

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 8
Anthropological methods: Ethnography, part II

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- An example of how ethnographic fieldwork works and pays off:
- 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 gets convicted, but didn't actually do it
 - everyone knows this, but still feels that justice was done
 - this contradiction between the ethnographer's concept of justice and that of the Dou Donggo suggests that there is something interesting to investigate here
 - To understand this story, 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 two 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
 - one of his sons was betrothed to la Fia
 - of course he did not want anyone flirting with his son's fiancé!
 - and another of his sons was betrothed to ina Mone's daughter
 - he did not want her to think he might tolerate his son cheating on her daughter

- Ina Mone was about to become his sister-in-law, and mother-in-law of one of his sons
- he had to stay on good terms with her
- so by chewing out la Ninde, ama Panci was reassuring la Mone that her daughter's betrothal to his other son was safe
- so everyone's motives made 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 know 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
 - even justice and truth are cultural constructs!
 - 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)
- this can look like cynicism
 - focusing on what seems like hypocrisy

- but it is actually a research method
 - investigating contradictions like this can lead to interesting insights if done well
- Critiques of ethnography
 - romanticizing or idealizing other cultures
 - 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 Wari’ eat their dead.”
 - in reality, observations always describe the past
 - using the ethnographic present makes the studied culture seem fossilized, unchanging, outside of history
 - implies that these strange other people do not, even cannot, change
 - Note that Richard Lee (*The Dobe Ju’hoansi*) avoids this by generally writing 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:** the tendency to treat a culture as a fixed, unchanging feature of a group of people
 - that is, something that is part of the permanent “essence” of the people
 - ignores or downplays the impact of outside influences, history, change, globalization, the modern world
 - sees other cultures as fixed, often as primitive relics
 - using the ethnographic present tends to essentialize a culture
 - by implying that what the ethnographer observed in the field is still true and will remain true
 - that the people are trapped in that culture
 - that they will never change
 - unlike us, who have the intelligence and knowledge to be changing constantly
 - this is not only factually incorrect
 - but also condescending
 - and ethnocentric
 - Ethnography is subjective
 - little can be done about this
 - restudies to check ethnographers’ findings rare
 - even when they are done, they are problematic
 - because they usually involve slightly different people and places
 - some time has passed, so things may have changed
 - it was once hoped that projects with groups of researchers, rather than just one, would be less subjective
 - but it is not clear that this really helped

- 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.
 - the ethnographer gets to present his understanding of the people he or she studies, and his or her views are generally respected
 - but the people may disagree
 - and they have little or no way of making their dissenting opinions heard
 - the people being studied may feel used
 - the ethnographer gets credit for his or her work documenting them
 - but they get little or nothing
 - 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 the reader can’t forget that this is a view through the author’s eyes, with the author’s biases
 - that was clearly Malinowski’s intention in the extract you read for today
 - especially the photos he included in his books that include himself or his equipment
 - he wasn’t just vain; he had a good reason to include himself in the book
 - 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 best to use pseudonyms for people and places
 - to protect them from embarrassment, retribution, etc.
 - or not? what if they want recognition?
 - what if your view of the risks is different from theirs?
 - maybe leave out dangerous subjects, or ones that could be used against the people

- When, if ever, is it OK to interfere?
 - We thought about this when we looked at the Warí, virginity testing in Turkey, and the practice of sati
- How much can you help or be their advocate without compromising your objectivity as an observer?
 - that is, without making people doubt the accuracy and fairness of your research?
- Is it fair for the anthropologist to “profit” from knowledge provided by informants, or knowledge that might “belong” to the group?
 - as in advancing one’s career, selling textbooks, gaining prestige
- Is adding to Western, academic knowledge enough, or do anthropologists owe more than that to the people they study?
 - or to anyone else, like taxpayers who fund research, or the anthropologists’ students?
- 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