

Clifford geertz's description of culture

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Geertz's theoretical contributions start with his definitions and descriptions of culture. For Geertz, culture is " an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life" . In an alternative (and more quoted) formulation, Geertz states, " Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative in search of meaning" Geertz, following Wittgenstein's stance on language, believes that culture is not something that occurs in the heads of humans; " Culture is public, because meaning is" . Cognition is largely the same throughout humanity , while the symbols that people use to communicate are different. Symbols are not to be studied to gain access to mental processes, but as formations of social phenomena. It is the anthropologist's job to unravel the webs of meaning and interpret them. Culture is also not a force or causal agent in the world, but a context in which people live out their lives. This goes back to Geertz's early distinction between social structure and culture. Culture is only the pattern of meanings embedded in symbols. Social structure is the " economic, political, and social relations among individuals and groups". Geertz does not dismiss the study of social structure, but takes culture to be his object of study. Geertz develops his idea of reading cultural practices as " texts. " Examining the cockfight as text enables Geertz to bring out an aspect of it that might otherwise go unnoticed: " its use of emotion for cognitive ends" . Going to

cockfights is an emotional education for Balinese — it teaches and reinforces the emotions and reactions of Balinese culture in an external text.

Eventually, Geertz makes his general statement: " 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" .