

## The Interpretation Theory of Cultures and Thicker Description Lens for Social Science Research in Pakistan: An Analytical Perspective of the *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)

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### Introduction

Current educational initiatives and social research in Pakistan are essentially concerned with policy making and quality debates through initiatives such as the Single National Curriculum (SNC) and participation in international assessment programs. There is a broad field for social and educational researchers to contribute to the said initiatives through methodological nuances as required for such works. For such seminal works, indigenous researchers in social science and education need to develop better methodological insights into the works that matter. One work of such a nature which this critical essay reviewed is *the Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), a seminal work in anthropology by Clifford Geertz. The book is now almost four decades old and has earned the reputation of the bible in modern anthropology. The reputation earned by the author for this work owes to the methodological intricacies presented for anthropological research, still relevant to qualitative social science research. This critical commentary on the *interpretation of cultures* (1973) focuses on the varied thematic strains discussed in different essays. This essay focuses on the author's 'interpretive theory of cultures' concerning 'thick description.' The essay is thus divided into multiple parts, which discuss different aspects of the seminal work of Geertz in *the Interpretation of Cultures*.

The book is a collection of essays written during participant observation for ethnographic research in different cultures. The author reports and analyzes multiple cultural incidents by introducing his famous term "multilayered thick description." Geertz's work is challenging to address under one or two headings being thematically diverse. The author's actual contribution lies in the interpretation of what he conceives to be cultural symbols. He is concerned with different cultural happenings in sociopolitical and religious settings.

### Overview of the *Interpretation of Cultures*

This part presents an overview of *the Interpretation of Cultures*, which introduces the main themes leading to the different thematic divisions of Geertz's work.

Structure: The book is thematically divided into five parts. On a general note, the author seems to approach all effective practices, such as religion, politics, ideology, rituals, philosophy, and psychological growth, as multiple cultural outcomes. He takes multiple themes from biology to psychology (Part II), religion to politics (Part III), revolutionary ideology to the politics of meanings (Part IV), and the 'deep play' of anthropology (Part V) as closely interpretable domains in cultural and social contexts.

The first part has only one essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." This chapter introduces the interpretive theory, which the author seems to practice in the book. Part II has two essays which mainly deal with man's intricate biological and psychological growth, mind, and culture. Part III discusses the mutual effects of religion, worldview, and rituals in different world cultures and societies. This part also marks a thematic and outward shift of the

author's earlier concept of thick description to the cultural outgrowth of religious phenomena. It is interesting to notice how the author demystifies the general notion of religion and presents these through different societies' social and cultural lenses. The political topping is yet another interpretative layer in this sociocultural interpretation of religious and sacred phenomena in different societies. IV's main object is ideology as a cultural system. Part V has three essays, of which the last two are anthropological descriptions of Bali. 'The Balinese Cockfight' is an intriguing story of cultural practice in a Balinese Village. This essay is also a good prototype of the author's 'thick description' and 'deep play.' It is also a good presentation of the author's interpretation of cultures through the meaning-making of cultural symbols.

### **Thematic Construction of the *Interpretation of Cultures***

The author looks for a thematic fabrication of multiple themes in the cultural outcome of different cultures. He brings different themes to the discussion, such as political, religious, cultural, social, and philosophical. It is intriguing to see how the author incorporates multiple themes into a single perspective of culture in a society. The themes considerably overlap and usually intensify each other, as seen in the whole work throughout. This part focuses explicitly on Geertz's religious, political, and social themes in *the interpretation of cultures*.

Geertz intricately tackles religious themes throughout the text. The author's contribution lies in the complex weaving of political and religious genres. Chapter 7, for example, narrates an example of a Javanese funeral. The author deliberately chose an uncommon incident and described the inner layer of political controversy in society. His 'thick description' of the political drive behind the ideological basis is significant. Geertz (1973) describes:

Whatever is the distinctive aim of each of them – the economic reconstruction, religious reform, artistic renaissance – it became submerged in diffuse political ideology; all the groups were increasingly concerned with one end as the prerequisite of all further social and cultural progress – freedom. By the time the revolution began in 1945, reformulation of ideas outside the political sphere had noticeably slackened, and most aspects of life had become intensely ideologized, a tendency that has continued into the post-war period. (p. 166)

This passage of the book presents analytical insights into a particular aspect of time, culture, and ideology. The particular time the author mentions has a significant politically-driven ideological stance, which is not easy to analyze until one utilizes 'thick description' to see the deeper play. Pakistan, for example, came into being in 1947 – around the very time as mentioned by the author in the cited passage, and the political drive of Pakistan ideology is quite comparable with Geertz's description' of Javanese patterns. Rituals significantly signify the political undercurrents of a culture. The two-nation theory in the subcontinent has many sources of differences along with the religious one. If present at the time of partition (1947) in the Indian subcontinent, an ethnographic researcher such as Geertz might have noticed the political drive behind the ideological patterns of the two-nation theory. The two-nation theory is based on the theme that two nations lived in the subcontinent: Hindus and Muslims. Therefore, the country should be divided between these two nations and not the single geographical label of *Hindustani* (the people of Hindustan/India) upon the return of the British from the subcontinent. The political drive behind the ideological basis is remarkable to read even though the people might share the same culture and region. Good anthropological works aim to read the complex patterns that contribute to a single culture at times.

The other significant contribution of Geertz is his tracing and description of unifying cultural elements with that of psychology. Contrary to what he did with the Javanese example in Chapter 7, in which he identified the different threads of contrasting views through the rituals, he worked over the Balinese Cockfight to understand the deeper symbolic meanings of cock and cockfighting in Bali. This time he is not digging down the rituals but working on the cultural aspect of a popular game to find out the complex psychological, cultural, and social intricacies of a particular cultural display is easy to see how Geertz uses his 'interpretive theory of cultures' here. His anthropological interpretations present the profound symbolic nature of human cultures. This chapter connects several themes discussed earlier, such as the concept of man, the human mind, and culture (essays included in Part II).

### **Interpretive Theory of Cultures**

The real credit of the author is his "interpretive theory of cultures." He uses culture to explore multiple aspects of human nature. It can be noticed that the author moves from the singular picture of "the man" in a biological and psychological set of cultures to the multiple expressions of good and evil, sorrow and happiness, ideologies, and celebration as driving cultural entities in different societies. Geertz playing around the interpretive nature of cultures is interesting to observe, especially when, in a sense, ethnography only gives a brief account and cannot be the whole picture of any culture or society. Human cultures and societies are hard to capture holistically because they are vast and complex. In this particular sense, Geertz's ethnographic fragments are very well dealt with on interpretive grounds, as can be seen especially in the case of the Balinese Cockfight.

Another contribution of Geertz in this regard is his ability to see the specific sides of human culture, which, though sprouted out of a common notion of humanity, give birth to unique human cultures, such as Javanese-ness in Java and the Balinese notion of Bali. Interestingly, coming out of the common human essence, multiple cultures and notions can be interpreted and understood generally on a psychological, economic, political, religious, and ideological basis, as Geertz makes sense of different cultural symbols in his book. In short, he moves from the common notion of human cultures – biological and philosophical human notions, to multiple cultural practices – funerals, plays of good and evil, cockfights in different human societies, which again are understood and explained on common human notions of ideological and psychological parameters.

### **Thick Description and Deep play**

Geertz makes practical use of the terms 'deep play' and 'thick description.' Although used in the first and last essays of the book, both terms complement each other and present a way of thinking that might generalize across multiple ways of thinking. It is not just about the 'birds' fight,' or 'rituals,' or sacred symbols, but connects these social phenomena as cultural and national identities. He educates his readers to see and look closely into things to make sense of these and practice meaning-making exercises. This book is the exceptional contribution of Geertz to anthropological studies. Thick description involves understanding multiple layers of human culture, and not only the surface description or presentation of foods and festivals.

### **Methodological perspectives in the book**

The book is not only an ethnographic record of cultural interpretations but shares some methodological insights too. The author shares the different events before, during, and after his ethnographic studies, which are sometimes missed in other ethnographic works. The accidental

entry into the Balinese community in the cockfighting episode is a remarkable example of methodological insight. Geertz's sharing of his techniques in getting 'access' and 'accuracy' towards the right story is a methodological share for new ethnographers and anthropologists, who may be unaware of the fundamental challenges of ethnographic works during the theoretical part of their studies. This part is a good description of not only ethnographic works but of the ethnographer himself. These essays present cultures in an appropriate context and setting for work and interpretation by the author.

### **Discussion**

Anthropologists' job is all about "telling a good story." Stories, however, have multiple edges, both good and bad, and a good anthropologist is aware of both. Readers thoroughly enjoy Geertz's 'good stories' over all these years, through the making and remaking of his stories to understand and connect the content with their personal experiences. Geertz discussed multiple thought-provoking topics shared earlier in this essay. Another seminal notion is the concept of 'accuracy' in the ethnographic interpretation. When coupled with the selected choice of incidents by the ethnographers for presentation and interpretation, this concept opens up the intricate issue of whose interpretation should be valued and why. As one may confess, it is hard to make sense of human diversity through these particular, at times, single selections by the ethnographers.

There is a fascinating relevance of Geertz's discussion of religious rationalism to the recent world debates. It is phenomenal to note that he brought up religious rationalism in multiple segments of society from religious, cultural, and thematic aspects. His description of the Balinese religion in a predominantly Muslim sea is noteworthy in this connection (p. 188). There is a close kinship with the post 9/11 world of war against terrorism closely defined in liaison with different religious traditions within the bounds of western political hegemony. The point here is that the world is still looking for the peaceful coexistence of different human clans derived from different religious traditions. The closing of Chapter 7 is significant when read in a backward connection of these first two decades of this century concerning Geertz's work and his account of new intellectual rationalism towards religion in *the Interpretation of Cultures*. The closing remarks of Geertz of his essay 'Internal Conversion in contemporary Bali' have some insight into the present state of world affairs:

The regenerative potential of a triangular alliance of troubled youth threatened aristocrats, and aroused priests should not be underestimated. Today in Bali, some of the same social and intellectual processes which gave rise to the fundamental religious transformations of world history seem to be at least well begun (p. 189).

To conclude, Geertz's work is seminal from many aspects, primarily in the context of a time when it was produced (1973). He is an interpretivist and talks about the meanings of different gestures and postures. Sensemaking is essential for him, as seen in connection with the winking and twitching incident narrated in the first chapter. Additionally, a thick description explains the context in which things are happening. His work is context-specific and presents meanings in a particular social context that can only be understood through social interactions. *The interpretation of Cultures* describes the multiple layers and practices that play out in different cultures and highlight those patterns that interplay in ethnographic studies.

### **References**

Geertz, C. (1973). *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.