

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 7  
**Anthropological methods: Ethnography, part I**

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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
  - much 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 or condescending, 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 develops and used only in contact situations between people who do not otherwise share a language
      - usually fine for trade and basic tasks, but poor for communicating more subtle ideas
  - 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 are there to observe it
    - you can (and must) investigate immediately
    - while everyone is involved and talking about it
    - the reading by Monaghan and Just about the Dou Donggo also makes this point
  - the Trobrianders came to regard Malinowski as “part and parcel of their life, a necessary evil or nuisance, mitigated by donations of tobacco”
- 3. Make systematic observations, using methods such as the three he specifically discusses
  - 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 of observation 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 even think about or think it is necessary to explain
        - things that people may never have thought about and cannot 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 (obviously) 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 use this collection of verbatim statements to develop, check, and support interpretations of the peoples' ways of thinking about the 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 fireplace ashes
    - this is put in the mouth while you chew betel nut
    - betel nut is the 4<sup>th</sup> 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
    - and the authoritative voice of many later ethnographers
- 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 of ethnographic fieldwork 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 looking out 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 of time*
        - 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
    - must balance two kinds of activity
      - observing and taking notes

- actually participating in the activities for first-hand understanding
  - trying to write notes as quickly as possible afterwards
- 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, and/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 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 interviews with every person or family in the 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
      - this shows you the real culture (what they actually do, whether or not they realize it)
      - not just the ideal culture that people might tell you about
    - gender roles, family structure, childrearing practices, etc.

- relations between villages, clans, etc.
- provides background information that is essential to understanding people's interactions
  - as in the Monaghan and Just story about the Indonesian Dou Donggo la Ninde, who supposedly assaulted 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: visiting and talking with lots of people to collect this information sets up many opportunities for people to tell you other interesting things, not just things about kinship
- 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 all **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 anecdotes: individual stories, events, conversations)
      - but systematically so
      - in that many stories are collected and compared, looking for regularities among them
      - these qualitative methods add up to Malinowski's three methods of observation:
        - recording a "*corpus inscriptionum*"
        - recording the "*imponderabilia of actual life*"
        - collecting "*concrete, statistical documentation*"
          - resulting in lots of cases to compare, tally up, find patterns in
    - qualitative methods are not mainly numerical or statistically representative
    - but they often allow you to figure out the culturally constructed framework of meanings that make the culture understandable
- 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.
    - anthropologists sometimes 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
- if you don't do some qualitative research first, 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
- doing some 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 survey 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 in order to understand the impact of the new bridge
- recording ecological data like plants, animals, rainfall, etc.
  - these obviously influence what people do
- 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**: one strategy or approach to ethnography
  - 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.

- The ethnographic data that result from all this become the raw material for ethnology
  - **ethnology**: the comparative study of cultures
  - **comparative approach**: looking for and interpreting similarities and differences between cultures
    - in learning about one culture, the anthropologist inevitably compares it to
      - his or her own culture
      - other cultures
    - looking for regularities or patterns that might explain or highlight differences and similarities