

COMMENTARY

PRACTICE IN GEERTZ'S INTERPRETATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

In her influential article, 'Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties', Sherry Ortner calls Geertz's interpretative anthropology an important step in a general trend toward a practice- or actor-centred approach (Ortner 1984). In her opinion, however, Geertz has not developed a theory of action or practice as such, although he has 'elaborated some of the most important mechanisms through which culture shapes and guides behaviour' (ibid.: 152). I agree with Ortner that Geertz has not elaborated his view of practice systematically. This in fact applies to many aspects of Geertz's interpretative anthropology. Though Geertz has expounded on some elements of his anthropology explicitly and systematically, he generally prefers to develop it in response to immediate research needs, and to convey it through concrete examples. He even tends to speak in somewhat derogatory terms about articulating general theory (Geertz 1983: 5). His increasingly dominant focus on the literary dimensions of cultural anthropology may imply a further shift away from systematic expositions on theoretical and methodological issues (Geertz 1988). Moreover, Geertz hardly applies the term 'practice' himself. Nevertheless, in my opinion, on the basis of Geertz's explicit programmatic statements and of his thematic and ethnographic essays a systematic theory of practice can be reconstructed.

This article is my reconstruction and analysis of this 'Geertzian theory of practice'. For this purpose I define practice as 'intentional behaviour', and use it as an equivalent of two terms that Geertz applies frequently and interchangeably: 'conduct' and 'action'. A 'theory' I define as a more or less coherent set of core concepts and epistemological and methodological principles which both imply and are implied by the core concepts. These concepts and principles, which form the 'hard core' of a theory, are

further specified and elaborated by supplementary concepts, research strategies and methods, and rules of argumentation.¹

Geertz's general theory of practice begins with the key concept of culture. Crucial in the context of a theory of practice is his emphasis on the public and intersubjective character of culture. Culture consists of interrelated symbols, which in Geertz's view refer to both conceptions and their vehicles of expression. These vehicles are quite essential, since they fix conceptions into concrete, tangible forms, and thus make their communication possible. The forms through which meaning is expressed are therefore a necessary condition for culture's intersubjectivity. In Geertz's theory, culture is further tightly linked to the concrete, public activities of everyday life. The relation between culture and practice is in fact so close that Geertz denies them an autonomous existence apart from each other. Practices cannot exist apart from culture because through it they find order and direction. This is related to Geertz's view of culture as the defining property of man. Man depends on culture in all aspects of his life, including his practices. This does not imply a cultural deterministic point of view. Culture is not so much a determining force but a framework in terms of which a group of people live their lives. Culture offers man some options for ordering his practices, but which of these options man actually selects depends on many factors. Ultimately it depends on man's own choice. The number of options a specific culture offers its participants for ordering their practices is, however, limited; culture exercises substantial constraints on their conduct.

As practices cannot exist without culture, culture cannot exist without practices. The public character of culture is fully realised only in concrete practices. Through its presence in the flow of practices, culture is made manifest to man, or, in other words, it is through practices that the participants receive the necessary information from their culture to cope with their lives. Moreover, both cultural continuity and cultural discontinuity are brought about as a result of the cumulative effects of the individual applications of culture in concrete practices. This holds true for the content of cultural conceptions, and also for the relations between conceptions and their concrete forms of expression. In Geertz's opinion there is no intrinsic relation between a particular conception and its symbolic form. In the flow of human

¹ Personally I prefer the term 'theoretical orientation' to 'theory'. Since Ortner and others speak of 'theory', I will use the term in this article to avoid confusion. Research strategies I define as the suggestions regarding particular aspects of the socio-cultural world which provide productive starting-points for anthropological analysis. Rules of argumentation I paraphrase as the specific means through which the anthropologist orders his research findings, and clarifies these to the reader.

practices, man as a social being selects the specific forms that he finds appropriate to serve as means for the expressions of particular conceptions. This holds true for the structural interrelations between symbols as well. These interrelations are brought about in the process of human conduct, and cannot be separated from it. As in the application of cultural meaning in his daily life, man has a fundamental freedom in changing and reproducing his culture, in terms of its content, its internal structure, and the relations between conceptions and their forms of expression. Through practices man ultimately acts as the subject of culture rather than as its object.

The epistemology of Geertz's interpretative anthropology is closely related to his view of the public, intersubjective character of culture. Geertz aims to produce knowledge about a culture from the perspective of its participants. Yet he emphasizes that the epistemological gap between the participants and the outsider-anthropologist will always remain. Geertz also renounces personal identification with the participants as a sound basis of anthropological knowledge. Nevertheless, the basis of knowledge of a culture is ultimately alike for the participants and the anthropologist. This basis is the public character of culture. Through the very same symbolic forms and concrete practices from which the participants receive cultural information, the anthropologist obtains access to their culture, at least in principle.² The analysis of practices has, therefore, the methodological top priority in Geertz's interpretative anthropology. Geertz's anthropology is therefore interpretative in Dilthey's classic sense: a science concerned with the understanding and explication of cultural meaning through the systematic study of its concrete manifestations.³ In this context Geertz compares the anthropologist to the literary critic who tries to explicate the meaning of individual literary texts. Unlike the latter, however, the anthropologist is not presented with already existing texts to interpret. He is like a philologist who reconstructs texts from scattered pieces of manuscripts. Anthropology, then, is like both reconstructing and

² Geertz explicitly acknowledges that the production of anthropological knowledge tends to be more complicated in actual practice. A lot of anthropological knowledge is based not on the direct observation of symbolic forms and meaningful conduct, but more indirectly, on the accounts of meaningful conduct provided by specific participants. The anthropologist, furthermore, belonging to another culture, is in fact quite dependent on the help of the participants of that culture in the proper understanding of the meaning of the practices that he does observe, and on their willingness to give him access to their lives.

³ Rickmann 1976: 9-10. Geertz does not follow Dilthey's distinction between understanding and interpretation. He applies the term 'interpretation' to both Dilthey's definition of understanding and to interpretation proper.

interpreting texts, consisting of observable practices, not of written linguistic signs or recorded sounds. Geertz therefore also speaks of anthropology as a hermeneutic science: a science dealing with the interpretation of individual texts or other specific meaningful entities, which, like texts, possess a more or less persistent and inspectable form.

The description and interpretation of practices involve a degree of selection and abstraction from their concrete, actual occurrence in Geertz's interpretative anthropology. Although he attributes importance to the individual applications of culture by specific people, he is in actual practice predominantly interested in the collective aspects of cultural meaning. He therefore focuses mainly on those practices that seem relatively representative of the general conduct of all the participants of a culture. And he analyzes these practices only to the extent that these reveal important aspects of a culture as a whole, rather than the specific views of individual participants.

Geertz does not in my opinion present any concrete research strategy explicitly. Nonetheless a research strategy that specifies the interrelated core concept and epistemological and methodological principles, as outlined above, can be inferred from his corpus. My reconstruction of this research strategy begins with Geertz's assertion that man is so dependent on the information of culture that he functions best in places and situations where the conveyance of this information is optimal: public, and social events and places. In his opinion the 'natural habitat' of culture is the house yard, the market place, the town square, the scholar's desk, the football field, the studio, the lorry-driver's seat, the platform, the chessboard or the judge's bench (Geertz 1973: 45, 83, 360). Since the epistemological basis of anthropological knowledge and that of the participants is ultimately the same, it follows that those practices that are most telling for the participants are heuristically most useful to the anthropologist. So a prime focus on the practices in public and social events and places forms the basis of a research strategy. In addition, the set of practices predominantly focused on should meet two other requirements. They should be representative of the participants' practices in general, and they should have a continuous or recurrent form. The requirement to be representative is, in my opinion, self-evident. The requirement to have a recurrent or continuous form seems to me consistent with a classical (in Dilthey's sense) demand of hermeneutics. The continuous or recurrent form of texts or other meaningful entries makes, at least in principle, both their empirical and repeated investigation possible. Furthermore, it - that is, the recurrent or continuous form - will bridge the tension between a focus on the ongoing flow of human practices - which will not persist - and a classical view of anthropology as a hermeneutic science. Specific instances of practices with a recurrent or persistent form do not persist, but through their recurrent or continuous form their meanings can nonetheless be analyzed repeatedly. This specific set of practices I will call 'collective interactions'.

'Collective interactions' refer to specific occasions where a number of people involved in the same recurrent or continuous

practice publicly interact with each other in a shared and limited space, though not necessarily with conceived shared interests or as one, collective actor. Though 'collective interactions' form by no means the sole source of anthropological knowledge in Geertz's corpus, he nonetheless bases many telling assertions on this type of practice. The practices of economic search and bargaining and the conceptual framework in terms of which these are conducted have proved to be of notable heuristic value for the understanding of Moroccan culture (Geertz 1979). In his Javanese case material, Geertz presents at least two 'collective interactions' that clarified for him changes both in social structure and in the way people culturally perceived them. One case pertains to a very problematical neighbourhood funeral (Geertz 1957: 53), the other to public meetings which were part of a procedure of public protest against irregularities in a local election, and the subsequent campaigns of the subsequent new elections.⁴ Vivid descriptions of court ceremonies in the literature on Balinese history probably inspired Geertz's view that court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics in the pre-colonial Balinese state. One such description pertains to a spectacular cremation ritual written in 1880 by a Danish sea-clerk called Helms (Geertz 1980: 98-102; 1983: 37-9).

Geertz's corpus manifests a particularly important subset of 'collective interactions', viz. 'self-interpretations'. These refer to recurrent events with a more or less persisting form that teaches the participants of a culture how they ultimately perceive their own social life. Through the careful analysis of these 'self-interpretations', the anthropologist can acquire understanding of these lessons as well. The form and content of these 'self-interpretations' vary from one culture to another. In Bali, for instance, the cockfight is in Geertz's view an important 'self-interpretation'. It shows to the Balinese what they think their social life ultimately is: two roosters hacking each other to bits (Geertz 1973: 412-53). A less explicit example (that is, Geertz does not explicitly present it as a self-interpretation) is that of the battle between Rangda and Barong. This is a dramatic Balinese performance which pictures the battle between two mythological figures: Rangda, the evil, fearful witch, on the one hand; and Barong, the foolish dragon, on the other. The play generates an enormous tension in the audience, but just before it reaches the expected climax (expected at least by a Western scholar) the play ends and the tensions ceases. The play and the tension it generates very effectively convey an important cultural message: the line dividing reason from unreason, love from destruction, and the divine from the demonic is only razor-thin (Geertz 1973: 180-1). It further illustrates the 'absence of climax' which Geertz regards to be characteristic of Balinese social life as a whole

⁴ Geertz 1965: 153-208. The problematic neighbourhood funeral presents a borderline case. Its heuristic value seems to depend partly on its discontinuity with the standard pattern of a Javanese funeral (see Falk Moore 1987: 729).

(ibid.: 403). Another, less explicit example is the *wajang* play. This is performed with puppets, which project large shadows onto a white screen. With these projected shadows, events from ancient Javanese epics are dramatised, but at the same time frequent references are made to present religious, socio-economic, and political developments. According to Geertz, the analysis of the *wajang* play (which is the most deeply rooted and most highly developed Javanese art form) gives perhaps the clearest and the most direct insight into the relation between Javanese values and Javanese metaphysics (ibid.: 132-40).

'Collective interactions' certainly meet the demand of having a recurrent or continuous form, so that their meaning can be analyzed repeatedly, even though specific instances of these interactions do not persist. Yet, as such, they still form a rather broad category. This raises the question of how to select the specific 'collective interactions' that are particularly fruitful for anthropological analysis. For this selection, Geertz does not offer general principles, apart from, of course, his focus on 'self-interpretations'. But which 'collective interpretation' is of particular heuristic importance, and which serves as 'self-interpretation', varies from one culture to the other. What cockfighting is in Bali may be what bullfighting is in Spain, soccer in Brazil, and bargaining in the bazaar in Morocco. The selection of a particular 'collective interaction' is therefore tacitly made. Yet the heuristic value of a 'collective interaction' selected for analysis may be made plausible with an important methodological principle: the hermeneutic circle.

Geertz's application of this principle comes down first of all to a broad and loose characterization of the kind of life a group of people live as shaped by their culture. Geertz characterizes Moroccan culture as strenuous, fluid, visionary, violent, devout, unsentimental, individualistic, and assertive. He characterizes Javanese culture amongst other things as industrious, settled, sensitive, introvert, philosophical, quietistic, mystical, and polite. In his opinion, Balinese culture is, amongst other things, aesthetical, artistic, ornate, refined, dramaturgical, formalistic, and status-conscious. Though these characterizations are oversimplified, general and tentative, they are nonetheless heuristically useful. They provide a rough context in terms of which specific 'collective interactions' are analyzed. The anthropologist can see to what extent the a priori articulated characteristics are confirmed, deepened and enriched in the 'collective interactions' being analyzed, and to what extent these are contradicted and corrected. A very good illustration is Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight. Geertz relates the cockfight, in which corporate groups identifying with the fighting cocks symbolically put their pride at stake, to the leading characteristics of Balinese culture: status-mindedness, indirectness, shyness and *polit-esse*. On the one hand, the cockfight underlines some of these characteristics; it particularly confirms that status differentiation is a deadly serious matter in Bali, even to the extent that the most suitable metaphor to express this truth seems to be a scene as violent as two roosters hacking each other to bits. But

the cockfight also corrects the a priori characterization of Balinese culture, by conveying characteristics of it that are counter to the a priori articulated ones. It shows that envy, hatred and aggression turn out to be as essential to Balinese life as *polit-esse*, shyness and indirectness. So one might say that Geertz's interpretative anthropology does not a priori account for the choice of 'collective interactions' selected for anthropological knowledge. But through the application of the hermeneutic circle the heuristic usefulness of a elected 'collective interaction' for analyzing a culture as a whole can be assessed a posteriori.

Analogies form the most prominent and extensively discussed aspect of argumentation in Geertz's interpretative anthropology. The most notable analogies that Geertz has applied are text, drama, and game. These three analogies are quite useful for the analysis of 'collective interactions' because like 'collective interactions', they have a persisting (text) or recurrent (drama, game) form. So these analogies are quite in line with a hermeneutic theory of practice. Geertz extensively applies the game analogy in his analysis of the flow of economic practices in a Moroccan bazaar, wherein he describes this flow as an ongoing context in discovering, protecting, hiding and applying relevant information. An advantage in strategic information, which is necessary to maximize economic profit, is the prize of the game (Geertz 1979). The most extensive application of the theatre analogy is to be found in his analysis of the classic Balinese state, which he regards as a theatre state, in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience (Geertz 1980: 13). This theatre state, and particularly the public royal ceremonies which formed the heart of this state, dramatically manifested and actuated a particular Balinese world-view. The most prominent application of the text analogy is Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight. Watching a cockfight is like 'reading' a 'text'. Every time the Balinese watch a cockfight, they 'read' about a man's individual sensitivity: how it feels when a man, represented by a cock, is attacked, insulted, tormented, challenged, and driven to the extremes of fury, and through all that, is either brought to total victory or to total defeat. They also 'read' about the general characteristics of their collective life (like the deadly serious importance of status differentiation, etc.). Through 'reading' the cockfight individual sensitivities and the Balinese view of their collective life both become manifest to them and become reinforced further.⁵

⁵ Geertz uses the text analogy in two different ways. On the one hand, he uses it in a general sense, to express anthropology's affiliation with literary criticism. An example of this general application is Geertz 1980: 135. He declares here that the elements of culture are, among other things, 'texts' to be read, despite the fact that this statement is part of an analysis where the theatre analogy is primarily applied. On the other hand, he uses the text analogy in a more specific and restricted sense, as a rule

So Geertz's corpus does, then, present a coherent hermeneutic theory of practice. The 'hard core' is formed by the public, intersubjective character of culture, which not only forms the basis of cultural knowledge for the participants but also the epistemological basis of anthropological knowledge, and by Geertz's view of anthropology as an interpretative science. This 'hard core' is specified by a focus on 'collective interactions' in combination with the hermeneutic circle, and by the use of the game, text, and drama analogies. It must be noted, however, that the research strategy and analogies I have just expounded only specify Geertz's view of how culture manifests itself in practices. But concrete research directives that specify how practices sustain and change culture are lacking in Geertz's interpretative anthropology.

I agree, then, with Ortner, that in Geertz's interpretative anthropology, the impact of system (and particularly culture) on practices is predominantly emphasized rather than the impact of practices on system (Ortner 1984: 152). The most prominent counter-example in Geertz's corpus is his book *Agricultural Involution* (1963). There, Geertz analyzes how the cumulative effects of the choices of Indonesian peasants have brought about a form of static change - involution - in a social system, first of all in its economic aspects but secondly in its social-structural and cultural aspects as well. Geertz further explains these choices - which brought about involution - in terms of the combined pressures of Dutch colonial policies, a population explosion, and the ecological requirements and constraints of sugar cultivation and wet-rice agriculture. Yet *Agricultural Involution* is, in my opinion, not representative of Geertz's corpus as a whole.⁶

Despite this shortcoming, Geertz's theory of practice is still relevant for cultural anthropology.⁷ Though the impact of practice on system may have been too much neglected in the past, the focus on how culture shapes practice by no means forms a past stage. In

of argumentation that might be useful for the analysis of some cultural processes, but not necessarily for all. His analysis of the Balinese cockfight provides an example of this more restricted use of the text analogy.

⁶ I have discussed elsewhere (Bakker 1988) the degree of continuity and discontinuity between *Agricultural Involution* and Geertz's other publications.

⁷ Geertz's theory of practice also generally neglects the question why certain practices sustain or change culture and other aspects of socio-cultural systems. This neglect is deliberate. According to Geertz's explicit programmatic statements, causal and teleological explanations are of minor importance (Geertz 1973: 3-30).

my opinion, Geertz's theory of practice - as can be explicated from his corpus - offers a valuable tool for the work that still needs to be done in this context.

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