**Week 9 Reading notes - Geertz**

**[Optional] “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” (1973): 3-32.**

* Definition: “The concept of culture I espouse…is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take cultures 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”. (Geertz 1973:5)
* What does he mean? And what are the strengths and weaknesses, in your view, of an interpretive theory of culture?[[1]](#footnote-1)
* Culture, according to Geertz, was the interconnected patterns of ideas that manifest within a collectivity of persons - a series of complex “webs”
* What does Geertz mean by thick description? What tasks does doing thick description entail for the ethnographer?
* What does Geertz see as the dilemma of theory for anthropology? (Hint: See pp. 24-28).

**[Required] "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" (1966/ 1973), pp.33-54.**

* Geertz explains his problems with functionalism in both "The Impact of Culture of the Concept of Man" and in "Deep Play." What are his criticisms? Do you agree?
* What is Geertz's sense of the evolution of humans and culture? How do people relate to their culture? Why does he assert that culture completes us?

**[Required] "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," (1972/ 1974): 412-454.** [[2]](#footnote-2)

* Geertz argues that we should analyze the cockfight as an art form or text through which people create meaning about themselves and their worlds. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
* How do Balinese deal with outsiders? How did Geertz and his wife become accepted by the Balinese in the village? What does this tell you about their cultural values and symbols?
* In the first part of the essay, what do we learn about “doing anthropology?”  How does it, and does it not resemble other “scientific” methods?
* What does he mean when he writes: “For it only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men.”
* What does the complex betting system of the cockfight illustrate that, for example, does not exist in the complex betting of a horse race?
* Where does the term “deep play” come from, and why is used here?
* What does he mean when he writes that the cockfight is a “status bloodbath” but adds that “..no one’s status really changes.?”
* When he writes that the “function” of the event is “interpretive” is he thus a “functionalist?” If so why?  If not, why not?
* What does he mean when he suggests the one examines “culture” as an “assemblage of texts?”

**Schemata of Geertz’s Methodology**

**Qn 1: How would the anthropologist observe such interconnection?**

**Solution 🡪 symbols**

**Qn 2: But what does one do with symbols?**

**Methodology 🡪 Thick Description : Description on two critical levels (1973: 20-21)**

* 4 characteristics: Microscopic; social discourse rendered into perusable; culture via symbols and social events; interpretative (the meaning)
* **“Model of” -** Describe what happens & Describe the intention behind the action. Thick descriptions look for the meaning and significance behind an action. It requires an understanding of the actor’s point of view. At the same time, the recorder develops Consciousness (awareness) & looks out for Intentionality (awareness directed at objects in the world; “consciousness of”)
* **“Model For”** (1973: 92-94): guidelines for a culture, tell a participants how to live.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Critique/ Qn 3: If ethnography is interpretation how can we know that your interpretation is correct?**

**“analysis of culture should "not (be) an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning".(5)**

* This means that it cannot be a science since it cannot generalize from truth statements or tests the statements againsSt empirical data [?]

**[Option A] Week 9 Recitation Exercise - A Geertz Rubric of “Thick Description” (Modified)**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stages** | **Category** | **Elaboration** | **Balinese Cockfight (1973)** | **Your event** |
| 1 | Event | Superficial intro | Secret, illegal  (why is it interesting?) | 1. Dating; 2. funeral; 3. wedding ; 4. Break up |
| 2 | Description | Procedures  Identification – symbols  Explanations - Psychological | * Wagers * Cocks * Manhood |  |
| 3 | Significance I  (interpretations) | Model of … | * Representation of Balinese social life and self * Hidden passions * Status bloodbath * hierarchy, and conflict * But “only a game” |  |
| 4 | Significance II  (interpretations) | Model for … | * A “sentimental education” * Balinese able to see a dimension of themselves * This helps shape how Balinese come to be themselves |  |

**[Option B] Week 9 Recitation - Geertz**

**Class exercise:**

1. Watch documentary “Floored” about the Chicago Stock Exchange and ask them to do a thick description of the Chicago trading floor.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--H8SY334Zw&t=48s>

1. Make a list of specific actions related to : a. Dating; b. Funeral; c. Hass lesson; d. Wedding (Thin Description)

Describe the significance or intentions behind these actions (Thick Description)

How do you know the significance or intentions of these actions?

Meaning must be social/shared rather than private/subjective

**General Question**

“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” Discuss the workings and significance of Geertrz’s method. What are the shortcomings of such an approach?

**Deep Play (1972)** is essentially the most well-known and widely read piece of writing in anthropology as well as in cultural studies and literary criticism. Your task as a reader is to decipher Geertz’s claim that Balinese cockfight is a form of “deep play.” So the main question is why the Balinese cockfight is deep? (Hint: what meanings are being ascribed to the whole process?) The answer to this question is scattered throughout the text. It is not summarized in a particular place, which is why also this article may be titled “deep play.” Go over the description and analysis of the cockfight and make a list that shows the depth of a deep play. Shall we have a contest on who came up with the longest list, in our class?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7g3rqFJx7s&t=102s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRu4dXIV7Jg&t=22s>

1. Adapted from: http://college.holycross.edu/faculty/aleshkow/320/geertz.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from MIT Open courseware [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Religion as a Cultural System," (1966/1973), 87-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)