

Work of clifford geertz in history



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What Does The Work Of Clifford Geertz Have To Offer Research Into History?

With the publishing of his book, ' The Interpretation of Cultures' in 1973, Geertz has often been hailed as the ' champion of symbolic anthropology'. Geertz outlined culture as ' a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life' He believed the role of anthropologists was to try and understand the underlying symbols of the culture in question, a term he describes as ' Thick Description'. Geertz also conducted extensive work on religion, particularly on Islam, in both Southeast Asia and North Africa. His most famous use of thick description is portrayed in the essay ' Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', and his theories still influence anthropology to this day.

But how does the work of an anthropologist, concerned with analysing modern societies, apply to historians whose work concerns cultures from the past?

In this essay I will examine how both anthropologists and historians attempt to examine humanity ' in the mist', and how cultural historians in this endeavour have attempted to use an anthropological model to answer historical questions in order to do so. With the development of cultural history historian's creation of the past as an ' other', a place completely different from our own, they attempt to view history through an anthropological lens.

But despite differences between historical and anthropological research there has been much interdisciplinary study between the two, with social <https://assignbuster.com/work-of-clifford-geertz-in-history/>

and cultural historians attempting to use synchronic analysis as a way of viewing the past they are studying. History becomes a view of time and space all within a single plane that stays unmoving and none changing under the cultural historians gaze, just as the Bayeux tapestry shows the history and context of the Norman Conquest of England.

Even with the rise of synchronic analysis, historians have not abandoned diachronic analysis as an analytical tool. Historians still feel they need to explain the context of the subjects they are studying in order for their research to be viewed as 'complete'.

This has led to many criticisms of Geertz's work and how historians have applied his research to past societies. Geertz's detachment of culture and history has, in many cases, created more problems for the cultural historian than it has solved. Due to these difficulties, cultural historians have shied away from many larger historical debates in order to study features outside of the historical main-stream. They have focussed on small and, in some historians' views, inconsequential histories, becoming bogged down in their own tedium. With this, social history has focussed on the development of social theory, rather than the society in question's development over time.

With these views in mind, I have attempted to use Geertz's analytical models with my own research: 'Hearts and Minds: A Study on the impact of Christianity on paganism in the Byzantium Empire during the fourth century CE'. Using examples drawn from my own work, I will attempt to see the merits of using an anthropological model while studying the religions of the past; those that were still evolving and those religions that were dying out.

At this stage it is important to define the object which cultural historians have attempted to study with an anthropological view point; history itself.

As a noun, ' history' can be defined as:

1) a continuous, systematic narrative of past events as relating to a particular people, country, period, person, etc., usually written as a chronological account; chronicle: a history of France; a medical history of the patient.

2) a systematic account of any set of... phenomena without particular reference to time: a history of the American eagle.

The definition of history as ' a continuous, systematic narrative' and as ' a systematic account of any set of... phenomena without particular reference to time', or, as phrased by Michael Chanan '... the formal analysis of a given system as it exists in the present moment (synchronic) and analysis across time, or historical explanation (diachronic)' means the historian has to show their awareness of both in order to fully explore the topic they are researching.

The historian Marc Bloch stated that the ' good historian was like the giant in the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies'. While C. Wright-Mills remarked about the anthropologist: ' What social science is properly about is human variety, which consists of all the social world in which men have lived, are living and might live. '

Cultural historians have embraced Geertz, using his ideas and methods and applying them to historical models, such as Matthew Eric Engelke and Matt Tomlinson's 'The limits of meaning: case studies in the anthropology of Christianity'. Although historians are not as prone to theoretical disputes as much as anthropologists, it is also true that Geertz does not serve as a marker in generalised struggles among historians.

According to Paula S. Fass, the limitations of social history in previous historiography led to the development and 'subsequent dominance' of cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite the move in focus away from political elites towards the examination of social groups and their 'behavioural tendencies', cultural historians felt that social history had 'ignored both the uniqueness of individual experience and the ways in which social life is created through politics and culture' due to the dehumanization of such social groups by reducing them to quantifiable data. Social historians' reliance on structural explanations and development of group categories began to 'deaden history as an exploration of contingent experience.' By the mid 1980s, cultural historians were adapting work done by social historians, such as Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese, and taking them further by exploring 'the way agency was attributed to participation in predefined group activity'. Cultural historians increasingly used the anthropological and 'post-modern' perspective of identity as an ever-changing construct, what anthropologists refer to as 'liminal' experiences and deconstructing identity entirely. Due to this, social historian's research potentials have become 'quite limited' due to the

constrictions of primary sources in the construction of 'ordinary life', while, in the words of Fass:

'Cultural historians, in contrast, put their faith in a fuller exploration of language and because, in their view, all culture is connected, all forms of articulation could be examined as exemplary.'

Geertz's ideas have become so attractive to historians due to the development of cultural history, with historians focussing on the past as a place structurally different from the modern world: '... worlds where people's motives, senses of honour, daily tasks, and political calculations are based on unfamiliar assumptions about human society and the cosmic order'. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne in 'A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature', explore the religious aspects in Old English poetry in relation to Geertz's definition of religion itself.

Both anthropology and history, according to Geertz, are both similar and different, both looking for the same type of answers but asking different questions. Historians focus on broad sweeping actions and movements, while anthropologists focus on 'small, well bounded communities... wallowing in the detail of the obscure and unimportant' (or, as Geertz phrases it in his typically artistic style: 'History (it is said), is threatened by the history-from-below rather than focussing on the Movers-and-Shakers, such as Kings, Philosophers and Bishops'). Anthropologists 'present static pictures of immobile societies scattered across the remote corners of the inhabited world', while anthropologists accuse historians of 'schematicism, of being

out of touch with the immediacies and intricacies, 'the feel' as they like to put it, considering themselves to have it, of actual life.'

With this said, it has not been unusual for historians and anthropologists to conduct research in each others' field; historical research such as Roger Chartier's 'The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution', Carlo Ginzburg's 'The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller', and Natalie Zemon Davis' 'Society and culture in early modern France: eight essays' to name but a few.

Despite the attraction of Geertz's theory to social historians, the differences between historical research and ethnography can hinder the historian's full utilisation of Geertz's 'Thick Description' model. Historians are restricted to the textual evidence written by a literate elite, with the culture and symbols of those who existed outside of the elites literacy focus lost in the minds of those who lived through it; a stark difference from the ability of anthropologists to observe the effects of culture and its symbols when studying cultures 'in the field'. Despite historians criticisms of anthropologists reliance on oral testimony, with its possible 'invented tradition and frailties of memory', Geertz's ability to examine the religious development of Morocco and Indonesia almost first hand must be greatly envied by social and cultural historians.

Despite the difference between history and anthropology, many historians (especially social historians like Michael MacDonald and Robert Darnton) have embraced Geertz's ideas. However, this raises another question; why

would historians, whose work is essentially diachronic in nature, be interested in the synchronic analysis of an anthropologist?

It is important at this time to look at the meaning of synchronic analysis. As William H. Sewell Jr. explains:

‘ Although a synchronic description or analysis is often glossed over as a ‘ snapshot’ that ‘ freezes time or as a ‘ slice’ of time, that is not quite right. Such a description is, rather, one in which time is suspended or abolished analytically so that things that actually occur in the flow of time are treated as part of a uniform moment or epoch in which they simply coexist... To put it otherwise, in synchronic description acts of cultural signification, rather than being treated as a temporal sequence of statement and counterstatement or as linked by causal chains of antecedent and consequence, are seen as components of a mutually defined and mutually sustaining universe of... unchanging meaning.’

The use of synchronic analysis on what Geertz called ‘ cultural systems’ presented cultural historians with the ability to explore the past with a new analytical model. Robert Darnton, in his book ‘ The Great Cat Massacre’ uses such analyses to explore episodes from eighteenth century France, especially in his essays ‘ Peasants Tell tales: The Meaning of Mother Goose’ (an analysis of the cultural significance to French, German and Italian fairy tales) and ‘ Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint Severin’ (in which he explores the cultural context of the massacre of cats in Paris by printing apprentices during the late 1730s).

The use of thick description allows historians to suspend time rather than be carried along with historical narrative, and in the process analyse the transformations of the past with greater accuracy and depth. Geertz's ideas of thick description have allowed historians like David Sabean to explore witchcraft in seventeenth century Germany.

Despite criticisms by anthropologists of the diachronic approach taken by historians in the past, many historians are still attached to the ideas of history in transformation. Many American 'new social historians and those within the French 'Annales' school try to define themselves against historical narrative and by those 'attempting to manage - or side-step - conceptual problems by writing historical accounts', such as Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson, as seen in his book 'A History of the Jewish people'.

William H. Sewell Jr has best conveyed this view:

'It [Geertz's theory] tells us, perhaps surprisingly, that adequately realized synchrony is more important to good historical analysis than adequately realized diachrony. In the eyes of professionals it is more important for a historian to know how to suspend time than to know how to recount its passage.'

This is shown in the work of historians such as Noriko Onodera, who examines the evolution and development of the Japanese language, and Stephen M. Feldman, with his analysis of the separation of the Church and State during the twentieth century.

Although Geertz's theories have become popular with cultural historians, there have been many critics of not only his own work but how historians (especially those studying cultural aspects) have used Geertz's work in their own research.

Although Geertz's work features events as they happen in real historical time, he uses a 'literary device' to make his work less formally structured. This means that he uses the social and historical impact of the cultural model he is analysing as a writing style rather than a strict analytical tool. This is best demonstrated in Geertz's essay 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight'.

William Roseberry, in an analysis of Geertz's essay (in his book 'Balinese Cockfights and the Seduction of Anthropology'), argues that Geertz does not take into account the history of its development, and that we should think of the 'material social process' as a 'production' rather than as a 'product' (stating that the issues on development are mentioned but never taken up by Geertz). Roseberry's view, one which I personally agree with, is that '[the cockfight] has gone through a process of creation that cannot be separated from Balinese history'. Geertz detached culture and history by treating history as a text to be read and scrutinised rather than being an essential thread in the fabric of Balinese life.

Maybe due to this separation, historians, despite their enthusiasm, have been in many cases less than successful in their attempts to marry history with 'Thick Description'. For example, Roger Beck's attempt to apply Geertz's description and interpretation to the symbol system of Mithraic

mysticism is hardly successful, and neither is his comparison with the symbol system of the Mexican Chamulas.

With history's diachronic roots, anthropology as a whole has had difficulty in finding fertile ground with historians outside of cultural history. With focus on 'eccentric bits of evidence' (or, as I view it, 'obsession with the mundane'), cultural historians and anthropologists writing about history search for evidence around a central point of argument and 'build a mountain around a molehill and that molehill can lie on the periphery of the subject'. Rather than pushing back the frontiers of historical research by opening up and exploring new channels of investigation through analysis of symbols within societies in the past, cultural historians have become intent with finding 'hidden histories' rather than bringing new light to work at the focus of historical debate.

Despite the development of social theory by anthropologists and the rise of cultural history and its application to history, almost none deal with the explanation of historical change, with the main problem created by most social theory being the accounting for social order or social structure rather than the development and history of those roots.

With my own research I have focused on the impact of Christianity on paganism in the eastern half of the Roman Empire during the fourth century CE, analysing how Christianity infiltrated aspects of the educated elite, society, the state apparatus and its depiction through art and on coinage. My work also focussed on a number of other factors:

- The peasants in the eastern half of the Roman Empire were naturally conservative and were initially hostile to the Christian community that were mainly based in urban centres.
- Eastern Roman peasants clung to their local pagan deities as they took care of their 'first-order' concerns: healing, death and family - as pagan spirits and deities took care of these concerns there was no initial need to abandon them in favour of Christianity.
- Bishops and preachers that attempted to convert the peasantry failed as they were distrusted by the peasantry because of their connections to local government. Bishops and preachers also addressed them in Greek or Latin and in complex rhetoric styles, alienating them from the peasantry who spoke in their 'everyday' local dialects.
- The destruction of pagan temples in the urban centres and the construction of Christian basilicas on top of them or in their vicinity changed the power balance within such centres against the pagan cults.
- Only the establishment of monasteries away from the urban centres deep in the countryside led to the slow conversion of the peasantry through the contacts they made with them through local trade and due to the conversion tactics that the monasteries employed.

Due to the amount of written documentation available to us, initially it may seem that Geertz's theories on symbolic systems in reference to early Christian rites and formal rituals may make Christianity in the fourth century eastern Roman Empire accessible to us. Although the study of early Christianity's cultural anthropology through field work is obviously

impossible, the archaeological record of pagan temple destruction and the construction of Christian basilicas with the reused stone cannot be described as 'thick description' as the reuse of the stone from the pagan temples is not a symbolic act in its own right, but a form of cheap and readymade building material. However, Geertz himself has used written accounts from the past as effectively as he used his own field work and that of other anthropologists.

This, however, cannot be said about localised pagan rituals; ones performed in homes and fields in small, personal shrines. Eric Wolf suggested that these rituals were due to peasants 'first-order' concerns, such as protection of the family unit in this world and the next. The lack of documented evidence, even if written by a condescending Christian elite, makes symbolic analysis extremely difficult.

If we focus on pagan 'lost ceremonies' then Geertz's theory appears to be a hopeless endeavour. That is because, despite the richness and detail as a complex of symbols, textual evidence rarely mentions local pagan rituals for what they are, and when it does many aspects of them are either exaggerated or incredibly distorted, therefore destroying their immediate ritual context. Even if the ritual context had survived through the textual, or through the archaeological, evidence that would allow us to subject it to symbolic interpretation, it cannot now be interpreted in the way we can interpret Christianity; we cannot trace the evolution of a religion which is now extinct.

To conclude, the work of Clifford Geertz has a lot to offer research into history, as long as his work is used correctly.

In my introduction I stated ' how both anthropologists and historians attempt to examine humanity ' in the mist', and how cultural historians attempt to use anthropological models to answer historical questions in order to do so'. In this endeavour, cultural historians have been unsuccessful. Geertz, and other anthropologists, benefit from the ability to view culture closely (and as Geertz's brush with the Balinese police shows, perhaps a little too closely). Cultural historians, in contrast, have to rely on the words of those they are trying to move away from, the literate elite, in order to view the lives of those who had no written history of their own. Rather than viewing humanity ' in the mist', cultural historians, for instance have attempted to determine a peasant's accent by studying the peasant's reflection in a muddy puddle.

Historians' reluctance to abandon diachronic analysis undermines the benefits of synchronic analysis, despite anthropologists' attempts to conduct historical research. Cultural historians' attempts to ' suspend' time removes them from the historical development that took place, therefore allowing them to be caught up in the difficulties that anthropologist themselves have faced. This problem is only exacerbated by the reliance on textual evidence.

As shown with my attempt to use Geertz's theories in relation to my own research, I too had difficulties overcoming this problem. As I used a large amount of archaeological evidence when researching the power shift from pagan to Christian domination in eastern Roman urban centres it was nearly impossible to apply ' thick description' and investigate symbolic systems due

to their lack of context. Again, the reliance on textual evidence written by a hostile group means that there are other historical methods which would be more beneficial when symbolic contexts and restricted written records are unavailable.

At face value, I understand the appeal Geertz's theories would have for cultural historians trying to uncover the mindset, culture and experiences of those who lived in the past. However, the ability for anthropologists to study their subject at first hand, and therefore place more emphasis on first-hand accounts, leaves cultural historians at a crucial disadvantage. Geertz's theory changed the face of anthropological research, but I doubt it will do nothing but frustrate the historian by reminding them of what they are missing.

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