

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 7
Anthropological methods: Ethnography
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- How anthropologists actually learn about cultures: by doing ethnography
 - Today’s readings by Lee and Malinowski should give you a small taste of doing fieldwork
 - just as the Fernea readings have been doing
- Let’s start with a bit of a classic ethnography from the early years of the field: Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, first published in 1922
 - the class web page has a link to the entire book online
 - the book is about people of the Trobriand Islands
 - where Malinowski was stuck during WWII, because he was a Polish citizen in English-controlled territory
 - (England was at war with Poland)
 - some of his ways of expressing things are old fashioned and no longer acceptable
 - some of his language sounds racist, like “the white man” and “the native”, even though he was certainly not racist
 - some of it sounds arrogant, like his own “mind striving after the objective, scientific view of things”, versus “untrained minds, unaccustomed to formulate their thoughts with any degree of consistency and precision”
 - Malinowski starts off conversing with the Trobrianders in pidgin English
 - **pidgin**: a "contact language", usually a mix of two languages (in this case, the Trobriand language and English), with limited vocabulary and simplified grammar, usually used only in contact situations between people who do not otherwise share a language
 - he makes little headway as long as he keeps living with "some neighboring white man"
 - instead, Malinowski developed the outlines of what we now call the method of **participant observation**
- Malinowski's three secrets for successful anthropological fieldwork:
 - 1. Have scientific aims
 - he explains and implies elsewhere what this means:
 - your purpose is to understand the people and explain them to others, not judge or ridicule them
 - recognize that they are just as human and intelligent as you are
 - and that they think and behave as they do for understandable reasons
 - not just because they are childish or ignorant
 - the ethnographer's task is to figure out these reasons, the logic, the "skeleton" of the culture that allows us to understand it
 - have some general theoretical issues in mind to investigate
 - such as the nature of religion or magic
 - the nature of economic exchange, etc.
 - but do not begin with preconceived notions
 - 2. Live with the people you are studying, not with others like yourself
 - otherwise you will simply not see and experience the events that will help you understand their culture

- this is the part that he elaborates on in your extract
- by not being able to retreat to the company of people of your own culture, you are forced to find companionship among the people you are studying
 - and thus get to know them better, on more normal terms
 - and they get used to you and start to be less self-conscious
 - when something happens, you can (and must) investigate immediately
 - while everyone is involved and talking about it
 - the Trobrianders came to regard Malinowski as "part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco"
- 3. Use some specific methods
 - his discussion of this is not included in your extract, but the point of these methods is to
 - study the whole society, not just art, or technology, or religion
 - because things only make sense when you consider the whole pattern of thought and social organization
 - Malinowski's three methods are:
 - 1. Record *concrete, statistical documentation*
 - collect a lot of specific cases, make tables or charts that summarize them, and try to discern the regularities among them
 - 2. Record the *imponderabilia of actual life*
 - Malinowski used "imponderabilia" to mean those things that people do not, maybe cannot, think about and explain well in words
 - routines of daily life; things that people simply assume and do
 - the only way to grasp these things is to observe them; just asking won't work
 - take detailed notes about things that are common and ordinary, people's state of mind and expressions as they do things, others' reactions to them, etc., as well as things that are unusual and exciting
 - sometimes stop taking notes and just participate, in order to better grasp these "imponderabilia"
 - 3. Record a *corpus inscriptionum*
 - that is, write down people's explanations, stories, expressions, folklore, magical incantations, etc. in their exact words, in their own language
 - producing a large collection of utterances in the local language a
 - analogous to the "Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum", a collection of virtually all known Roman writings in Latin
 - this collection of utterances "documents native mentality"
 - the ethnographer can then use this collection of verbatim statements to develop, check, and support interpretations of the peoples' ways of thinking and understanding their world
- Even though Malinowski wrote this book almost 90 years ago, and the language is a bit old-fashioned, the ideas are still amazingly current
 - you will find strong echoes of Malinowski's thinking in the other readings for today, and in many others
- Photo of Malinowski sitting on a log with four Trobrianders

- they are all holding “lime pots”, used to hold an alkaline substance (“lime”) made from ground shell or fire ashes
 - this is put in the mouth while you chew betel nut
 - betel nut is the 4th most widely used recreational drug, after tobacco, caffeine, and alcohol
 - used by 10%-20% of the world’s population, mostly southeast Asia and India
 - causes mild euphoria and alertness; turns your teeth brown
- check out the differences in dress and body language
 - what does this say about the deep, unconscious influence of culture?
- Photo of Malinowski being observed while writing in his tent
 - the ethnographic experience goes both ways!
 - Malinowski was very modern here in including himself in his description of Trobriand life
 - unlike the invisible, supposedly objective narrator of many ethnographic documentaries
- One difference: today, a lot of anthropology is done in less exotic places
 - there is just as much need to understand the culture of auto workers in Detroit as to understand Trobriand Islanders (or maybe more)
 - but the concepts remain the same.
- How anthropologists do ethnography
 - [this section is derived largely from Kottak 2005:26-36 and Middleton 2003:3-7]
 - **participant observation**
 - live, work, worship, etc. with people for an extended period
 - that is, *direct contact* with the people
 - armchair speculation, talking with visitors, missionaries, or government administrators, watching TV or from a bus window might be a start, but they won’t get you nearly as clear and complete a view
 - and the contact must be for an *extended period*
 - long enough to really get it, in their language
 - ideally at least a bit more than one year, to get a sample of the entire range of seasonal activities
 - ideally MORE than a year, because for the first part of your stay, you won’t really understand the language, who people are, etc.,
 - so you need to observe that part of the year again once you have the basics under control
 - balance observing and taking notes with participating in the activities for first-hand understanding
 - this is the fundamental method of cultural anthropology
 - requires good rapport with people
 - in turn, requires that you have respect for them, no matter how foreign their ways may seem at first
 - typically requires becoming reasonably fluent in their language
 - **conversations** at various levels of formality:
 - hanging out, casual conversation
 - **interviews** with little formal structure

- interviews guided by an **interview schedule**
 - interview schedule: an outline of topics to cover
 - ensures that each interview covers all the needed info
 - so that they can all be compared and tallied
 - NOT used rigidly as a script or a questionnaire
 - instead, interviews are open-ended and conversational
 - allow for unplanned digressions that may provide crucial information
- ideally involves recording (in writing, audio, or video) a lot of conversation in the people's own language and words
 - this is the "*corpus inscriptionum*" that Malinowski called for
 - it is raw, (somewhat) unfiltered data that can give us clues about how people think about things
 - anthropologists go back again and again to these records to see exactly what people said, and how they said it, to check their ideas about the culture
- **key informants** or **cultural consultants**
 - **informant**: person who teaches an anthropologist about a culture
 - often means just someone the anthropologist interviews or talks with
 - sometimes referred to as a consultant, teacher, assistant, friend...
 - **key informants**: certain people who know a lot about some area of interest and are willing to explain things
 - sometimes paid or compensated in other ways
 - the only way to have good informants is to develop good rapport and show respect
 - this is not only a moral imperative, but also a practical one
- **genealogical method**
 - systematically collect information about who is related to who, and how
 - typically involves setting up individual or family interviews with everyone in the entire community
 - who was your mother; when was she born; where was she born; at what age did she marry your father; ... who are your siblings; how old is each one...
 - putting all this together lets you figure out
 - the interlocking family trees of everyone in the community
 - tendencies and rules about who marries who
 - gender roles, family structure, childrearing practices, etc.
 - relations between villages, clans, etc.
 - provides background information that is essential to understanding specific people's interactions
 - as in Monaghan and Just story about the Indonesian Dou Donggo la Ninde "assaulting" ina Mone
 - if you don't know how everyone is related, you can't understand how they respond to each other
 - we'll look at this example more closely later
 - bonus: actually visiting and talking with lots of people to collect this information sets up many opportunities for people to tell you interesting things, connected to kinship or not
 - another bonus: you can do this while learning the language and culture

- collecting genealogical information usually does not require a large vocabulary or a detailed grasp of the culture
- **life histories**
 - collect the life stories of a few willing contacts
 - usually involves numerous long interviews
 - provides a wide variety of stories and examples, viewpoints, beliefs, raises questions to investigate, etc.
- these are **qualitative** methods
 - in contrast to **quantitative** methods such as surveys, censuses, etc.
 - that produce numerical, statistical results
 - ethnography is mostly based on qualitative methods
 - qualitative methods
 - are anecdotal (based on individual stories, events, etc.)
 - but systematically so
 - in that many stories are collected and compared, looking for regularities among them
 - these qualitative methods add up to Malinowski's other two main methods of ethnography:
 - recording the "*imponderabilia of actual life*"
 - collecting "*concrete, statistical documentation*"
 - lots of cases to compare, tally up, find patterns in
 - qualitative methods are not numerical or formally representative
 - but they provide the culturally constructed framework of meanings for understanding a culture
- other methods that complement ethnography and may be done together with it
 - **surveys**
 - provide **quantitative** data
 - like "60% of respondents say they believe in God"
 - surveys are more common in sociology, political science, etc.
 - but anthropologists often find them useful to fill in quantitative data on some kinds of questions
 - usually a relatively impersonal questionnaire
 - given to a randomly selected sample of the population
 - it is wise to do qualitative ethnographic work *before* designing a survey
 - you need to know what issues are relevant
 - and the categories and terms that people use to think about them
 - or the questions may turn out to be ambiguous, so that respondents do not answer them in a consistent, meaningful way
 - you have surely seen surveys like that
 - that makes the survey data hard to interpret
 - ethnography in advance helps to avoid the "garbage in, garbage out" problem of interpreting data from poorly written surveys
 - in turn, the survey results may raise questions that send you back to do more ethnography to understand the fuller context and meaning of the survey's results

- mapping settlements, routes, layout of houses, use areas within households, etc.
 - figuring out which areas are public, and which are private
 - noticing which activities, places, people are close to each other, and possibly connected, and which are kept apart
 - which may lead to insights about how people think about these activities, places, and people
 - example: the Ferneas needed to understand the layout of El Nahra to understand the impact of the new bridge
- recording ecological data like plants, animals, rainfall, etc.
- health studies
 - any of countless kinds of medical data collection
- diet studies
 - record (often weigh, etc.) everything people eat for a period of time
 - you will see an example of this in Lee's book on the Dobe Ju'/hoansi
- **time allocation studies**
 - follow people around and systematically record what they are doing on a regular, often minute-by-minute basis
 - again, you will see an example of this later on in the book by Lee on the Dobe Ju'/hoansi
- **archival research**
 - relevant history
 - census records
 - agricultural records
 - you will some of see this, too, in the chapter of Lee that you read for the next class
 - and many others as needed to address particular questions of interest to the researcher
- **longitudinal research**
 - return and collect comparable data multiple times over many years
 - allows an ethnographically-informed understanding of change over time
 - and of impact of new developments, government policies, ecological changes, missionary activities, medical practices, etc.
 - some ethnographers take a longitudinal approach; others don't
 - depends on the research questions
 - and on practical issues in the anthropologist's life, career, interests, funding, etc.
- **comparative approach**
 - in learning about one culture, the anthropologist inevitably compares it to
 - his or her own culture
 - other cultures
 - looking for regularities that might explain or highlight differences and similarities
- Anthropologists have to look beyond simply what people say, to figure out the cultural constructs that underlie what they say
 - often things that people make uncomfortable or touchy are particularly telling
 - often indicates a contradiction between ideal culture and real culture
 - or a contradiction between one belief and another

- contradictions often make assumptions easier to see
- and they highlight that beliefs are arbitrary cultural constructs
- example: many Americans believe that by and large, people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life here
 - yet lots of evidence suggests that this is not actually true
 - a fairly limited number of families provide a disproportionate number of the politicians that run the country
 - people born into some ethnic or economic groups have much lower incomes, poorer health, etc. than people born into others
 - the surest predictor of a person's income as an adult is the income of their parents
 - the children of the rich get richer, and those of the poor get poorer (see the US census report on incomes in 2004 and 2005, reported in the New York Times on August 30, 2006 and elsewhere)
- these contradictions highlight how factually incorrect the "equal opportunity" or "meritocracy" belief is
 - "equal opportunity" is part of our "ideal culture", but is contradicted by our "real culture"
 - this contradiction leads us to think about why this belief persists in the face of evidence
 - leads us to think about the role this belief plays in our culture
 - does it help us to accept randomness or unfairness that we cannot control?
 - does it help the successful to not feel guilt or obligation to others?
 - does it help to maintain a system that benefits some people, and not others? who?
 - how does it relate to other beliefs?
 - why exactly does it make people irritable if you question it?
 - why does it seem so important to maintain this belief, in spite of plentiful evidence that it is false?
- people's irritation or denial indicate that the cultural constructs involved are important to them
 - the contradiction calls into question some comfortable cultural assumptions
- focusing on these contradictions often makes anthropologists seem cynical
 - it may seem that anthropologists are often pointing out hypocrisy
 - but really, they are pointing out contradictions between ideal and real culture
 - which is a way of discovering assumptions and recognizing them as arbitrary cultural constructions
 - all cultures have these contradictions, not only ours
 - the point is not to be cynical, but to become aware of what aspects of our perceived reality are actually arbitrary cultural constructs
 - which, because they are only cultural constructs, presumably could be changed
 - this can be hopeful and idealistic, not cynical
 - anthropology can help us to understand:
 - that some (many? most?) beliefs are just arbitrary cultural constructs
 - how those beliefs fit into the rest of the culture
 - what the function or effect of a given belief is
 - what other aspects of the culture support these beliefs, or depend on them

- maybe what other changes would ripple through the culture if a given belief changed
- Monaghan and Just 2000 Chapter 1: A Dispute in Donggo: Fieldwork and Ethnography
 - Peter Just
 - studies Dou Donggo of the Indonesian island of Sumbawa
 - swidden (slash-and-burn) farmers shifting to rice
 - mountain people who maintained identity and beliefs through waves of Hindu and Muslim dominance
 - Chapter 1: A Dispute in Donggo: Fieldwork and Ethnography
 - complicated story of la Ninde's "assault" on ina Mone
 - la Ninde is convicted, but didn't actually do it
 - everyone knows this, but still feels that justice was done
 - To understand this, we need to use **genealogical notation**, or **kinship notation**
 - box or triangle represents a male
 - circle represents a female
 - double horizontal lines are a marriage
 - or other long or short term sexual relationships between unmarried people
 - there is no widespread standard for expressing these differences; each author does it in his/her own way
 - vertical lines connect the marriage (the relationship between the parents) to children
 - we will use double dotted lines for betrothal (fiancés; planning to be married)
 - this is not particularly standardized, though
 - So, how could everyone feel justice was done in condemning la Ninde for an assault they all know he did not commit?
 - he was really being admonished for flirting with la Fia, a betrothed girl
 - and for endangering the institution of betrothal
 - and in particular, for endangering betrothals of sons of ama Panci, who is father of both la Fia and the boy who is betrothed to ina Mone's daughter
 - ina Mone's daughter was betrothed to a son of ama Panci
 - la Fia was betrothed to another son of the same ama Panci
 - put bluntly, la Mone was afraid that if la Ninde could get away with cheating with the girl betrothed to one of ama Panci's sons, then ama Panci's other son might try cheating on her daughter
 - note that the judge who particularly berated la Ninde was ama Panci, father of la Fia and of the son betrothed to la Mone's daughter
 - he was both upset with la Ninde for interfering with his son's betrothal to la Fia
 - and was reassuring la Mone that her daughter's betrothal to his other son was safe
 - so everyone's motives make sense
 - and the "false" conviction actually did address the concerns of all involved, even though they were not the ones explicitly stated
 - look at the genealogy chart...
 - see why you have to understand who is related to whom in order to get what is going on?

- if the ethnographer doesn't understand the kin relations, then
 - he/she won't understand a specific case like this one correctly, and then
 - he/she will use that misunderstanding to draw incorrect conclusions about how this culture handles trials, their ideas of justice, and so on
- The points of the story: why we need ethnography
 - 1: this whole event, and the insights into Dou Donggo ideas of justice and conflict resolution, would not have been visible without participant observation
 - there would be no record of it
 - 2: if it *had* been noticed and recorded at all, it would have been misunderstood for lack of the detailed background that only ethnography would provide
 - 3: ethnography leads to comparing the ethnographer's culture with the one being studied, which gives insights into interesting ideas
 - what insights can we gain about the Dou Donggo culture from this case?
 - notion that justice is distinct from factual evidence or guilt
 - that punishment for what someone *might have* done is appropriate
 - that resolving conflict and tensions is more important than factual truth
 - even that "real" truth (intentions, attitudes, values) is more important than mere "actual" truth (actions actually completed)
 - that justice, truth, etc. are not universal values, even though they seem logically distinct and clear to us
 - thus perhaps they are not actually as clear, logical, and absolute as we think
 - at least we know that one society works fine with a different concept of justice
 - 4: doing ethnography consistently leads to "lucky" breaks like observing this event
 - and to having relationships such that someone will explain it
 - ethnography seems like an unsystematic, casual method, but it reliably leads to this kind of "random" discovery that casts light on how a culture works
- this case is another example of how anthropologists often seek to contrast...
 - what an event is *apparently* about
 - (did La Ninde assault Ina Mone, or not?)
 - and what it is "*really*" about
 - (respecting the rules of betrothal)
 - leads to the impression of cynicism discussed earlier
 - but does provide insights if well done
- Critiques of ethnography
 - romanticization, idealization
 - mostly in older and less well-done ethnographies
 - but always a problem to be avoided
 - **Ethnographic present:** style of writing in which observations are expressed in present tense
 - “The Duo Donggo do it this way.”
 - in fact, observations are always in the past
 - using the ethnographic present makes the studied culture seem fossilized, unchanging, outside of history

- Note that Richard Lee (*The Dobe Ju/'hoansi*) generally writes in the past tense, telling stories.
 - he is very conscious of the need to see the Ju/'hoansi as living, current participants in the world
 - whose culture reflects distant and recent historical, political, economic events
 - who will be affected by government policies, tourism, etc.
- **Essentializing**: tendency to ignore or downplay outside influences, history, change, "the modern"
 - to treat a culture as a fixed, unchanging feature of a group of people
 - using the ethnographic present tends to essentialize a culture
 - by implying that what the ethnographer observed in the field was still true when he or she wrote about it, and will still be true when you read what she or he wrote
- Ethnography is subjective
 - little can be done about this
 - restudies rare, even then after time has passed, often with different emphases and methods
 - it was once hoped that projects with groups of researchers, rather than just one, would be less subjective, but that has not clearly worked out
- asymmetry of power between the anthropologist and the people being studied; imperialism
 - the ethnographer is doing the writing, gets to pick the themes, interpretations, conclusions
 - which are inevitably colored by his/her own culture, relative wealth, education, politics, etc.
 - response: use unedited "voices"
 - let the people speak for themselves
 - about what they think is important
 - example: *Nisa*, by Nisa and Margorie Shostak
 - response: **reflexive ethnography**
 - includes more autobiography of ethnographer
 - writing in a way that puts the ethnographer in the picture
 - so you can't forget that you are getting a view through his/her eyes and biases
 - that was clearly Malinowski's intention in the extract you read for today, and the various photos he included in his books that include himself
 - Richard Lee does this well in *The Dobe Ju/'hoansi*
- some of these problems are being corrected as other cultures produce more anthropologists
 - who write about their own cultures
 - or who write about other cultures from points of view very different from ours
 - but this only works to some extent
 - recall that being an *outsider* is important to learning a culture, because outsiders do not already make that culture's assumptions
 - it is hard to study one's own culture well, because it is hard to recognize one's own assumptions

- Ethical issues: more on this later in the course
 - first, do no harm
 - often wise to use pseudonyms for people and places
 - or not? what if they want recognition?
 - what if they don't understand consequences in the way the anthropologist thinks he/she does?
 - maybe leave out dangerous subjects
 - maybe leave out subjects that could be used against the people being studied
 - when, if ever, is it OK to interfere?
 - how much advocacy is appropriate?
 - is it fair for the anthropologist to "profit" from knowledge provided by informants, or that might "belong" to the group?
 - as in advancing one's career, selling textbooks, gaining prestige
 - is adding to (western, literate, academic) knowledge enough, or do anthropologists owe more to the people they study, or to anyone else?
- Anthropology “makes the strange familiar, and the familiar strange” Spiro 1995, in Kottak 2002.
 - what does this mean?
 - makes the strange familiar: makes other cultures understandable
 - makes the familiar strange: makes us stop taking our own culture for granted, and look into our beliefs and behaviors more carefully