

## Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology

**Symbolic anthropology** assumes culture as a system of symbols and aims to understand meanings of symbols in their cultural context. It studies the way people understand their surroundings, as well as the actions and utterances of the other members of their society. Symbolic anthropology studies symbols and the processes, such as myth and ritual, by which humans assign meanings to these symbols to address fundamental questions about human social life.

According to **Geertz**, man is in need of **symbolic "sources of illumination"** to orient himself with respect to the system of meaning that is any particular culture. Turner states that symbols initiate social action and are "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action". **Geertz's position illustrates the interpretive approach to symbolic anthropology, while Turner's illustrates the symbolic approach.**

The goal of Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology is to analyse how people give meanings to their reality and how this reality is expressed by their cultural symbols. The major accomplishment of symbolic anthropology has been to turn anthropology towards issues of culture and interpretation rather than grand theories.

The anthropological studies seek aspects of social structure & the analogy involved, which has been taken to the area of understanding of people's action and how the structure has been placed with the help of symbols and decoding their meaning understood by a shared understanding of the people. It has been quoted in anthropological language "reading between lines", mean interpreting underlying 'meaning or message' (understanding the social code underlying those actions).

The primary desire of present Ethnographic approach is to **outline the 'native point of view'**. It emphasizes on the **peoples' shared understanding of their own culture**, how they locate their own self in it and their experiences. The culture is attributed to the agglomeration of symbols having particular meaning and which is interpreted via actors and therefore interpretive can be understood as study of actor-centred action.

There are two major premises governing symbolic anthropology. The first is that **"beliefs, however unintelligible, become comprehensible when understood as part of a cultural system of meaning"**. The second major premise is **that actions are guided by interpretation, allowing symbolism to aid in interpreting ideal as well as material activities**. Traditionally, symbolic anthropology has focused on religion, cosmology, ritual activity, and expressive customs such as mythology and the performing arts. Symbolic anthropology can be divided into two major approaches. One is associated with Clifford Geertz and the University of Chicago and the other with Victor W. Turner. David Schneider was also a major figure in the development of symbolic anthropology, however he does not fall entirely within either of the above schools of thought.

The major difference between the two schools lies in their respective influences. **Geertz was influenced largely by the sociologist Max Weber, and was concerned with the operations of "culture"** rather than the ways in which symbols operate in the social process. **Turner, influenced by Emile Durkheim, was concerned with the operations of "society" and the ways in which symbols operate within it.** Turner, reflecting his English roots, was much more interested in investigating whether symbols actually functioned within the social process the way symbolic anthropologists believed they did. Geertz focused much more on the ways in which symbols relate to one another within culture and how individuals "see, feel, and think about the world"

## **INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY/ GEERTZIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

In anthropological literature Geertz was the leading figure in Interpretive Anthropology. Geertz's approach to culture was based on the idea that understanding another culture is always an act of interpretation, an inquiry that involves placing a cultural act—a ritual, a game, a political campaign, and so on—into the specific and local contexts in which the act is meaningful.

Geertz was influenced by **Max Weber's approach of 'Verstehen'**. Weber's idea was that, man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance, which was adopted by Geertz. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.

Interpretive drew ideas from Hermeneutics. **Hermeneutics** is a subject directed study, drawn from word "Hermes ", a Greek god who was given the job of delivering and interpreting the messages of the other gods for humans. From this came the word 'Hermeneus' or 'interpreter'. The hermeneutic as an ideology came into the social sciences with the close and careful study of all free flowing texts.

The hermeneutic approach stress

(1) on myths or narrative having meaning in a collective consciousness of the society in sense or knowledge of culture

(2) it is the job of social researcher to discover those meaning

(3) an acknowledgment to that, the meaning can change with time and can also be different for groups or sub-groups within a society.

He believed that an analysis of culture **should "not be an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning"**. Culture is expressed by the **external symbols that a society uses rather than being locked inside people's heads**. He defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life". Societies use these symbols to express their "worldview, value-orientation, ethos, [and other aspects of their culture]". For Geertz symbols are **"vehicles of culture"**, meaning that symbols should not be studied in and of themselves, but for what they can reveal about culture. Geertz's main interest was the way in which symbols shape the ways that social actors see, feel, and think about the world. Throughout his writings, Geertz characterized culture as a social phenomenon and a shared system of intersubjective symbols and meanings.

Clifford Geertz proposed interpretative analysis in order to study culture and the webs of significance. He utilized Gilbert Ryle's' notion of **"Thick Description"** to define the original aim of anthropology. He argues that social Anthropology is based on ethnography, or the study of culture. Culture consists of the symbols that guide community behaviour. Symbols obtain meaning from the role which they play in the patterned behaviour of social life. Culture and behaviour cannot be studied separately because they are intertwined. By analysing the whole of culture as well as its constituent parts, one develops a "thick description" which details the mental processes and reasoning of the natives.

**Thick description, is an interpretation of what the natives are thinking made by an outsider who cannot think like a native but is guided by anthropological theory.** To illustrate thick description, Geertz uses Ryle's example which discusses the difference between a "blink" and a "wink." One, a blink, is an involuntary twitch –requiring only a 'thin' description of eye movement– and the other, a

wink, is a conspiratorial signal to a friend—which must be interpreted through ‘thick’ description. While the physical movements involved in each are identical, each has a distinct meaning “as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows”. A wink is a special form of communication which consists of several characteristics: it is deliberate; to someone in particular; to impart a particular message; according to a socially established code; and without the knowledge of the other members of the group of which the winker and winkee are a part. In addition, the wink can be a parody of someone else’s wink or an attempt to lead others to believe that a conspiracy of sorts is occurring. Each type of wink can be considered to be a separate cultural category. The combination of the blink and the types of winks discussed above (and those that lie between them) produce “a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in which winks and twitches are produced and interpreted. This, Geertz argues, is the object of ethnography: to decipher this hierarchy of cultural categories. Thick description, therefore, is a description of the particular form of communication used, like a parody of someone else’s wink or a conspiratorial wink. In actual sense, Ryle’s example of “Twitching and Winking” has made the understanding or study of cultural phenomena more explicit with this example.

### JAVANESE FUNERAL

To oversimplify, peasant religion in Java had been a syncretic mix of Islam and Hinduism overlain on an indigenous Southeast Asian animism. “The result,” Geertz wrote, “was a balanced syncretism of myth and ritual in which Hindu gods and goddesses, Moslem prophets and saints, and local spirits and demons all found a proper place” (1973:147). This balance has been upset increasingly during the twentieth century as conservative Islamic religious nationalism crystallized in opposition to a secular nationalism that appealed to pre-Islamic, Hinduist animist “indigenous” religions. Those positions became sufficiently distinct that the difference between the self-conscious Muslim and self-conscious “nativist” (combining Hindu and native elements with Marxism) became polarized as types of people, **santri and abangnan**. In post-independence Indonesia, political parties formed along these dividing lines: Masjumi became the conservative Islamic party and Permai, the anti-Islamic mix of Marxism and nativism. These differences were epitomized at a specific Javanese funeral.

“The mood of a Javanese funeral is not one of hysterical bereavement, unrestrained sobbing, or even of formalized cries of grief for the deceased’s departure,” Geertz observed. “Rather it is a calm, undemonstrative, almost languid letting go, a brief ritualized relinquishment of a relationship no longer possible” (Geertz 1973:154). This willed serenity and detachment, *iklas*, depends on the smooth execution of a proper ceremony that seamlessly combines Islamic, Hindu, and indigenous beliefs and rituals. Javanese believe that it is the suddenness of emotional turmoil that causes damage. “It is ‘shock’ not the suffering itself which is feared” (Geertz 1973:154)—and that the funeral procedure should smoothly and quickly mark the end of life.

But in this particular case, the deceased was a boy was from a household loosely affiliated with the Permai party, and when the Islamic village religious leader was called to direct the ceremony, he refused, citing the presence of a Permai political poster on the door and arguing that it was inappropriate for him to perform the ceremony of “another” religion. At that moment, *iklas*—the self-willed and culturally defined composure surrounding the death—unraveled.

Geertz describes the emotional chaos that ensued, tracing its roots to a central ambiguity: religious symbols had become political symbols and vice versa, and created “an incongruity between the cultural framework of meaning and the patterning of social interaction”. Not only is this an interesting point about the dynamic uses of religious and political symbols, but it is a **fine example of thick description**.

### **BALINESE COCKFIGHT**

"Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is one of Clifford Geertz's most influential articles which illustrates not only the meaning of a given cultural phenomenon, the Balinese cockfight, but also Geertz's interpretative approach that sees a culture as a set of texts to be read by the anthropologist. Geertz shows how the Balinese cockfight serves as a cultural text which embodies, at least a portion of, what the real meaning of being Balinese is.

Despite being illegal, cockfighting is a widespread and highly popular phenomenon in Bali, at least at the time "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" was written (1972). Geertz reports that the Balinese people deeply detest animals and more specifically expressions of animal-like behavior. However, they have a deep identification with their cocks (yes, with their cocks) and "in identifying with his cock, the Balinese man is identifying not only with his ideal self, or even his penis, but also, and at the same time, with what he most fears, hates, and ambivalence being what it is, is fascinated by- the powers of darkness".

Balinese cockfight is linked with the status hierarchy, tension inside the society and between societies and kinship bonding. Geertz found that, 'Sabung', the word used for a cock is having several meanings in the society, which metaphorically meant 'a hero', 'warrior', 'tough guy', 'lady killer', etc. He also noted in this chapter 'Deep play', that, both a type of man like, a man who make irrational effort 'extracting' himself is compared to a roster with a dying cock, etc.

He has talked extensively on the owner and their cocks, how they take care of their cocks and they start reflecting their own image in their rosters, the money involved (the primary bet and the secondary one along with their characteristics), the fight and how these fights vary on the basis of money and the prestige involved. He showed that even the status in society is connected with rosters and a hierarchy based on participation and a link to the status oriented fights.

In Balinese society where, participants taking part in larger bet have the highest social status, the kind of status gamble involved make them important in other affairs of society whereas poor, women, children are the one, lowest in hierarchy, who either are starting or do not play or gamble in pennies. It is reported in the account that, the hierarchy is felt so strongly that, none of the men would like to be around the one lowest in the social hierarchy. He also talked of function of these fights in resolving inter and intra group tension via defeating the other person but, at the same time brought out that for the people who bet often it is not a matter of prestige in fact a mode of economic gain. Geertz drew from Balinese cockfight that, the themes of gambling, status hierarchy involved, aesthetic evoking excitement, etc. are all connected to rage and its fear, bound by rules they have a symbolic structure in which the inner social ties can be felt where one is having close friends and kin in their centre bet while when it is between two villages, allies is the one from the same village and the roster of Home is supported.

Rituals such as the Balinese cockfight, Geertz concludes, are a form of text which can be read. It is a society's manner of speaking to itself about itself, and is therefore of prime interest for the anthropologist.

One of the main critiques of "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" is that Geertz overlooks the importance of women in Balinese culture, even though he recognizes that they are a part of it, and that Geertz does not first explain the social origins of status in Balinese society to give context to his theories and interpretations of what he saw and studied. Of the collection of essays overall, there are two key critiques. The first is that there is an inevitable limitation to the culture-as-text approach - it fails to consider how that "text" was created in the first place, and the significance of its' development

in the society. The second is that it does not address the bigger pictures in cultures overall, such as how they were formed, and the historical context for why symbols are created or occur.

### **SYMBOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY/TURNER'S ANTHROPOLOGY**

Turner's approach to symbols was very different from that of Geertz. Turner was not interested in symbols as vehicles of "culture" as Geertz was but instead investigated symbols as **"operators in the social process"**. Symbols "instigate social action" and exert "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action". **Turner felt that these "operators," by their arrangement and context, produce "social transformations" which tie the people in a society to the society's norms, resolve conflict, and aid in changing the status of the actors.**

Turner defined following properties of symbols:

- a) **Multivocality:** representing different meanings at different times
- b) **Condensation:** many meanings at the same time
- c) **Polarization of meaning:** The symbols may ask u to do something as well it may prevent from doing something at the same time.

Symbolic anthropology becomes visible in Turner's work on Ndembu's of Northern Rhodesia, titled **'Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A study of Ndembu Village Life', 1957**. Turner conducted fieldwork amongst the Ndembu in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and here began to focus on rituals. Turner explored Arnold van Gennep's threefold structure of rites of passage and expanding his theory of the liminal phase. Van Gennep's structure consisted of a pre-liminal phase (separation), a liminal phase (transition), and a post-liminal phase (re-incorporation).

In his book Rites of Passage, the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep (1908:189) explored the fundamental process underlying the change of an individual's status in society: For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way.

Life, for van Gennep, is characterized by transitions from one social group or situation to another. This is evident as an individual passes through various age grades, social relationships, and occupations during their lifetime. Van Gennep declared that all of these transitions share a processual similarity that he calls "rites of passage."

Van Gennep analysed small-scale societies where changes in status are strictly regulated and are accompanied usually by ceremonial rituals. In contrast, changing status in hypermodern societies is relatively easy but also more ambiguous. To illustrate the difference, van Gennep compares society to a house with rooms that represent the various roles or social positions available. The more a society resembles our hypermodern industrial civilizations, the thinner its walls and the "wider and more open are its doors of communication" (van Gennep 1908:26). Passage from room to room, from social state to social state, is easy. In smaller-scale societies, the rooms are carefully isolated with narrow doors and corridors. Ceremony and ritual regulate the passage between these rooms. While rites of passage are easier to identify in small-scale societies, the process applies to all civilizations, "from the most primitive to the most evolved".

Rites of passage are subdivided into three stages: separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (post-liminal). Rites of separation symbolically detach the individual from an existing



point in the social structure. After this separation, the former social status no longer applies to the individual. In the transition or liminal stage, the individual is a symbolic outsider with no clearly defined status or role. The liminal personae (or "liminar") resides at the margins of society while they prepare to adopt a new role. The final stage of incorporation allows the individual to adopt a new social status and re-enter society. If this re-entry does not occur, liminality does not end, a status possible in hypermodern society but not in small-scale society

Victor Turner expanded our understanding of liminality, and described its relevance. Liminal stage marks the transition between two socially viable positions. "Liminality," according to Turner, "is a movement between fixed points and is essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling." Liminars "are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner 1969:95). Their social condition is "a confusion of all the customary categories".

Ambiguity and paradox characterize the social situation of liminal persons (Turner 1967:97). They are neither this nor that, child nor adult, woman nor mother. As a result, the liminal individual is often invisible both structurally and physically. Structural invisibility is the inevitable result of losing or being without a social status. Liminality is a "limbo," an ambiguous period characterized by humility, seclusion, tests, sexual ambiguity, and "**communitas**" (unstructured community where all members are equal).

Thus, Turner conceived of communitas as an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness. It is characteristic of people experiencing liminality together. Communitas is an acute point of community. It takes community to the next level and allows the whole of the community to share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage. This brings everyone onto an equal level—even if people are higher in positions, they were lower at one point and know what that means.

In puberty rituals (known as Nkang'a) of a girl in Ndembu group, the girl is wrapped in a blanket and placed at the foot of the Mudyi sapling. The tree, Mudyi is known for its white latex in the community, giving milky beads when bark is scraped. The tree is called as 'milk tree' by the author, which is explored by him among the community women for its meaning to them emerging as being 'senior' (mukulumpi) tree of the ritual which Turner categorised as '**Dominant Symbol**'.

The other perspective of people regarding tree is that it resembles the human breast milk and the breast as well which is giving it. This corresponded the facts of Nkang'a performed near the mudyi sapling symbolising girl's breast maturing. Turner calls it the ritual showing connection with the mother and child, more importantly the nurturing ties of it involving biological act of breast feeding to social linkage in domestic relations and in the structure of the society which is matrilineal. In the third notion which emerged in the study pointed out it being 'the tree of a mother and her child'.

The discussion on puberty ritual of a girl is taken forwards to the concepts of nourishment and learning which are equated in the content of the milk tree. The child narrated to be swallowing instructions as a baby swallows milk. In the Nkang'a the focal element of the ritual is the integration of Ndembu women, Mudyi itself more specifically, is the flag of Ndembu women. In certain situations, girl's particular tree symbolizes her shift in social personality as a grown woman filled with maturity.

### **SOCIAL DRAMA**

**Social Drama** is a concept devised by Victor Turner to study the dialectic of social transformation and continuity. A social drama is “a spontaneous unit of social process and a fact of everyone’s experience in every human society” (Turner 1980:149). Social dramas occur within a group that shares values and interests and has a shared common history (Turner 1980:149). This drama can be broken into four acts.

In his theory of social dramas, Turner argued that there were four main phases of public action that lead to change:

1. **Breach:** in the first phase the crisis emerges, as one individual or group publicly breaches the common norm that regulates relationship between parties.
2. **Crisis:** the crisis widens and extends the gap between parties.
3. **Redressive action:** in this phase the crisis is being negotiated by the use of redressive mechanism that exists in the society, and which have the goal to establish pre-crisis-like social peace. Public ritual usually serves this kind of purpose.
4. **Reintegration:** resolution of the problem is being negotiated; the change is being legitimized.

Turner interpreted ‘**milk tree**’ endowing order and structure on Ndembu social life as due to matrilineality and virilocality there is a probability of conflict in marriages and hinders the growth of deep lineages and increasing probability of individual movement and village fission.

The Milk Tree counteracts and prevents stronger group formation larger than village. Within village quiet unstable marriages allowed Turner to exhibit social drama as a tool to look beneath the layer of social regularities, hidden contradictions and eruption of conflict in the social structure.

The redressive mechanism are the rituals performed at community level which were performed by cult associations which is treated by Turner as **a social glue holding the Ndembu society together**. The principle of matriliney as reflected in the milk tree, symbolizes the total system of interrelations between groups and persons that makes up Ndembu society. At its highest level of abstraction, therefore, the **milk tree stands for the unity and continuity of Ndembu society**. These thoughts were supported by perceptions of educated Ndembu’s explaining the milk tree as their flag.

### Critical Perspective on Interpretative Anthropology

Though Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology provide great insight into a human’s individual understanding of symbols embedded into culture and how it affects the way people think, it does not provide concrete ideas to support it. Symbolic anthropology does not take into account the importance of materialism, physical sciences, and empirical data. Symbolic anthropologists take a lot of what they know from imaginative insight into cultures and because of this their knowledge does not provide a good basis for figuring culture out as a universal phenomenon.

### Feminist Critique

In the majority of cultures men dominate symbolism and the interpretations of them. In Geertz’s study of the Balinese cockfighting, he overlooks the roles of women in society and focuses too much on male dominance. Looking over the importance of women in this context is a big flaw because it discounts the contributions that women have in cultures.

### Crisis of Representation Critique

This theory argues that symbols are meant to represent a meaning and often times that meaning can be misinterpreted by people through various misleadings but primarily the media. Since we all have

different interpretations of symbols, it is therefore impossible to generalize the beliefs of one culture together.

### **Objectification of researcher**

The concept Objectivity, which marked the researcher's detachment from the research, was contradicted by postmodern anthropological tradition. The postmodern scholars argued for reflexivity in approach, which pointed towards that, a hundred percent of objectivity or detachment cannot be achieved.

### **Validation in the interpretive anthropology**

Another criticism to the approach of interpretative work is Reliability on the interpretation where, Geertz himself argued that, validation of interpretation is problematic where subjectivity was added to the meaning asserted by individuals. He himself has explained the levels of interpretation first involving insider, second researcher and third reader or any other which actually justified the notion of subjectivity and various minds involved. He talked of interpretation of interpretation of a person, which forming the second level of argument where understanding of researcher, insider's projection and how much the researcher could capture can be argued.

### **Geertz's Critique**

Of the collection of essays overall, there are two key critiques. The first is that there is an inevitable limitation to the culture-as-text approach - it fails to consider how that "text" was created in the first place, and the significance of its' development in the society. The second is that it does not address the bigger pictures in cultures overall, such as how they were formed, and the historical context for why symbols are created or occur.

In the end, Geertz's work provokes thought regarding the nature of culture and how it is studied, and was greatly influential in shaping the symbolic and interpretive anthropology.