

Any suggestions who might
be interested in this ??

ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK: SOME ASPECTS OF THE
ORGANISATION OF FIELDWORK DATA

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In this paper we want to take a look at the nature of ethnographic practices to see if it is possible to find ways of examining them in their own right.¹ In doing this it will be our intention to treat ethnographic practices as discrete phenomena, as ways of making and presenting findings, and not merely as 'writing up the data', the necessary grind after the real, the important, the proper, the sociological work has been done 'in the field'. The question we want to ask concerns the sociological interest that might be generated in ethnographic practices. What kind of socially organised activity is ethnography? What does the 'work' of ethnography consist in?² Setting up our interest in this way might appear to give us several unmanageable problems, not the least of which being how to move from the finished product, the published report, to the invisible process of collecting, collating, organising, ignoring, listing and labelling all the notes, tapes, photographs, reminiscences, stories and memories that make up the 'fieldwork experience'. Since these processes are prior to the 'writing up', or so the argument might run, and since they are, anyway, intuitive, it might appear that the only way to study the practice of ethnography is to engage in that most narcissistic of exercises, namely fieldwork on fieldworkers.

But this is to misconstrue the problem. Or rather, it is to construe it in a most partial and limited way. Proposing that, in order to study ethnography, it is necessary to look at fieldwork and analytic procedures as separate entities is a little like saying that appreciation of cooking can only be obtained by looking at the ways that ingredients are assembled. Whereas, of course, we would all agree that one of the prominent proofs of the cooking is in the eating of the pudding. What

ethnography is can be identified with its end product. What this means is that we can treat the ethnographic report as an account of the work that went into its production. The organisation of the account displays the work that went into its production. One has only to spend a little time trying to study fieldwork procedures to realise that the one thing that is never available for investigation is the mysterious business of understanding some culture, some organisation, some activities in a setting. All that are ever available are the routine and practical matters of finding somewhere to stand and someone to talk to, of not imposing too much and not getting in the way. And yet, this essential practicality of fieldwork is not pointed out by researchers, but rendered somehow invisible alongside the questions of the establishment of rapport, empathy, verstehen and the need to obtain emic/etic understandings, insider/outsider knowledge. We suspect that it is this constant transformation of the practical into the ineffable, this constant theorising of research that has contributed to the disarray that ethnography appears to be in to-day.³

The net result of posing practical problems in theoretical terms is the engineering of a degree of 'theoretical angst' and the perpetual search for some new theory, some new paradigm, hermeneutic or whatever which will solve once and for all, and in an in-principled way, all of the practical problems which field researchers face. Such theoretical aspirations conceive the major problem for ethnography to be the delineation of some program, some set of instructions, some directives on how to arrive at 'proper' ethnographic activities. We want to get away from all this prescriptivism concerning what proper ethnography ought to look like. We want to see exactly what ethnographic practices are made available in ethnographic accounts. We will do this by considering one particular piece, Clifford Geertz' description of

Balinese cockfighting,⁴ to see which practices can be discerned there. Finally, we will sketch some of the general features of a logic to ethnographic practice which conforms, we think, to something akin to the maxims that Paul Grice once thought provided the logic of conversation.⁵

II

At the end of what is a marvellous description of Balinese cock-fighting, its place in Balinese culture, the nature of gambling that takes place at fights, and the significance of gambling in the Balinese's relentless pursuit of status, Geertz steps back and reviews his presentation in these words:

"In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his ~~temperament~~ and his society's temper at the same time. Or, more exactly, he forms and discovers a particular facet of them. Not only are there a great many other cultural texts providing commentary on status hierarchy and self regard in Bali, but there are a great many other critical sectors of Balinese life besides the stratificatory and antagonistic that receive such commentary."

(Geertz, 1973, pp. 451-452).

A little later on, he says that it appears to him that

"The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong."

(*Ibid.*, p. 452)

In this lovely image, Geertz captures the relationship between native and observer descriptions. Such descriptions are, says Geertz, *readings of culture*. We want to take up this idea of a hermeneutic for culture but not with the intention of taking issue of the way it encapsulates ethnographic work, for that gloss will do just as well as any other. In any case, one would have to be very bold to want to

dispute with an acknowledged master of the form about his conception of it. It really does not matter for our present purposes whether Geertz' conception of ethnography is a good one or not. It just happens to be his view. What is important is that on the basis of it, he writes superb ethnographies. What we want to do is take Geertz' reading as the phenomenon for study to see how he makes plain, plausible, certain and unquestionable (i.e. 'factual') his reading of Balinese life. In so doing we shall try to show that this social construction of factuality⁶ is accomplished via a technical mastery of ethnography story telling. What is, for Geertz, a reading of culture we shall treat as a story about culture. To speak for a moment in Geertz' own terms. He sees his work as reading the story of Balinese life from the text of their activities. We will show what presenting that reading is constituted by and that, just like the writing of commentaries on scriptural texts, although it may appear an arcane activity, it is nonetheless a practical one as well. We are, then, concerned with what MacHoul (1980) talks of as the production of a "documentary reality", although we shall not be examining reading in exactly the same way as he does.

But, to begin at the beginning; or rather, at the end. Geertz arrives at the following conclusion about cockfighting:

"What....the cockfight talks most forcibly about is status relationships, and what it says about them is that they are matters of life and death. That prestige is a profoundly serious business is apparent everywhere, one looks in Bali - in the village, the family, the economy, the state. A peculiar fusion of Polynesian title ranks and hindu castes, the hierarchy of pride is the moral backbone of society. But only in the cockfight are the sentiments upon which that hierarchy rests revealed in their natural colours. Enveloped elsewhere in a haze of etiquette, a thick cloud of euphemism and ceremony, gesture and allusion, they are here expressed in only the thinnest disguise of an animal mask, a mask which in fact demonstrates them far more effectively that it conceals them. Jealousy is as much a part of Bali as poise, envy as grace, brutality as charm; but without the

cockfight the Balinese would have a much less certain understanding of them, which is, presumably, why they value it so highly."

(*Ibid.*, p. 447)

Just before this, Geertz has suggested that

"What makes Balinese cockfighting deep thus is not money in itself but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight. Psychologically an Aesopian representation of the ideal/demonic, rather than narcissistic, male self, sociologically it is an equally Aesopian representation of the complex fields of tension set up, by the controlled, muted, ceremonial, but for all that, deeply felt, interaction of those selves in the context of everyday life."

(*Ibid.*, p. 436)

Geertz' reading, then, relates cockfighting, its participants, its rituals and above all its gambling, to a pervasive feature of Balinese life, the search for status, honour and prestige within an unchanging and inflexible stratification system. Although there is always competition between individuals, any change can only affect marginal matters. When reviewed from the point of view of the system as a whole, these marginal changes are insignificant. When seen from the point of view of the individuals involved, they are crucial. It is this paradox, this tension, that Geertz' ethnography seeks to resolve. What he does is show how cockfighting can be seen as status competition. And it is this that makes it quintessentially Balinesian. All of the details and magnificent descriptions of fights and who goes to them, what happens and where they take place, what kinds of gambling and what strategies are used can all be treated as if they were organised to make that theme available to the reader. Without saying so in so many words, Geertz uses them to say what his theme is. This is *not* a logical point. We are not saying that Geertz' account rests on hidden presumptions or that he fails to give his arguments any

decent defence. What we are saying is that the details of the ethnography provide for their own theme. Without that theme they would not constitute a story. Geertz' ethnographic account of cockfighting in Bali is, then, a *self explicating reading*.

It could be argued that the end product of ethnographic description tends to be a conception of culture as monolith. Instead of proceeding *inductively* to discover culture in daily life, investigators opt to study culture via daily life. Thus there emerges an *a priori* supposition that lying behind daily life is a package of ideas, a framework of meaning, a *weltanschauung*, a consensus of norms and values which is expressed in ordinary activities. Those activities are treated as the bearers of this culture. On this view, the work of ethnography most definitely consists in making observations, notes, tapes, interviews, i.e. collecting data and then writing up these notes etc. as the representatives of culture. If you suspend the culture as monolith supposition, it is possible to conceive ethnographic work not as 'fieldwork' and the 'capturing of the native's point of view' but as the working up and working out of the data in the account. Making matters plain, it becomes possible to ask questions such as 'Why is cockfighting chosen to represent Balinese culture when anything would do?', 'Why do we have this story in this form now?', 'Why is it told in the way it is?', 'How is it told?'. To get our discussion underway we will borrow a couple of the leading ideas of Harvey Sacks on the organisation of stories, namely recipient design and co-selection of descriptors.⁷ With these two it should be possible to lay bare some of the features of ethnographic work as story telling.

A Reading as Self Explicating and Self Organising

The first thing to notice is the format of Geertz' paper. It is not a seminar performance with slides, diagrams, jokes, asides and

reminiscences to organise the flow. It is a formal, that is, written out and written up, paper. The ease of the style should not lull us into ignoring its construction. The format of the paper is both an argument and a performance. Once Geertz captures his audience, the reader, he can tell his story.

Fairly obviously the first thing that has to be established is the significance of cockfighting, that is, that the story is one worth the telling. But, on this occasion that is the outcome, the point, of the story, namely the role of cockfighting in Balinese cultural life. It is only *after* he has presented the ethnographic detail that Geertz can feel free to suggest about gambling.

"It is, in any case, this formal assymetry between balanced center bets and unbalanced side ones that poses the critical analytic problem for a theory which sees cockfight wagering as the link connecting the fight to the wider world of Balinese culture."

(*Ibid.*, p. 429)

The point is that reading Geertz' paper does not mean working through his account back to front. Nor is the paper presented as if that was a standard reading procedure. The reader does not have to have the later solution to see why cockfighting is *now* an important, acceptable or significant analytic problem. Nor does he have to have anything more than an outline of what the solution is going to look like. Consequently, as the story unfolds, so it has to establish the recognisability of the adequacy of its formulation of ethnographic problems and what adequate solutions to them will be like. The reader is not invited to read Geertz' descriptions, think about ethnographic practices *and then* decide on the plausibility or otherwise of his account. That plausibility is the outcome of that account's organisation. Indeed, analysing Geertz' accounts, for whatever reasons, it is necessary to detach oneself from the flow. Hence Geertz' story is

both self organising and self explicating, and bringing it off, telling the story, is very much a technical matter.

(a) 'Getting the Floor' by Establishing the Importance of Cockfights

One thing we must always keep to the forefront of this discussion is whom Geertz is writing for, what his audience is. For the most part these will be fellow professionals; ethnographers and field researchers, sociologists and anthropologists. All of these share an awareness of, or at least a knowledge of, what is known as 'the problem of access'. They will know from their own experience or from others that 'getting in', 'getting started', 'being accepted' is the first and the most important hurdle to be overcome in the study of an alien culture. Geertz builds his preface to his story out of just this problem. He starts with what he shares with his audience and by trading off this known-in-common problem, he locates the significance of cockfights for him. It was because of a cockfight and its aftermath that he became accepted in the Balinese village he studied. There are two important aspects to this. Cockfights have a *contingent* significance for Geertz. It was sheer chance that they came to have the personalised fieldwork relevance they do for him. But although they are merely contingent for him, they express what fieldworkers will recognise as important for them all, namely the 'breakthrough'. This personalised relevance is to be contrasted with the cultural significance that the cockfights have for the 'Balinese way of life'.

"It gave me the kind of immediate inside-view grasp of an aspect of 'peasant mentality' that anthropologists not fortunate enough to flee headlong with their subjects from armed authorities do not get. And, perhaps most important of all, for other things might have come in other ways, it put me very quickly onto a combination emotional explosion, status war, and philosophical drama of central significance to the society whose inner nature I desired to understand."

(*Ibid.*, p. 417)

It was purely by chance that Geertz stumbled on an essential feature of Balinese life. As they say of themselves, the Balinese are 'cock crazy'. This surprise discovery works as a dramatic device, one that achieves the peculiar *ahistoricity* of the event. As the first significant cockfight that Geertz encountered, he can leave out of all of the account the many other fights that he heard about, attended, prior to this one. As the first significant one he watched, it is placed first in the temporal construction of his account.

Having used this fieldwork significance of the cockfight to get the floor so to speak, Geertz elaborates that significance into the centrality of cockfighting in Balinese life. This importance is to be seen in the fact that the Balinese themselves recognise the way that the organisation of fighting expressed the structure of society. In this way, Geertz presents an apparent coincidence of lay and professional ethnographies. By so doing he manages to make it look as if the anthropologist and the native are *reading the same story*.

"In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosed animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence and death."

(*Ibid.*, p. 421)

(b) 'Telling the Tale' Through the Participants, the Fights and Gambling

The story of Balinese cockfighting is the way that Geertz thematizes the ethnographic detail he has to hand. The organisation of fights, the participants and the gambling are seen as problems, as tasks to be solved. The solutions consist in a rationalisation of the detail, which at each stage, enables the understanding of activities by the location of a situated logic. Two features of the procedure are discernable immediately, (i) the surprise order of exposition and (ii) the puzzle-solution format.

- (i) The surprise order of exposition: we have already discussed indirectly some features of this in the section on the story preface. Now it is intimately connected to the solution-puzzle format. The solution is produced *at the end* as the dénouement, the surprising resolution of apparent contradictions. The baffling and apparently paradoxical features of the fights are documented in the stark contrast between the poise, elegance and serenity of most of Balinese life and the animality, aggression and viciousness of the fights. Geertz presents this as a fundamental problem for the comprehension of Balinese society. But, having provided the puzzle, assembled all the disconcertingly contradictory evidence, clues and elements, he produces his way out.

"Today, a few special occasions aside the newer rectitude makes so open a statement of the connection between the excitements of collective life and those of blood sport impossible, but, less directly expressed, the connection itself remains intimate and intact. To expose it, however, it is necessary to turn to the aspect of cockfighting around which all the others pivot, and through which they gain their force, an aspect I have thus far studiously ignored. I mean, of course, the gambling."

(*Ibid.*, p. 425)

- (ii) Puzzle-solution: if the puzzle is how to locate cockfighting within the overall context of Balinese society, the solution is to see it as *deep play*. This idea allows Geertz to give an exposition of gambling that both collects all the central features of Balinese life as well as giving them a rationality, a logical coherence. The apparent illogicality of Balinese cockfighting is discounted and becomes thoroughly understandable and explicable once it is construed as deep play. The steps from the introduction of the candidate solution of the puzzle

to the final fitting out of it as a viable solution to the puzzle of cockfighting are very quickly taken. They consist in

- (1) The encapsulation of deep play as irrational on strict Bethamite utilitarian grounds:

"They are both in over their heads. Having come together in search of pleasure, they have entered into a relationship that will bring the participants when considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasure."

- (2) The formulation of cockfighting as a moral not utilitarian exercise:

"....the explanation lies in the fact that in such play, money is less a measure of utility, had or expected, then it is a symbol of moral import, perceived or imposed."

- (3) The casting of net rewards in an appraisive drama which makes them socially significant:

"In deep ones (i.e. play) where amounts of money are great, much more is at stake than material gain: namely esteem, honour, dignity, respect - in a word, though in Bali a profoundly freighted word, status."

(all quotations, *Ibid.*, p. 433)

Once this order of solution can be substantiated for the cockfighting puzzle, it is but a simple move to establish the centrality of status and hence the reproduction of the theme. At several points in the narrative Geertz brings us back to the significance of status for the Balinese (cf quotations above on p. 4 and p. 5). What is arrived at in the end is exactly what we knew all along we would get viz. the representative expressive character of cockfighting for Balinese culture. At each stage, whatever resources have been introduced into the narrative have been used for this purpose. There is no redundancy: there are

no clues left over and no clues left out. All of the cultural artefacts have been accounted for. In a very strong sense culture appears in Geertz' account as both product and premiss. It is both the outcome of what they do and is precisely what enables them to do it. Each item in the account has been introduced for the fit that it can be shown to have with the logic of Balinese society. Indeed, the account shows them to demonstrate that logic, that is, it shows the nature of Balinese culture. Such a demonstration is exactly what ethnographers expect from an ethnographic account. In short, Geertz' readers are given the reading that they can understand: the story they will recognise.

III

At this point, we would like to stop and move back a little from the discussion so far, so that we can locate it in a more general framework. From the examination of Geertz' work, it appears that ethnography consists in the transforming of the confused, accidental and contingent nature of events as they occurred to and in front of the researcher into a logical expression of some social organisation. This transformation achieves a *post hoc* reconstruction or 'reading' of the events in question. Such a 'reading' is displayed in the writing up of the ethnographic report. The social organisation which is 'discovered' or 'uncovered' in this way is held to exhibit the culture, the framework of meaning, the *weltanschauung* of the actors who inhabit the setting. Such a transformation is achieved by what we like to think of as the provision of a 'contextual shapeliness' to events within the account. It is through this shapeliness that the 'data' is made available and hence the logical character of the culture being described

is provided. The obvious implication of this view of ethnographic practice is that any attempt to specify sets of programmatic principles for how ethnography should be carried out, or to lay down criteria for how data are to be defined and described, is likely in the end to be unsatisfactory. This is because such principles and criteria are expressly designed to forge strong connections between the descriptions that can be licensed and "what really happened", "what was going on". And yet, as we have seen in our examination of Geertz' paper, what ethnographies are composed of is descriptions of data that are recognisable, plausible, adequate and satisfactory. The task is not, therefore, to see if ways can be found to ensure that descriptions fit "what really went on" but to ask how it is that "what really went on" is what the descriptions tell us. How are the facts of the matter, unarguably, unassailably made available in the descriptions that we give? In short, what is the organisation of the methodical procedures which ethnographers use?

We are not now in a position to spread out the detailed structure of this organisation in front of you, although in our discussion of the Geertz example we have indicated some of the elements of which it is composed. To do that will require a great deal more attention to be paid to what could be termed "the sociological attitude" as an empirically observable phenomenon.⁸ But we have made a start. And, from these initial enquiries it is possible to sketch a general outline of what that organisation might be like. As we suggested at the beginning of this paper, we feel that it may have a lot in common with the maxims that Paul Grice once set out for the logic of conversation.

It might be best if we go back to the proposition that a reading of a culture can be treated as self explicating. This can be taken as implying that any activity such as giving a reading can be seen as

relying on its own resources for the sense that it makes. It is a reading that is written to be read. And hence it is recipient designed. It is designed, that is, so that some particular sense can be made. It is this that we mean by the notion of a practice of writing for a reading. Geertz suggests that ethnography is the reading of a culture. We have been extending this by further suggesting that any such reading can be examined for the ways that it too is designed. A battery of questions then becomes available to anyone interested in the socially organised character of these writing practices. "How was this ethnography done on this occasion as recognisable ethnography?", and "What is the logic of its descriptive practices?" are just two that spring to mind.

Given the viability of this treatment of ethnographies as designed readings, one obvious conclusion that we can draw is that such writing and reading can be seen as co-operative activity, and as oriented to as such by those that co-participate in it. Readers treat ethnographies as designed for them. It was this attitude of co-operativeness that formed the cornerstone of Grice's logic for conversation. Having posited conversation as a co-operative activity, Grice proceeded to spell out some of the maxims that co-participants to conversation would have to observe in order to maintain its recognisable features. These maxims might be re-shaped somewhat to capture what might be thought of as the design features of ethnographies. Using the terms that we have employed in our discussion so far, the following is a first attempt to formulate such a list.

- (1) Make sure to fit data to the story being told.
- (2) Provide for the sense of the description and the detail being provided within the descriptions themselves.
- (3) Make sure that the story unfolds in a sequential and orderly

manner.

- (4) Use the simplest and most economic story-telling format possible.

Such a set of design features might be matched to a complementary collection of readers' maxims instructing the reader to assume that features (1) through (4) are observed. The descriptive practices which we have designated as 'getting the floor', 'telling the tale' and 'puzzle-solution format' can all be seen to incorporate such a set of design features. In the case of Geertz, what 'getting the floor' does is to establish the recognisability of the story as the contradictory and baffling nature of cockfighting in Bali by grounding its comprehension in a commonplace fieldwork problem. What is, after all, simply a sub-plot eventually becomes relevant to the solution provided for the puzzle in that it locates the place where the problems of both fieldwork and understanding a cultural activity *and their solutions* can be displayed. The practices described as 'telling the tale' provide for the sequentiality of the descriptions given. The accounts of the preparations, the activities engaged in, all *unfold* the puzzle, the apparent contradiction between the poise and serenity of the rest of Balinese life and the anxiety and aggression of cockfighting. Finally, in conceiving of cockfighting as a puzzle to be solved in the ethnography, Geertz uses a strikingly simple organisational format for the structure of his account. All he has to do is describe the puzzle and then solve it. He does this by building up step by step all the contradictions inherent in cockfighting and then resolving them via the rationalisation of 'deep play'. Such a puzzle-solution format is both simple and highly effective. In summary, then, Geertz' ethnographic practices can be seen as

- (a) assuming that ethnography is a co-operative activity
- and
- (b) using the simplest possible forms.

Two features which are exactly the same as those on which Grice built his logic for conversation.

Perhaps we should conclude by considering, briefly, some of the difficulties associated with the adoption of a Gricean type logic. The most important of these is precisely that it is a logic. Using it to describe the organisational structure of an activity such as ethnography tends to overcognitivise the activity concerned. It leads to the conceptualisation of such an activity in proceduralised or algorithmic terms. Activities become formulated in a step by step manner which presents their *logical* character but which perforce disattends to the specifics of any particular instance in that each case comes to be treated as an instance of the generalised form. Any descriptions that are given are offered as types of gambling, or gamblers, or fights and not as descriptions of individual instances. By so reducing the particularised and embodied nature of activities, such descriptions present activities in cognitive or rationalised terms. The proceduralised logic separates the actor from his activities in the description but allows the ethnographer to invoke the notion of culture as a means of re-uniting them. Types of actor, types of action and their typical courses can be read off from the programmatic nature of culture.

These tendencies to cognitivisation and proceduralisation of activities may very well turn out to be characteristic of all sociological descriptions. It remains an open question whether they are necessarily so. This raises the issue of whether the avowed sociological and ethnographic goal of 'the preservation of naturalness' can ever be achieved by the use of such constructivist practices, and

whether its adoption is not really, after all, just another example of methodological tokenism. But that is a very different bag of tricks and deserves a paper all to itself.⁹

Footnotes

1. In two other closely related papers, we have set out a general account of the nature of our interest in sociological work and have detailed one more example of its practice. Cf. 'Sociological Work: some procedures sociologists use for organising phenomena' and 'Analytic Work: some procedures used in the organisation of conversational data'.
2. This approach is derived from that first worked out by Harold Garfinkel and exhibited in much of the work of his students. See for example, Garfinkel (1967), Lynch (1977) and Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston (1981).
3. For a somewhat more leisurely treatment of these matters, Cf. Anderson and Sharrock (1981).
4. Cf. Geertz (1973).
5. Grice (1975).
6. We owe this formulation to our colleague David Melling.
7. This analysis has now been published as Sacks (1978).
8. This refers, then, to a project of work in hand, some of which has been reported in 'An Investigation into the Use of Audio-Visual Materials in Sociology'. An SSRC Research Report by W.W. Sharrock.
9. Some thoughts on this matter are contained in a forthcoming paper to be entitled 'Methodological Tokenism or "Are Good Intentions Enough?"'.

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