

Symbolic anthropology

ANTH 348/Ideas of Culture

Symbolic Anthropology

- Examines symbols & processes by which humans *assign meaning*.
- Addresses fundamental questions about human social life, especially through myth & ritual.
- Culture does not exist apart from individuals.
- It is found in *interpretations* of events & things around them.



International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Symbolic Anthropology

- *Culture is a system of meaning* deciphered by **interpreting** key symbols & rituals.
- Anthropology is an *interpretive not scientific endeavor*.
- 2 dominant trends in symbolic anthropology represented by work of British anthropologist Victor Turner & American anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

Victor Turner (1920-1983)

- Studied with Max Gluckman @ Manchester University.
- Taught at:
 - Stanford University
 - Cornell University
 - University of Chicago
 - University of Virginia.
- *Publications include:*
 - *Schism & Continuity in an African Society* (1957)
 - *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967)
 - *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes Among the Ndembu of Zambia* (1968)
 - *The Ritual Process: Structure & Anti-Structure* (1969).
 - *Dramas, Fields, & Metaphors* (1974)
 - *Revelation & Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (1975)



Social Drama

- Early work on village-level social processes among the *Ndembu* people of Zambia
 - examination of demographics & economics.
- Later shift to analysis of ritual & symbolism.
- Turner introduced idea of *social drama*
 - "public episodes of tensional irruption**"
 - "units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations."
 - They represent *windows into social organization & values*.
 - These *episodes lay bare tensions in the social fabric & are recurrent features of social life*.
 - Can be viewed as *units of social process* that have a *beginning, middle, & end*.

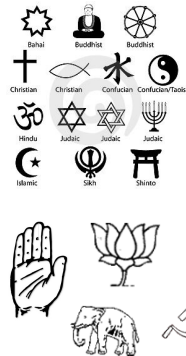
**a sudden, often violent appearance of something.

Social drama

- *For Turner, social dramas have four main phases:*
 1. Breach –rupture in social relations.
 2. Crisis – cannot be handled by normal strategies.
 3. Redressive action – seeks to remedy the initial problem, redress and re-establish
 4. Reintegration or schism – return to status quo or an alteration in social arrangements.
- In both types of resolutions symbolic displays demonstrate the actors' unity in the form of rituals.
- In Turner's theory, ritual is a kind of plot that has a set sequence which is linear, not circular.

Victor Turner

- Symbols are by nature **multivocalic**:
 - can have *multiple meanings*
 - subject to *different interpretations*.
 - *construction of meaning occurs in specific, dynamic contexts of social process.*
- Turner shared Durkheim's view that the social order depends on rituals and ceremonial performances.

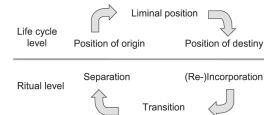


Rites of Passage

- Turner was also influenced by work of folklorist Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (1909).
- Van Gennep saw these rituals as marking changes in rights and obligations.
- According to Van Gennep, these rituals have 3 **principle stages**:
 1. *rites of separation*
 2. *margin or limen* (i.e., threshold)
 3. *aggregation*.



Arnold van Gennep, 1873-1957



Communitas

- Turner saw *liminal stage* as crucial with regard to process of regenerative renewal.
- Experience of liminality yields *communitas*
 - *ideal view of culture*
 - purely spontaneous and self generating.
- *Communitas* is opposed to structure, as antimatter is opposed to matter...
- Turner believed that exposure to or immersion in *communitas* is an indispensable human social requirement.

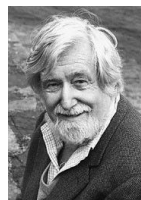
Communitas

- "In a situation that is temporally liminal and spatially marginal, the neophytes or passengers in a protracted rite of passage are stripped of status and authority – in other words removed from a social structure which is ultimately maintained and sanctioned by power and force – and further linked to a homogenous social state through discipline and ordeal... Much of what had been bound by social structure is liberated, noticeably the sense of comradeship and communion, in brief, of *communitas*."



Clifford Geertz (1926-2006)

- Undergraduate English major, then philosophy, finally anthropology.
 - Ph.D. (in anthropology) from Harvard, 1956.
 - Taught @ University of Chicago 1960-1970, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, New Jersey 1970 – 2006.
- Discernible theoretical shift – early to late career – culminating in semiotic approach.
- Primary advocate of American brand of symbolic anthropology.
- Like Turner for British anthropology but he calls it "interpretive anthropology".



"Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs."

<http://www.thirteen.org/bigideas/geertz.html>

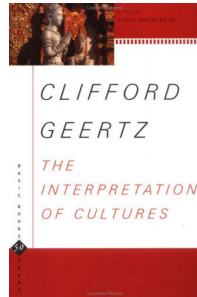
<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/geertz.htm>

Publications

- *The Religion of Java* (1960)
- *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (1963)
- *Peddlers and Princes: Social Change and Economic Modernization in Two Indonesian Towns* (1963)
- *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)
- *Local Knowledge: Further Essays on Interpretative Anthropology* (1983)
- *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988)

Clifford Geertz

- Geertz rejects reified notions of culture as superorganic (Kroeber, White).
- Also rejects a view of culture as patterns of behavior (RB) & idea that culture is located in mind (LS).
- Advocated a *semiotic approach* – study of symbols and their meanings.
- Culture is *public* because meaning is public.
- Culture is a *context* within which social events can be described.

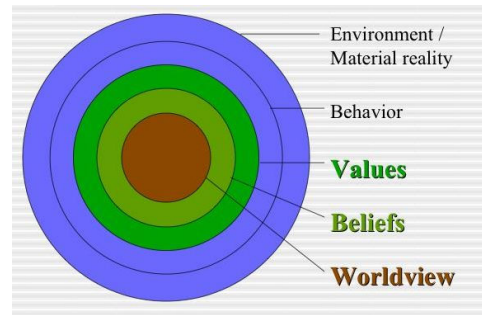


Clifford Geertz

- Cultural anthropology is an *interpretive* rather than experimental science.
- “Man is an animal suspended in *webs of significance* and culture constitutes those webs.”
- Explication comes from “*thick description*” – careful analysis of ethnographic detail.
- Goal is to interpret multiple levels of meaning attached to human sociocultural phenomenon.

Thick description

- **Culture, like an onion, consists of layers.**
- **Outer layer** is level of *explicit culture*.
 - what people primarily associate with culture
 - visual reality of behavior, clothes, food, language, housing, etc.
- **Middle layer** consists of *norms & values* held by community.
 - What is considered right & wrong (norms) or good & bad (values).
 - Norms are often external & reinforced by social control.
 - Values tend to be more internal than norms.
 - Values & norms structure way people in a particular culture behave.
 - But they are not visible, despite their influence on what happens at observable surface.
- **Inner layer** is level of *implicit culture*.
 - Core consists of *basic assumptions*, series of *rules and methods* to deal with regular problems that it faces.
 - They are so basic that, like breathing, we no longer think about how we do it.
 - For an outsider these basic assumptions are very difficult to recognize.



THICK DESCRIPTION

- This interpretation is not predictive, nor verifiable.
- Primarily descriptive approach – does not yield much in way of theoretical formulations.
- In his article, *Thick Description*, Geertz claims that the object of study (culture) is one thing; the study of it (anthropology) is another.
- *Anthropological writings* are themselves, *interpretations* – our own interpretations of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to.

THICK DESCRIPTION

- Four characteristics of ethnographic description
 - 1) It is *interpretive*.
 - 2) It is interpretive of the *flow of social discourse*.
 - 3) Interpreting consists of trying to rescue the “said” of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms.
 - 4) It is *microscopic*.
- Aim is to *draw large conclusions from small but very densely textured facts*
 - to support *broad assertions* about role of culture in construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with *complex specifics*.

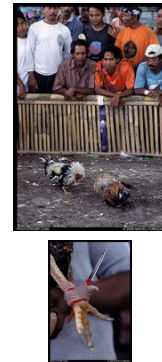
Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

- “Fighting cocks... is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kin group rivalries and hostilities but in ‘play’ form, coming dangerously and entrancingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup expression... but not quite, because, after all, it is ‘only a cockfight’”



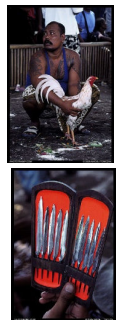
Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

- “Like any art form... *the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced... to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived.*”



Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

- “What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, *lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance* is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status discriminations... but that *it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience; a story they tell themselves about themselves.*”



Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

- “To put the matter this way ... shifts the analysis of cultural forms from an endeavor in general to dissecting an organism, diagnosing a symptom, deciphering a code, or ordering a system – the dominant analogies in contemporary anthropology – to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text.

If one takes the cockfight, or any other collectively sustained symbolic structure, as a means of ‘saying something of something’... then one is faced with a problem not in social mechanics but social semantics.

For the anthropologist, whose concern is with formulating sociological principles, not with promoting or appreciating cockfights, the question is, *what does one learn about such principles from examining culture as an assemblage of texts?*”

Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007)

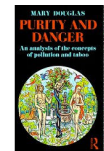
- Ph.D. Oxford University 1951
- Mentored by Evans-Pritchard.
- Extensive fieldwork in Belgian Congo amongst the Lele.
- *Partial list of publications includes:*
 - *Peoples of the Lake Nyasa Region*, 1950.
 - *The Lele of the Kasai*, 1963
 - *Purity and Danger: Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, 1966
 - *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. 1970
 - *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, 1975
 - *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, 1978.



<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/douglas.htm>

Purity and danger

- Examined different cultural definitions of *impurity*.
- Argued that *pollutants play an important role in maintaining social structures*.
- Example: in Lele culture *people have rules for protecting themselves from what they define as polluted*
 - feces, blood, military groups, milk, used clothing, & sexual intercourse.
- Another example *Old Testament, Book of Leviticus*.
- Dietary rules that define dozens of unclean animals.



Purity and danger

- Examples are **not** about hygiene
- They are *moral symbols based on people's concepts of impurity*.
- By defining what is polluted, people classify their social life into 2 **opposite categories**:
 - *what is acceptable*
 - *what is unacceptable*
- *Symbolic system gives moral order to societies.*
- In societies where categories of purity & pollutants are rigid, people have developed secular & religious rituals to keep themselves physically & morally pure.
- These practices enforce symbolic system & maintain order in society.

Mary Douglas



- McGee & Warms state that :

One of the general shortcomings of symbolic anthropology is that it is primarily descriptive and does not lend itself to general theoretical or methodological formulations. ... Mary Douglas is one symbolic anthropologist whose work defies this generalization. She argues her case from a Durkheimian perspective, suggesting that shared symbols create a unity in experience and that religious ideas about purity and pollution symbolize beliefs about the social order.
- In 1992 she became a *Commander of the Order of the British Empire* (CBE), and in 2007 was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE).
- She died May 2007 in London, aged 86, from complications of cancer

Symbolic Anthropology

- McGee & Warms (p.483-484) state:

Symbolic anthropologists claim to search for universals of human understanding through the collection of locally particular data. However, much of what symbolic anthropologists know is derived through imaginative insight into particular cultures or events within those cultures. As a result, *their knowledge does not provide a theoretical basis for understanding culture as a universal phenomenon.*

Symbolic anthropology is concerned with studying the process by which people give meaning to their world and how this world is expressed in cultural symbols. Geertz writes that "*cultural analysis is guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses.*" However *symbolic anthropologists have never specifically explained a methodology for "guessing at meaning"*. Critics claim that *the credibility of symbolic interpretation is based on the explanatory skills of the anthropologist* and argue that *such anthropology often seems closer to literary criticism than social science* (emphasis added).