

**Fred Myers (1986) once described his anthropological study of the Pintupi as ‘a result of the movement back and forth between concept and evidence’. Taking two or three of the ethnographic studies discussed in lectures and tutorials (see your Part 1 reading list), show how an anthropologist works to better understand situations they encounter in their field work (ethnographic evidence) by both bouncing off earlier ideas and/or developing new concepts to explore and understand their ethnography.**

This essay will show that anthropologists build on earlier ideas to develop new concepts to explore and understand their ethnography by explaining the roots of the earlier ideas and the need and function of new ideas. The development of Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” from functionalism and the application of Geertz’s concept by Fred Myers will be discussed in detail.

In anthropology, functionalism is the concept where every aspect of a society or culture has a reason and meaning. In “The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis”, Bronislaw Malinowski explains that functionalism is “the theory of transformation of organic- that is, individual- needs into derived cultural necessities and imperatives.” (Malinowski 1939:962) Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown on the other hand, places a higher emphasis on the structure of the society where “standardised mode of activity or mode of thought” exists because of the social structure. (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:10) The functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown is known as structural functionalism. In both cases, the general concept of functional analysis is that every aspect of a culture exists for the benefit of either the individual or the structure of the society.

However, in “Ritual and Social Change”, Clifford Geertz criticises functionalism as it implies that a society or culture will never change and that society and culture will always remain in an equilibrium. By this functionalist definition, religion should maintain harmony in a system. (Geertz 1973:143) Geertz puts forward the example of Paidjan’s funeral to demonstrate that the functionalist view of a system did not cope with a change of religion and hence culture in this particular system, and therefore it is inappropriate to generalise using just functional analysis.

The reason that Geertz does not believe functionalism caters for change “lies in its failure to treat sociological and cultural processes on equal terms.” (Geertz 1973:143) That is, society and culture are treated as interchangeable terms. Society is the actual relationship between people of an organisation, while a culture is the symbols, meanings and religion of the people in an organisation. If one abnormally changes without the other, “discontinuities” occur which Geertz argues to be the “driving force in change.” (Geertz 1973:144)

Geertz believes that “the concept of culture...is essentially a semiotic one” and demonstrates that there are a myriad of ways of interpreting a symbol of communication such as a wink. (Geertz 1973:5-6) To properly understand culture, Geertz suggests that “thick descriptions” be used in ethnographies. (Geertz 1973:7) Thick descriptions are detailed, thorough and multi-layered observational accounts of the rituals performed in a culture. Described as “winks upon winks upon winks”, thick description allows the anthropologist to uncover the meaning behind the rituals. (Geertz 1973:7)

With that in mind, Geertz writes of the funeral of Paidjan with thick description to understand the society and culture separately. In examining the society and culture independently, Geertz can then understand which aspect of the system has changed, and in turn understand what caused the discontinuity within the system. In this case, the culture of Modjokuto has changed, with the people divided by changes to the political (and religious) beliefs on a national scale. On the local scale however, the community of the kampong has not changed much, as both the santris and abangans participate in the slametan.

Other anthropologists use Geertz's concept of thick description. In his study of the Pintupi Aborigines of the Australian Western Desert, Fred Myers notes that the previous studies of the Pintupi have either been hindered by western perceptions that the Pintupi are just hunter-gatherers and thus lack culture, or that their patrilineal, patrilocal bands are structured around resources. (Myers 1982:30) It cannot be said that the Pintupi lack culture, since culture is a system of symbols for communication. For example, if a person wanted to join a Pintupi camp, he or she would have to light a fire some distance away from the camp and wait for the camp members to identify him or her. (Myers 1982:39) This is the Western equivalence of 'knocking at the door' to announce one's entry. It is also not true that the Pintupi bands are structured around resources, as each Pintupi moves around in a seemingly random pattern with people not necessarily blood related. Both assumptions about the Pintupi are not true; therefore, there is a need for a new method of understanding the Pintupi.

To comprehend the Pintupi situation, Myers uses the concept of “thick description” in his ethnography, as introduced by Geertz. In his thick description, Myers uses the account of “Shorty Lungkata” as an example of the typical life history of a Pintupi male, highlighting how Shorty considered his “one countrymen” to be the people he has travelled, lived, or has performed rituals with and kin. (Myers 1982:34) The confusion of earlier studies caused by the apparent lack of boundaries is explained as “one countrymen” should share resources. The concept of ownership does exist however, and is described as the right to be asked. (Myers 1982:39) In this way, Myers uses Geertz’s earlier concept of thick description to help understand the idea that each Pintupi’s “one countrymen” is different, that bands are not necessarily formed around kin, and to explain the lack of boundaries, concepts that previous studies have failed to recognise.

Geertz works to better understand the Modjokuto problem by first applying earlier ideas to prove that they do not apply to the particular situation. Having proved the paradox, Geertz then develops the concept of “thick description” to understand the discontinuities between society and culture. This concept is then used by Myers to understand the Pintupi people after finding that previous research on the Pintupi do not match up to the ethnographic evidence. If Geertz and Myers can be considered a sample of the wider population of anthropologists, then it is shown that anthropologists work to better understand situations they encounter in their field work by bouncing both off earlier ideas and developing new concepts to explore and understand their ethnography.

## **Bibliography**

Geertz, Clifford (1973) "Ritual and Social Change". in *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books Inc.

Geertz, Clifford (1973) "Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture". in *Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books Inc.

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1939) "The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis" in *American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 44, No. 6*. [On-line]  
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9602%28193905%2944%3A6%3C938%3ATGATII%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2003.

Myers, Fred 1998 (1982) "Always Ask: Resource Use and Land Ownership among Pintupi Aborigines of the Australian Western desert". in W E Edwards (ed) *Traditional Aboriginal Society*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan

Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred Reginald (1940) "On Social Structure." in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 70, No. 1*. [On-line]  
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0307-3114%281940%2970%3A1%3C1%3AOSS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2003