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
− 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 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
  - 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 results from all this becomes 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

- 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
– 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?
− 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?

− 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