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Following the Trail: Interpretation of Texts in Anthropology

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Introduction

Prior to 1920s anthropologists like James Prichard relied on memoirs, travelogues, and diaries written by missionaries and administrators, working in remote areas of Asia, Africa, Latin America, etc. or the data collected by trained investigators (some of them subsequently became anthropologists) for the construction of their theories. The ethnographic data on some of the more remote and 'primitive' or 'savage' societies were collected on the basis of standardized questionnaires. The data so collected were placed in their proper order and interpreted by senior anthropologists back home whose main concern was the origin and evolution of mankind. For them studies on 'primitive' societies provided the benchmark to feel proud that theirs was the most evolved society.

Two separate categories of people were involved in the business of collecting ethnographic data and interpretation of culture: one group was represented by the so-called collectors whose job was merely to collect the data and record their observations, and the other category comprised of the so-called experts who classified and interpreted the raw data collected by the former. In the words of Frazer, who himself was one such prominent 'expert':

> Every observer of a savage or barbarous people should describe it exactly as if no other people existed on the face of the earth. The business of comparison is not for him, at least not for him in the capacity of observer; if he desires to draw comparisons with other

> peoples, as he is of course at liberty to do, he should keep his comparisons strictly apart from his observations; the mixture of the two is, if not absolutely fatal, at least a great impediment to the utility of both (Frazer 1931).

This divide between the collectors and interpreters was, however, not only unequal but also unreal. The former category of people was governed in carrying out their menial job by categories and theories the latter had offered them. Often the interaction between the two extended beyond the task of mere collection of raw data to the organization of the report and at times even publication of the same by the collectors.

The other false divide that characterized early anthropology was between what we call 'mere description' and 'interpretation'. It is often claimed in anthropological writings that prior to 1920s the ethnographic monographs were highly, if not purely, descriptive. The understanding that theoretical underpinnings have been read into such monographs only recently is certainly not correct, for the nineteenth century ethnography was heavily influenced by evolutionary theories. However, the 1920s were quite significant in the history of anthropology in the sense that interest in evolution of mankind began to be replaced by the interest in understanding contemporary society and culture and rigorous fieldwork standards were set by Malinowski. This created an ideal atmosphere for functional and structural theories to thrive in anthropology and these theories began to inform much of the ethnographic writings since then. This however should not mean that there could be interpretation without description or description without some interpretation. Description, like interpretation, is not only always partial and selective but also actually inseparable from the latter because one can describe only what makes sense; what is incomprehensible is indescribable. Hence, as Clifford rightly points out, the ethnographic truths are partial and incomplete. It is a truism that we do not see everything that we look at or hear. We see and hear what we have been trained to see and hear. So our descriptions and interpretations of what we see or hear are our own constructions of the world around us, and simultaneously not so.

From Clifford Geertz to James Clifford

Between *The Interpretation of Cultures* by Clifford Geertz and *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* edited by James Clifford and George Marcus there is a gap of just 12 years, but the

development in theory and methodology of interpretation of texts in anthropology during this period has been phenomenal. At first glance the travel from the former to the latter may even be posited as a change from modernism to post-modernism, although bracketing either of them is extremely difficult. Jean-Paul Dumont, a leading deconstructionist, observes: "*Writing Culture* is the most thorough and penetrating interpretation to date of ethnography as literature. . ." Although the relationship between Geertz and Clifford is quite complex, the former has considerably influenced the writing of the latter. Clifford's work may be described as a respectful critique of Geertz. The present paper attempts to explore the critical space each occupies, while reading their works through conflicts of interpretations.

Clifford Geertz is clearly one of the first anthropologists, who paid attention to the theory and methodology of interpretation of texts in anthropology. To him, the purpose of theory is not to predict, as believed by some modernist anthropologists, but to serve as an aid to ethnographic interpretation, to point out what is important and what is not, and to show how different things are related to each other. We all know that theory or law provides the advantage of reading connections. But the ethnographer's emphasis, according to him, should be in making his text intelligible in the local context rather than trying to fit his generalizations with a general theory or law. Paradoxically again, although he did not believe in the possibility of "entering" into the native's mind he believed that knowing the nativ's point of view was the most important job of an anthropologist.

Methodologically, the construction of a text, according to him, involves two levels of interpretation: first the native's interpretation of the world around him, and second the ethnographer's interpretation of the native's interpretation. But in actual practice, the ethnographers' interpretation of the native and his world are privileged in that the native's world- view and existential conditions are ignored. Focusing on this disjuncture, Geertz advocated for the "emic" view free from the influence or interference of the "etic" categories and vice versa. Anthropologists who find the boundaries between the "emic" and "etic" categories blurred and overlapping rather than discrete now contest these two methods advocated by Geertz, in an attempt at methodological refinement.

Geertz suggests that the "ethnographic interpretations" should stay close to the "hard surfaces of life" – the economic, political,

biological, and physical realities of life. According to him, the ethnographer's work is an exercise in "thick description", which means a detailed description of the subject so that the same is comprehensible to the natives themselves. To structure a narrative or produce a text that transparently reflects the natives' understanding of themselves and the world around them is still one of the biggest challenges before the modernist anthropologists. The problem has been further complicated today as post-colonial anthropologists emphasize on the heterogeneity rather than homogeneity of the natives. Such an emphasis would obviously lead to multiple, rather than homologous, constructions of peoples and cultures and such constructions could extremely vary and even contradict each another.

Geertz was the first anthropologist to maintain that the right way of describing cultural phenomena is to interpret them. To him, the cultural phenomena are "an assemblage of texts" and culture is public "because meaning is". And, meaning is public because it is shared.

Many have commented on and labelled James Clifford, as a post-modernist. Clifford himself has objected to being labelled so though he says that the other three of his 'gang of four' (Michael Fischer, George Marcus, and Stephen Tyler) might be tentatively called so. Clifford also refuses to be alleged that he indulges in 'textualism'. He writes that he is "seriously interested in the textual form' but that does not mean textualism. About his 'textualism' he writes: "ethnography encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other" (p. 23). This persistent desire, Clifford is of the view, may not be considered as an indication of he being a post-modernist!

More importantly, his desire to be free from all labels bears upon the predicament of a text that needs to be freed from any kind of framing up. According to him, a text needs to speak for itself as it has a personality, an identity, and a voice. It should not be forced upon scuttling its freedom to articulate its own voice. Someone else, who may distort the personality of the text in question, can only reconstruct it otherwise. Underlying here is a sense of true or real text, waiting to be discovered, which may be seen as a 'post-modernist' strand in the 'modernist' Clifford.

Both Geertz and Clifford seem to share the traditional concept of a text as a stable category though they advocate methods of interpretation that are proximate, in a limited sense, to some of the post-modern positions. James Clifford, for instance, does not consider

important the polyphonic and dialogic relations in a text. Such a position of Clifford strengthens the modernist view of the text that it has a single identity, a single voice and is structurally homogeneous. Such a notion of the text engenders the colonial anthropologists' understanding of the 'primitive' cultures. The colonial anthropologists have never accepted the primitive cultures as heterogeneous, multi-voiced, and open to internal conflicts and contradictions. Such cultures were viewed, thanks to functionalism, as monolithic structures.

Geertz and Clifford Juxtaposed

There has been a tendency among some critics to essentialise the ideas of Geertz and Clifford and juxtapose them at the slightest pretext. For instance, Paul Rabinow, one of the contributors to *Writing Culture* and an ardent admirer of both Geertz and Clifford, draws certain parallels between the two unmistakably greatest of minds:

> . . . James Clifford has created and occupied the role of ex- officio scribe of our scribblings. Geertz, the founding figure, may pause between monographs to muse on texts, narrative, description, and interpretation. Clifford takes as his natives, as well as his informants, those anthropologists past and present whose work, self-consciously or not, has been the production of texts, the writing of ethnography (1986: 242).

Geertz's main concern, according to Rabinow, is to make anthropology of the Other more scientific despite the use of new concepts like discourse, author, and text. For Clifford, the Other does not constitute the people but the ethnography of the Other. This, as Rabinow rightly says, puts him firmly in control of his subject and at the same time makes him "parasitical". The distance from and the detachment about the field is considerably more in the case of Clifford, who has otherwise greater ability to examine the texts more closely than Geertz. In a sense, the project of Clifford is more scientific, and hence more modernist, because he can afford to work out the specific criteria for analysis, similar to the objective methods followed by natural and life-scientists in the evaluation of data. Here, Rabinow reminds us that such a close scrutiny of the body of texts created over the past sixty years or so was long over due and Clifford must be credited with having initiated that. We should realize that anthropological enterprise is essentially textual and its textuality

therefore deserves critical attention. Identifying 'interpretative anthropology' with Geertz and 'textualist meta-anthropology' with Clifford, Rabinow writes:

> If Geertz is still seeking to conjure and capture the demons of exoticism – theater states, shadow plays, cock fights – through his limited use of fictionalized stagings in which they can appear to us, the textualist/deconstructive move runs the risk of inventing ever more clever filing systems for others' texts and of imagining that everyone else in the world is hard at work doing the same thing (1986: 243).

While the project of Geertz was to further establish the authority of the ethnographer, Clifford starts his project by attacking the dual authority of the ethnographer using "free indirect speech" and claiming that he was 'there' to witness what he has described without making himself visible in the text he has produced. It is this dual authority of the ethnographer that Clifford is most uncomfortable with. But, according to Rabinow, his own style is comparable to the style of the ethnographers whose authority he is trying to challenge, as he makes himself as invisible in his texts as earlier ethnographers did in theirs. The Other remains voiceless and powerless in the writings of both Geertz and Clifford.

Although an admirer of Geertz, Clifford has made some incisive criticism of his interpretative anthropology. Perhaps not so justifiably, Clifford equates Geertz's interpretative anthropology with colonial anthropology:

> Interpretative anthropology . . . does not escape the general strictures of those critics of "colonial" representation, who, since 1950, have rejected discourses that portray the cultural realities of other peoples without placing their own reality in jeopardy" (cited in Rabinow 1990: 245).

To Clifford, the colonial representation is not only colonial but also monological, which does not allow the authority of the ethnographer to be challenged, because it represents only one voice in disguise – the voice of the ethnographer him-/her-self. This, according to him, does not certainly contribute to the strength of ethnography but to its weakness. Hence, he argues for dialogical and constructivist paradigms, or more preferably, heteroglossic representation that allows multiple voices to be represented in the ethnographic texts. But

Rabinow not only points out the lack of clarity in Clifford's writings about these concepts but also doubts the veracity of the same.

Geertz as postmodernist and Clifford as modernist

What follows from the above discussion clearly points out a positional-reversal contrary to the general acceptance of Geertz and Clifford by the critics. If someone calls Clifford a modernist a dozen eyebrows will be raised and for obvious reasons. But there is certainly no reason why he cannot be seen in the role of Geertz and vice versa! Further there is no reason why Geertz cannot be seen as modernist in one sense and post-modernist in another? This is exactly what this section seeks to explore.

One of the better-known characteristics of postmodernism is blurring of boundaries between disciplines, between fact and fiction, myth and reality, etc. According to Robert Pool, "Geertz has not only described this blurring, but also contributed to it significantly through his own work: he has popularized literary theory in anthropology (culture as text, ethnography as fiction), and is perhaps one of the few anthropologists who are taken seriously in relatively wide academic circles outside anthropology" (1991: 313). On the other hand, Pool writes: "The fact that these authors (Marcus, Clifford and Fischer) do not claim to be postmodern, and in fact explicitly state that they themselves and the experimental ethnographies they discuss are not postmodern but modernist, seems to go entirely unnoticed by the critics" (1991: 319).

In this context, the following words of Stephen Tyler, who is perhaps the only undisputed post-modernist, is interesting:

> Writing Culture is not post-modern; its authors neither invert the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology nor revolutionize the three-fold hierarchy of epistemology, politics, and aesthetics (in descending order of hierarchic precedence) . . . they are willing only to promote politics, to contextualize science to power, to relativize epistemology to politics, but this politicization of discourse does not change or threaten the ancient Western idea of hierarchized discourses. Instead it preserves the myth of a privileged discourse that founds or grounds all the others (cited in Pool 1991: 324).

While the boundary between modernism and post-modernism may quite clearly be discernible in arts, literature, and architecture the

same is extremely difficult to locate in anthropology. It is true that anthropology in the beginning sought for itself the status of a natural or life science but that was more an ideal than a reality. The discipline has always, and rather unnoticeably, been an uneasy mix of science and arts. While some of the best anthropological writings like *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer and *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead have been pure pieces of art there are some people in the discipline who have never abandoned the ideals of precision, measurement, and even prediction. In fact, there is room for all kinds of people in the discipline as it deals with one of the most fascinating as well as complex subjects of study - the human being. And in developing this most challenging subject of study, anthropologists have rarely gone beyond the physical and cultural manifestations of the subject to understand the human mind, which actually controls what anthropologists generally study.

This limitation of anthropologists has never gone unnoticed, which has actually made them extremely cautious in drawing generalizations even when it was customary to do so and while recording their observations for the readers. That is why there is sometimes a significant difference between what the ethnographers publish and what they actually record in their field diaries. In fact, the use of "free indirect speech" by the earlier ethnographers, which Clifford points out, almost accusingly, is due to the prevalent convention of writing in anthropology and the self-imposed need to dissociate oneself from the text one was creating in order that the ethnographer maintains a semblance of 'objectivity'.

Although anthropology is dominantly modernist in its narrative strategy there are some anthropologists who tend to adopt a post-modernist style of representation, a habit very recent in practice. The desire to look for the unique, the exceptional, and the particular instead of identifying the common or the general has been the new orientation that challenges the colonial practice. And to bring out diversity rather than uniformity, relatedness instead of distinctiveness, and the obsession with tradition, cosmology, magic, myth, mysticism, etc. have always been a part of anthropological tradition. In fact the very subject matter of anthropology has always been post-modern, as it simultaneously deals with the sacred and the profane, the traditional and the magical, the dominant and the marginal and the past and the present whether they are real or unreal.

Conclusion

One may recall here that while post-modernism as a movement grew out of the dissatisfaction and disaffection with modernism, it is indeed a reaction and not necessarily a critically consolidated discourse as it's many facets still draw sustenance from the theoretical foundations of modernism (a position clearly maintained by German philosopher Habermas). Hence, modernism is still the core, the substance, and the focus.

One of the reasons why Clifford has often been labeled as post-modernist is his indulgence in meta-textualism. While all ethnographies are exercises in textualism, he indulges in ethnography of ethnographies, text of texts. In this sense he is quite justifiably a post-modernist. But our experience of anthropological discourse in the twentieth century inform us that we still depend on field work reports and diaries which imply that some objectivity is still maintained in producing texts. Such texts cannot be simply interpreted meta-textually without considering the facts they reveal. Although such texts are open to interrogation nonetheless the primary data they record are important. These texts may not claim theoretical and methodological sophistication, however they are important to the discipline of anthropology. These texts in spite of the limitations are products of modernism. Even so, after the wedding of anthropology and linguistics in the 1960s and anthropology and literature in the 1980s the scenario has changed. What possibly would be a fruitful exercise in interpretation of various texts within the disciplinary boundary of anthropology is the historical factor. If we are clear about the historical conditions under which each text was produced most of the confusions about isms may be removed. Our goal should be let the text speak for itself.

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