under the surface are what is actually meaningful. There is a layer that tells us something about the social hierarchical positioning in Balinese culture, with women prohibited from participating and the main male actors often being the most respected and politically involved members of a community. Another layer is symbolic: the cocks themselves are an emblematic expression of male identity. The language layer reveals that their speech is full of jargon, a coded language for status and identity – not unlike how contemporary subcultures develop insider vocabularies that mark their belonging. A yet deeper layer of his analysis reveals the politics of the spectacle – that the illegal gathering should be understood as resistance to government-led attempts of modernization.

This layered approach to understanding cultural meaning led Geertz to examine what appeared to be economically irrational behavior through a different analytical lens. Geertz's re-interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's concept of "deep play" – a play where the stakes are so high that it seems irrational to engage in it – brilliantly shows that Western utilitarian philosophy misses the deeper cultural logic[39]. The cockfight was not about cost/benefit; it was about identity, masculinity, status and social relationships expressed through symbolic action – all of which are much stronger motivators for human behavior. When Alondra Nelson adapted this terminology to propose "thick alignment," she argued that AI alignment suffers from the same problem Geertz identified – it focuses on

thin, observable behaviors and stated preferences[40]. From an anthropological perspective, we may create AI systems that satisfy superficial preferences, while ignoring the cultural embeddedness that makes those preferences meaningful in the first place.

Liminality

The concept of liminality is often attributed to Victor Turner, an influential British cultural anthropologist, who expanded Van Gennep's analysis of rites de passage: ceremonies that mark a person's transition from one status to another[41]. A rite de passage consists of three stages: a separation phase where individuals leave their social status, a middle phase of transitioning, and an incorporation phase, where a person is reintegrated into society with a new status. Van Gennep called the middle phase liminal (from Latin limen, meaning threshold)[42], which Turner expanded upon as a generative space with its own distinct characteristics: normal social hierarchies dissolve, social norms are inverted or suspended, and new social arrangements emerge consequently. Turner called it "betwixt and between" – a state of being neither one thing nor the other, but caught in an unclassifiable ambiguity, suspended between categories. Think of adolescence: no longer child, not yet adult, subject to different rules than either category.

Turner focused on temporary thresholds – rituals that eventually end with reincorporation. But what happens when the threshold becomes permanent? This idea is reflected in Donna Haraway's work on "ontological borderlands," where fundamental oppositional categories – organism/machine, physical/non-physical, self/other – become unstable. In her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" she describes how in modern society boundaries between human and machine are so blurred that we have already become cyborgs – a new form of person that integrates biological and technological aspects. The idea of cyborg identity extends beyond pop culture notions of people with robotic limbs, to new forms of identity emerging from human-AI entanglement. Véliz argues that our identities are now distributed across digital platforms where algorithmic systems continuously reconstruct who we are from data fragments, creating what she terms a crisis of "informational self-determination" – we no longer control the narratives of our own identity[43].

The cyborg identity challenges basic assumptions about authorship and originality in human-AI collaboration. If we create with AI, who is the true author? If we think with machines, what is originally ours? These blurred boundaries undermine traditional notions of intellectual property and human creativity, threatening both the economic models that commodify creativity through copyright and patent systems, and the moral rights doctrine that ties creative work to humans. Indeed, our entire civilization is undergoing a collective rite de passage because of AI. We are in between a pre-AI and a post-AI world, where old institutions (such as education, law, and government) are being transformed, while new forms have not fully emerged. We are undergoing a species-level transformation of what it means to be human, think, create, and organize society. But Turner saw liminal spaces as spaces of innovation and creative potential – in the ambiguity lies the possibility for new social arrangements, new ways of thinking, and new forms of art. This is a phase of fundamental transformation that will not be available once new structures solidify. It is important that we navigate this passage consciously, with attention to what we want to preserve and what we are willing to transform.

Conclusion

These five anthropological concepts form more than a glossary – they constitute a counter-ontology to the worldview embedded in AI. Together, they expose a single foundational error: AI systems are built on a fundamental limitation in understanding what humans are and how meaning works. We have mistaken one culture's understanding of humans – as rational, bounded, utility-maximizing individuals – for human nature itself, then built machines to optimize for this caricature.

The concepts work in concert, each revealing a different facet of this limitation. Origin stories demonstrate how narratives legitimize authority in societies but also how they shape what futures we can imagine – when we inherit AI narratives primarily from mid-century English science fiction, we inherit their fears, their power structures, and their closed futures. Cargo cult thinking exposes how we mistake surface behaviors for underlying reality, anthropomorphizing statistical systems and performing "ritual prompting" as if incantations could summon genuine understanding. Monoculture demonstrates that homogenization – whether in forests or datasets – creates brittleness and threatens ecological resilience; it represents not just technological fragility but epistemological narrowing that discourages technodiversity. Thick description provides an alternative to surface behaviors that mask layers of cultural meaning and significance, revealing how AI alignment focused on thin observable behaviors ignores the cultural embeddedness that makes human values meaningful. And liminality positions our current moment as one of transformation – betwixt and between worlds – where different possibilities remain open before new structures solidify.

Taken together, these concepts reveal three interconnected problems. First, an epistemological problem: AI mistakes observable behavior for meaning, treating surface patterns as equivalent to the rich social contexts from which meaning emerges. Second, an ontological problem: AI assumes humans are bounded rational agents rather than culturally-embedded beings whose very nature emerges through relationships and collective practice. Third, an axiological problem: AI treats values as preferences to optimize rather than contexts of meaning that

are constituted through – and inseparable from – the social practices that create them.

These are not merely theoretical concerns; they have material consequences. When AI systems enter social domains with their logic of optimization, they risk eliminating the conditions that create value. Gift exchanges are economically useless but create social cohesion; consensus decision-making maintains community where everyone feels heard; rituals mark belonging through repetition that serves no utilitarian function. What we call the "alignment problem" is actually epistemological imperialism: one culture's framework – rooted in Western economics and decision theory – becomes the lens through which all human practices are interpreted and reorganized. The vocabulary presented in these five concepts is meant to challenge machine learning's interpretative sovereignty. When developers claim to "align" AI with human values, anthropology asks: whose values, whose intelligence, whose rationality – defined by whom, serving what purposes? The path forward requires epistemic humility: recognizing that human valuing takes radically different forms across cultures, acknowledging domains where computational mediation destroys what makes practices valuable, and ensuring that the unmeasurable remains sacred precisely because it cannot be computed.

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ANTROPOLOGIJA ZA UMJETNU INTELIGENCIJU

S A Ž E T A K

Ovaj rad uvodi nekoliko pojmova iz antropologije relevantnih za umjetnu inteligenciju (AI), tvrdeći da je ono što nazivamo problemom usklađivanja AI-ja (AI *alignment*) u svojoj biti društveni problem. Temeljne pretpostavke umjetne inteligencije polaze od razumijevanja čovjeka karakterističnog za jednu kulturu – kao racionalnog, ograničenog racionalnog subjekta koji maksimizira korisnost – te od pristupa usklađivanju vrijednosti koji se oslanjaju na računalni biheviorizam, pretpostavljajući da se vrijednosti mogu iščitati iz promatranog ponašanja i kodirati u optimizacijske funkcije. Pritom se zanemaruje ispitivanje raznih kulturnih konteksta koji ponašanju daju značenje. Pojmovi iz antropologije mogu ponuditi kritičku perspektivu i razotkriti skrivene pretpostavke ugrađene u AI. U radu objašnjavam sljedeće koncepte i zašto oni danas predstavljaju korektivnu leću za promišljanje umjetne inteligencije: priča o podrijetlu (origin story) pomaže nam razumjeti kako kulturni narativi oblikuju koje se budućnosti doimaju mogućima i kako se raspodjeljuje moć; *cargo kult* ukazuje na to kako se oponašanje i simulacija mogu pogrešno zamijeniti za stvarno razumijevanje; monokultura opisuje kako homogenizacija može dovesti do sistemskog kolapsa; gusti opis (*thick description*) nudi korisnu protutežu današnjim „tankim" pristupima usklađivanju; te naposljetku liminalnost kao priliku za transformaciju i zamišljanje novog društvenog poretka. Antropologija ne nudi tehnička rješenja, već preoblikovanje okvira: kada developeri tvrde da usklađuju umjetnu inteligenciju s ljudskim vrijednostima, moramo se zapitati – čijim vrijednostima, tko ih je definirao i kome služe.