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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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**A comparison of selected anthropological
theories in view of their pragmatic value**

**Srovnání vybraných antropologických teorií
z hlediska jejich pragmatické hodnoty**

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Abstract

The study deals with the problem of applicability of two anthropological theories, structural functionalism and interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz. By applicability is meant what concrete difference using of one or the other theory brings about in ethnography. Each of the theories is at first thoroughly examined with emphasis on its possible aims, assumptions, and consequences for an ethnographer. Then each theory is put to test in examination of one particular ethnography associated with the theory. Evan's Pritchard's *The Nuer* serves as an instance of structural functionalism. Clifford Geertz's *Negara* as an example of interpretative analysis. Structural functionalism is shown to provide an ethnographer with a much more definite guidance which contributes to better possibilities of verification and comparability of the results than interpretive anthropology. Apart from the main subject, the study is concerned with more general questions, especially related to non-existence of a paradigm in anthropology and some of its causes.

Keywords: structural functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, The Nuer, interpretive anthropology, Clifford Geertz, Negara, ethnography, theory, anthropology, applicability of a theory

Abstrakt

Studie se zabývá problémem praktické uplatnitelnosti dvou antropologických teorií, strukturálního funkcionalismu a interpretativní antropologie Clifforda Geertze. Uplatnitelnost se vztahuje k otázce, jak se užití jedné či druhé teorie konkrétně projeví v analýze etnografických dat. Každá z teorií je nejdříve podrobně rozebrána s důrazem na její možné cíle a přínosy, předpoklady na nichž staví, a důsledky které z ní plynou pro etnografa. Poté jsou teorie zkoumány na příkladu jejich konkrétního uplatnění v etnografických monografiích. Za příklad uplatnění strukturálního funkcionalismu je zvolen titul *The Nuer* od Evanse-Pritcharda. Interpretativní antropologii reprezentuje monografie *Negara* Clifforda Geertze. V závěru je konstatováno, že strukturální funkcionalismus poskytuje mnohem určitější vedení pro analýzu, z čehož vyplývá i lepší ověřitelnost a srovnatelnost jeho výsledků. Kromě hlavního předmětu se studie potýká i s obecnějšími otázkami ohledně ne-existence paradigmatu v antropologii a některých příčin tohoto stavu.

Klíčová slova: strukturální funkcionalismus, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, Nuerové, interpretativní antropologie, Clifford Geertz, Negara, etnografie, teorie, antropologie, uplatnitelnost teorie

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1 Introduction and some preliminary thoughts

1.1 Pragmatic value

Now I should make clear what and why I am going to do in this study, and I should add something on how I am going to do it. I will start with explaining the odd name of this work, especially what I mean by the term pragmatic value. I do not claim it to be a standard notion. The most concise expression of what I mean by it could be biblical “*You will recognize them by their fruits.*”¹ In a more modern and elaborate form one can find it in William James's *Pragmatism*, and in Peirce's well known article *How to make our ideas clear*. There we can find the following often quoted passage: “*Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.*”² The meaning of a concept lies in its practical consequences, to paraphrase it. This came to be known as pragmatic maxim. My use of the notion pragmatic value is confined to this, and even that in only very limited and perhaps slightly twisted form, and ignores practically all other lessons from the philosophy of pragmatism, as I would not know, how to apply them to my task.

1.2 General idea

After the minimal account of what I mean by pragmatic value, I should specify a little how and to what end I will use it. The idea is quite simple. It draws upon the question, what is going to be the difference for me, if I go on a fieldwork and decide to do it, let's say, as a functionalist, and if I choose to follow interpretive anthropology or any other theory instead. To summarize it, I am interested in how theories can be, or rather actually are, applied in practice. How they shape ethnographic monographs. Is ethnographic material recalcitrant and the principles of theories are just logically (more or less) coherent constructs, looking good on paper, but not so readily applicable? Are the theories definite enough to provide a real guidance? These are my main concerns. On the contrary, the term pragmatic value is not to be understood in the sense of evaluation of theories in terms of practical applications they made possible, that is in the sense of applied anthropology, nor is it to be understood as an

1 Matthew 7:15–20; English Standard Version.

2 PEIRCE, Ch. S.: “*How to Make Our Ideas Clear*”, *Popular Science Monthly*, v. 12, pp. 293.

assessment of theories from the perspective of how far they get us in answering some common, big, long-term, questions of anthropology. Both of these questions would be quite meaningless. The former because applied anthropology, if it has any results at all, does not seem to be dependent on theories. The latter because I do not believe there are any such common questions, which is a topic I will touch upon later.

1.3 Procedure and material

Something needs to be said about my procedure, though there is very little in the way of any formal method. First, I will attempt to expound the theory in such a manner so as to make apparent its consequences. At the same time questions of assumptions on which it stands and aims it pursues will be dealt with, along with some methodological problems. Then an exposition and analysis of a monograph follows.

The monographs I have chosen are such so they can be unequivocally attributed to the theory or “school.” Because of practical reasons, concerning both, time required and the usual length of the work of this type, that is master thesis, I will confine myself to comparing only two theories, structural functionalism and interpretive anthropology. As their representative monographs I have chosen Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*, and Clifford Geertz's *Negara: Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* respectively. They are, of course, of a very different sort, one dealing with egalitarian, and what was, before the era of political correctness, called primitive society, and based upon fieldwork, the other dealing with civilized and long gone state form. Nevertheless, they have in common their main subject - political institutions. But the reason I have chosen them rests on something different. They are considered mature expressions of their theories, and that is of greatest importance for my purposes. I am not in the slightest interested in the facts they present. The only relevant question is how they reflect their respective theories. Speaking of which, I could say this study is written from the standpoint beyond right and false. Both what concerns theory and what concerns data. In other words, in case of monographs, I will not concern myself with questions whether it was refuted by later researches or experts on the area. Nor will I pay attention to adequacy of methods used for acquiring data and the like, as these are only relatively loosely connected with a theory. The same disregard applies to matters of theory. This study only takes interest in what possible knowledge a given theory could bring us, granted it is correct, or at least not fundamentally incorrect. Therefore I will not, for the most part at least, criticize assumptions of theories, for this sort of criticism is, as a rule, possible only from the vantage point of

another theory, and I profess to have none. However, I cannot be said to be completely free of bias. I would like to see anthropology as a science and not just a peculiar and usually rather boring sort of fiction, driven by ideologies, whether colonial or postcolonial. Or just dull description, for that matter. So much for an exercise in reflexivity. In summary, I can only repeat that all questions of right and false should be parenthesized.

As for an evaluation, which the term pragmatic value might associate, it is in not the point here to tell which of the theories is better or worse. In fact, the true aims of this study are very modest. It is to make sense of it, which, I think, is done best, by looking not just at the principles and statements of theory, but at their application on some material. I will have something more to say about this aim in the section on motivation of this work. What I am evaluating here, if we cannot dispense with this word, is not how good or bad results of a theory are, but how usable a given theory is. It could be restated into: how good a theory is at providing the results it promises to provide. And for this reason I employ the monographs, instead of just trying to figure it out by pure reasoning.

There arises a common objection to pragmatism in this respect: application of some principle tells nothing of the principle itself, whether it is good or reprehensible, it might always be just misapplication. To this objection, given the fact that I take only one monograph for each theory, I cannot defend myself with usual pragmatic arguments, which have as their prerequisite multiplicity of the same experience. My only defence is the consensus of scholars on the subject, according to which these two monographs are mature examples of application of their respective theories. By this consensus I mean mainly textbooks and encyclopedias, which often refer to these two monographs in dealing with the theories in question.

With my aim the form of this study, a comparison, is connected. But comparison here should be understood in a very limited sense, which the concept of this work as stated above permits. The idea behind it is that understanding necessitates contrast, or in other words alternatives. When one sees just one theory or concept, it is easy for him to take it as natural, which is exactly something that prevents understanding. To understand implies to see how it might be otherwise, only then, in competition with others, our reasons become real reasons.

1.4 Motivation

Above I wrote that my aim is to make sense of it. What I mean by this “it” are not surprisingly chiefly the two theories in question, but at the same time it is true that theories are not born out of thin air. In a way, they are more often than not just particular and concrete expressions

of some more general ways of thinking. If we take it a step too far, they could, from this perspective, be viewed as transformations of some already existing thoughts. But I will not trace this line of reasoning explicitly. The reason I write it here, is merely to make clear the connection of reviewing, in some not quite usual, and perhaps bizarre and obscure way, two anthropological theories with my general motivation, which in a more explicit form follows. Speaking of which, I should state some reasons for the choice of my theories.

One could think of more sensible reasons for this choice. First, structural functionalism and interpretive anthropology are perhaps the two most influential theories in the later history of the field in terms of timespan and number of followers, but it would be hard to state with any certainty, so let's stay at a statement, which is safer, vaguer and less pompous, that they are among the most influential theories which have shaped anthropology. Other reason is their oppositeness in many respects. One could be named as an exemplary instance of nomothetic approach, the other is openly idiographic. With this, the aims of the field, the topic I will deal with later, are intimately related. Moreover, we could possibly try to classify these two approaches according to other conventional categories like materialist vs. idealist, where they would again stand on the opposite sides, or structure vs. agency, in which case they should be classified together. But I will omit following this intellectual pastime any further, for I do not consider it very telling.

After this necessary digression I would like to get back to the proper subject of this chapter. As I have already said, my aim, modest one measured by its possible outcomes indeed, is to achieve a better understanding of anthropological theories. We can ask seemingly silly question, why. This question can be understood in several senses. Two of them seem relevant for other than merely personal interest. One pertains to the situation of a student of anthropology, who might easily find himself in disarray looking at the history of the field. The second sense, in fact not at all disconnected from the first one, concerns the value of theory in anthropology, or even in any other field. In the short history of anthropology a number of theories has been created, about which we can hardly contend they resemble anything like progress. In other words, criteria for replacing old theories by newer ones do not appear to be driven by principles of efficiency, enlargement of the number of facts we can account for, or anything of that sort. In a way, the situation is not unlike the situation in philosophy, with a possible exception that philosophers do not truly reject anything, while in anthropology there are currently probably no proponents of many theories, which flourished in the past. But philosophers can get away with their zero-progress situation by saying that philosophical questions are eternal and yield to no definitive answers etc.

I would expect ambitions of anthropology to be of a different sort. It should purport to formulate something substantial about human populations, and possibly about man in general. But the impression I have of today anthropology is that the most general comment anthropology is able to present is that no general discoveries are possible, that every society is different, and the richness in diversity of those populations is the beauty of it. It strikes me as a fine example of making a virtue of necessity. For this idiom can be understood in several quite different ways, it is better to rephrase it in this way: Anthropologists are unable to produce a theory that could account for a broad variety of social phenomena and a majority of them would be willing to accept. So, instead of trying to come up with a new one, they, in a large part at least, reject all endeavours to make general theories and declare that we must focus on unique and distinct phenomena and try to understand them. What this understanding means is not easy to understand. I remember a Confucian story about a scholar who tried to discover the essence of a bamboo. His method was to sit and stare at the bamboo stick. After a few days he made a major discovery. He discovered futility of his practice. To discover something, we have to do something, we cannot just passively try to understand. In every discovery there is our contribution, not just some passive reality we uncover. That is why theories are so important and it is worth trying to come to grips with them. But the situation of a student of anthropology when he enters the field – now I mean field of anthropology, not a site where research is conducted – is either one of bewilderment, or, perhaps as a sort of defence reaction, he (or she) ignores theoretical issues, since the choice of theories at hand appears too vast and at once not particularly enticing. In anthropological textbooks and books on the history of the field one finds a chain of theories replacing one another, almost each of them appearing hopelessly obsolete and often quite silly today. It would be no wonder if the lesson one derived from it would be resembling lessons of Greek scepticism – the most reasonable choice is not to choose, in other words, the suspension of judgement.

I do not claim to have a solution for this. The only real solution would be some new, or perhaps even old, grand theory coming into fashion again. But a component of that situation of a student of anthropology is that he knows of theories as a rule only second hand, from textbooks. In them he finds only summaries of a few basic principles and handful of criticisms, which is hardly enough to acquire any definite idea of a given theory, especially what concerns its application, which is actually the only reason a theory exists. A theory which cannot be put to use is meaningless.

Above I described history of anthropology as a not particularly rationally appearing

succession of theories. In this regard it might be questioned what is the point in examining past theories then. It is exactly in this. It is a cliché of historians to say that we study history because we do not want to repeat the same mistakes, but in this case, I think, it is not unreasonable. To put it in a noble fashion, I could paraphrase Wilhelm Dilthey's dictum that what man is, only his history can tell him, into: what anthropology is, only its history can tell us.³ To put it in a more pedestrian way, we should clarify what it is we want to know, for the most peculiar thing about the history of anthropology is, that it does not move by rejecting old theories in favour of new ones because the old ones fail to answer our questions. What is changing in the first place are not methods and assumptions, but goals. Kuhn's depreciation of social sciences as being in pre-paradigm stage is quite to the point, and using by social scientists the word paradigm for their ephemeral theories has a taste of bitter irony. We do not even know, what it is we want to know. And to find it out, or rather decide on it, I consider it better to look into the history of the discipline, to see what options there really are, and where pursuing them had got us, instead of abstract reasoning about science per se, which is either void, merely logical concept, or modelled on some successful, and completely different science.

3 DILTHEY, W.: "*Was der Mensch sei, sagt ihm nur seine Geschichte*," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5th ed., vol. VIII, Teubner 1962, pp. 226.

2 Structural Functionalism

2.1 Introduction

2.1.1 Label

More often than not is it a matter of historian or generally somebody from without to invent a label for a movement, school, historical period or whatever of that sort. In the present chapter I would like to deal with a theory or school which in textbooks⁴ or other texts that can be called secondary literature goes under the name structural functionalism. I believe it is worth stopping here to make a few remarks about the name, since it is not the only one we can encounter. On the contrary, when we look into the more specialized book on the topic, Adam Kuper's *Anthropology and anthropologists: the modern British school*,⁵ what we find, is a bunch of names, structural functionalism not being among them. The names we can find, are British structuralism, Radcliffe-Brown's structuralism, or just structuralism. Moreover, we can find a nickname "kinshipology." In Radcliffe-Brown's own writings which I have examined the term also does not appear. He usually speaks just of social anthropology, social science or comparative sociology⁶ without specifying his approach by giving it a name of some theory. Only sometimes he calls it functionalist approach and the like. During my exposition, in order to prevent misunderstandings, I will stick to the conventional designation as it can be seen in the name of the chapter.

2.1.2 Context and content briefly outlined

In the next section I would like to introduce shortly what we are to expect under the heading, although I will have something more to say about the name as well. Reading the secondary sources, one gets the impression that in approximately 1920s there came into being in Britain one grand theory called functionalism and this theory suddenly rendered previous theories called evolutionism and diffusionism obsolete. This theory had two great proponents, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, each of which founded a branch of it, called just functionalism or psycho-biological functionalism and structural functionalism respectively. The main difference between the two being probably that while

4 BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004; ERIKSEN, T. H. - NIELSEN, F. S.: *A History of Anthropology*, Pluto Press 2001.; MOORE, J. D.: *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*, Altamira Press 2009.

5 KUPER, A.: *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*, Routledge 1996.

6 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, The Free Press 1952, pp. 3.

Malinowski was more interested in individual, and every institution or custom served ultimately some biological or psychological need of the individual, for Radcliffe-Brown something called social structure was the main subject of interest, and institutions or customs served to maintain this social structure. I am not saying this is wrong, and altogether I am not interested in polemics, but the above outlined picture needs to be specified in more than one direction. These specifications relate both to the historical circumstances of the origin of the theories, and what is more important, to the relation between the two branches, and to the question, whether they can be justly described as two branches of one theory at all.

Only a few words need to be said about historical context or circumstances, as it is not my business in this study to write about general history of the field and my knowledge of it is thoroughly insufficient for such a task.⁷ First to the dating. 1920s saw publications of the first major works of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, but it was not until a decade later that Malinowski's functionalism became prevalent in British social anthropology, and approximately another decade later it was replaced with Radcliffe-Brown's theory which continued to be the dominant stream in the British Empire well into the 1950s. But this is of course an extremely crude picture of the actual situation, since there were always some adherents of Malinowski, most notably Raymond Firth, and there gradually grew variance among British anthropologist, especially after the Second World War. Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Edmund Leach and Max Gluckman are the names of just the most prominent renegades.

Other thing which deserves a short notice is the relation of the so called functionalism to the previously ruling theories, evolutionism and diffusionism. Apart from Kuper's account of the history of the field, which says pretty much the same thing, we can find in Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* a passage, where he proposes to establish – in addition to the existing studies of a) history (schematic and hypothetical one) of the "primitives" which were the subject of evolutionism, b) of the culture contacts and influences, which we would probably call diffusionist studies, and for what Malinowski had the name ethnological school, and c) of the study of the influence of environment on institutions and race (anthropo-geography) - a new branch of enquiry. A branch concerning the present of the "primitives", or more precisely, interconnectedness of their institutions and their function.⁸ Moreover, we can find quite similar statements in Radcliffe-Brown's later paper,

7 KUPER, A.: *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*, Routledge 1996. A reader with an interest in this subject will find detailed information in Adam Kuper's excellent book on British anthropology, which served me as a source for the short summary following in the text.

8 "But it seems to me that a deeper analysis and comparison of the manner in which two aspects of culture

originally published in 1935.⁹ First, he says that a fieldwork done with his theory in mind would clearly be different from one *"carried out from other points of view, e.g. the ethnological point of view that lays emphasis on diffusion. We do not have to say that one point of view is better than another, but only that they are different, and any particular piece of work should be judged in reference to what it aims to do."*¹⁰ In a latter portion of the text he claims that there is no conflict between historical explanation, which were characteristic of both evolutionism and diffusionism, although in different terms, and functionalist explanation, which is essentially synchronic. They are rather complementary vantage points, and in a footnote he summarizes his position as follows: *"I see no reason at all why the two kinds of study—the historical and the functional—should not be carried on side by side in perfect harmony. In fact, for fourteen years I have been teaching both the historical and geographical study of peoples under the name of ethnology in close association with archaeology, and the functional study of social systems under the name of social anthropology. I do think that there are many disadvantages in mixing the two subjects together and confusing them."*¹¹

Now to the question of the label functionalism. Malinowski can be granted a coinage of the term functionalism and he himself boasted about it, as can be seen in the quotation below. Radcliffe-Brown on the other hand was quite sceptical about the term, at least in some of his writings. *"I have been described on more than one occasion as belonging to something called the 'Functional School of Social Anthropology' and even as being its leaders, or one of its leaders. This Functional School does not really exist; it is a myth invented by professor Malinowski. He has explained how, to quote his own words, 'the magnificent title of the Functional School of Anthropology has been bestowed by myself, in a way on myself, and to a large extent out of my own sense of irresponsibility'. Professor Malinowski's irresponsibility has had unfortunate results, since it has spread over anthropology a dense fog of discussion about 'functionalism'. Professor Lowie has announced, that the leading, though not the only, exponent of functionalism in the nineteenth century was professor Franz Boas. ...*

functionally depend on one another might afford some interesting material for theoretical reflection. Indeed, it seems to me that there is room for a new type of theory. ... The influence on one another of the various aspects of an institution, the study of the social and psychological mechanism on which the institution is based, are a type of theoretical studies which has been practised up till now in a tentative way only, but I venture to foretell will come into their own sooner or later. This kind of research will pave the way and provide the material for the others." MALINOWSKI, B.: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, Routledge 2002. pp. 406.

9 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the concept of function in social science*, in *American Anthropologist* New Series, Vol. 37, No. 3, Part 1 (Jul. - Sep., 1935), pp. 394–402.

10 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the concept of function in social science*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 184-5.

11 Ibid. pp. 186.

The statement that I am a 'functionalist' would seem to me to convey no definite meaning."¹² There are two things to notice in this large piece of quotation. The less important and a slightly bizarre one, (and by that maybe another reason for Radcliffe-Brown's turning down of the label) is the mention made by Lowie of Boas as a functionalist, not to mention Boas as a nineteenth century functionalist, although his career, in fact larger part of it, spanned about thirty years into the twentieth century. Boas, known for his disapproval of theory, or we can say speculation, in anthropology, is really an awkward candidate for Radcliffe-Brown's predecessor. His theory, for every great figure in anthropology must, at least in textbooks, be connected with a theory, or better be founder of one, is called historical particularism. The theory, and I am really not sure it deserves the name, that says that every culture is a product of unique historical circumstances and must be treated as such. As a result, there is no place for generalisations, let alone laws.

The more important thing to notice in the above quotation is Radcliffe-Brown's distancing himself from the label functionalism and from Malinowski. And we can find similar arguments echoed in a later text published by Radcliffe-Brown, a sort of an angry rejoinder to being labelled as a functionalist. One reason for rejecting the name is that: *"There is no place in natural science for 'schools' in this sense, and I regard social anthropology as a branch of natural science."*¹³ One might think this statement a rather dogmatic, a sort of, when I say social anthropology, I mean the way I do it. His actual point is though, I believe, rather different, as can be seen in the latter text, written in much sharper and even deriding tone: *"It is worth while to point out that names ending in -ism do not apply to scientific theories, but do apply to philosophical doctrines. ... By calling his doctrine "functionalism" Malinowski seems to have wished to emphasize that it was the product of one mind, like any philosophical doctrine, not, like a scientific theory, the product of the co-operative thinking of a succession of scientists. Might it not prevent confusion if it were renamed Malinowskianism?"*¹⁴ Science is a disinterested enterprise and scientist are labourers of knowledge, seekers of one objective Truth, not important by themselves. That is at least what Radcliffe-Brown openly acknowledges. The reason I make this remark and a possible

12 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On Social Structure*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 188. And we can find very much similar statement in another paper, devoted especially to rejecting any connection to Malinowski and functionalism. *"Malinowski has explained that he is the inventor of functionalism, to which he gave its name. His definition of it is clear; it is the theory or doctrine that every feature of culture of any people past or present is to be explained by reference to seven biological needs of individual human beings.... As for myself I reject it entirely, regarding it as useless and worse. As a consistent opponent of Malinowski's functionalism I may be called an anti-functionalist"*. RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Functionalism: A Protest*, *American Anthropologist* 51(2), pp. 321.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. pp. 323.

value of it for the task at hand, is, that it shows how strongly Radcliffe-Brown believed his vision of anthropology as a natural science and what implications it carried for him.

There are of course further reasons behind Radcliffe-Brown's objecting against being put together with Malinowski and his functionalism. Clearly there are differences between the two. Some of them are already apparent in the aforementioned textbook picture of the functionalism. The difference is, in fact, quite profound. It concerns, among other things, the aims of anthropology.¹⁵ In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* Malinowski repeatedly speaks of aim of his enquiry as getting native's point of view, or understanding them, and through this to understand ourselves, since we and the "primitives" share the same human nature. This nature is viewed in terms of psychology, the society being only a vehicle of satisfying human's, i.e. individual's needs. G. P. Murdock in his obituary on Malinowski sums it up speaking of the "instrumental character of culture" as the crux of Malinowski's functionalism.¹⁶ But what concerns me now more are the aims of anthropology as Malinowski expressed them. I think there is a passage in *Argonauts* regarding this which deserves to be quoted: "*This goal [of ethnographer] is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world. ... In each culture, we find different institutions in which man pursues his life-interest, different customs by which he satisfies his aspirations, different codes of law and morality which reward his virtues or punish his defections. To study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behavior and mentality without the subjective desire of feeling by what these people live, of realising the substance of their happiness—is, in my opinion, to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.*"¹⁷ And on another place he specifies further the final goal of ethnology, or the study of man – he uses both of these names – , as not acquiring the native's point of view, but through this, i. e. through "*grasping the essential outlook of others*", to understand better our own nature, to make it finer and to deepen our tolerance and generosity.¹⁸ These aims, high-minded and vague as they may be, are notably different from those of Radcliffe-Brown, which I will introduce in detail later. Here, I point out only the term natural science, which we have already encountered and which emerges with a fairly high incidence in Radcliffe-Brown's writings. Natural science is for him something utterly

15 I must confess, my knowledge of Malinowski's writings is very limited, as his theory is not one considered in this work. I work on the assumption that the views he expressed in his famous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* he held also throughout his later career.

16 MURDOCK, G. P.: Bronislaw Malinowski, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 45, No. 3. (July— September, 1943), pp. 444.

17 MALINOWSKI, B.: *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, Routledge 2002, pp. 19.

18 Ibid. pp. 407.

devoid of ethical or practical or any motivations other than getting knowledge.¹⁹ And knowledge means general propositions, for science, as Aristotle says and Radcliffe-Brown would keenly agree, deals only with the general, never with the particular. And one form of the general propositions, the form Radcliffe-Brown is most interested in, are scientific laws, although his notion of such a law is, in my opinion, unusually broad one, but we will come to that later. The previous discussion is supposed to serve mainly to contrast Radcliffe-Brown's view of the discipline with that of Malinowski, and by that, to acquire a somewhat better understanding of his position. There are of course numerous other differences between them, but the difference in aim or ultimate goal of the discipline I find the most interesting and relevant one for the purpose of this study. Yet, I can mention a few other major differences. Malinowski's interest in individual and his psychology in contrast to Radcliffe-Brown's sociological approach with interest in social structure have been already mentioned. Apart from that, there is one other thing that needs to be clarified, and that is the notion of function as a notion apparently closely related to that of functionalism. Above, I described Radcliffe-Brown as being sceptical regarding the latter term. Nevertheless he uses the term function and functionalist approach. But he does so in a manner very much different from Malinowski. In case of Malinowski, the word it could be substituted for is the word purpose. An institution, in Malinowski's point of view, has a function. It lies in satisfying a human need either primary, that is, biological, or secondary, meaning it is a need which comes into being out of necessity of some co-ordination between institutions in order to fulfil their function. For Radcliffe-Brown the word carries a different meaning, as he explicitly states in an article on the topic.²⁰ In it, he mentions three senses of the word function. One being the above mentioned function as a purpose. We could call it an instrumental use of the term. Then there is the way the term is used in mathematics. Radcliffe-Brown rejects both of these for the purposes of social anthropology. Interestingly he devotes practically no attention to the mathematical usage even though we are going to find this usage in Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*. The only legitimate meaning of the term function in the social anthropology is derived from physiology, the discipline concerning functioning of organisms. The analogy of society as an organism Radcliffe-Brown uses frequently.

Now there is an open question whether Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's use of the word function is really that different as Radcliffe-Brown insists. In the further text I shall go

19 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 7; 147–148; RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On Social Structure*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 204.

20 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the Concept of Function*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952.

into more details and try to expound somewhat more systematically his theory, including the notion of function as it was employed by him.

2.2 Theory proper

In this part I will try to focus on some of the key concepts which occur in Radcliffe-Brown's writing. The exposition follows two planes which can roughly be named as meta-theory on the one hand, containing aims, some of the background assumptions and thoughts about the nature of science in general and of social anthropology in particular etc., and on the other hand theory itself. But it is necessary to bear in mind that these two planes, however logically clearly delimited they may seem, are in fact intertwined and they cannot be completely separated in discussion, thus I gave up trying to split them into distinct chapters. Instead I start with some more abstract thoughts and gradually descend to something more concrete. Another misdemeanour against formal requirements I have to own up to, is that I have not found any way how to deal with the concepts in isolation from each other, for every one of them implies in some way or other the rest of them. Because of this there are numerous cases of terms already discussed reappearing in the text, in order to enrich them of some details not previously mentioned.

2.2.1 Sources

This section is based primarily on Radcliffe-Brown's four texts, three articles and one book, which are his main texts devoted to theoretical issues. There is a few problems related. These texts come from various times and the terminology used in them differs, sometimes profoundly. This is a serious obstacle to any exposition, because there is simply too many terms, the relations of which are not always clear. Another problem is Radcliffe-Brown's habit of defining one term many times even in one text, each time somewhat differently. He does it by all means for the sake of clarity, but the result seems to me sometimes a sort of a scholastic proliferation of numerous awkward terms appearing in various connections and configurations. What differs also are the ways in which Radcliffe-Brown expounds the subject-matter. For example, one word which keeps occurring in the latter text is the word process, almost everything is in one way or another related to a process. In the older book *A natural science of society*, there is scarcely any mention of it. However, there seems to be little change in his views, only the emphases are put a little differently. Instead

of deciding for one source and its terminology, which would perhaps seem most natural, I will try to stick to some common core of the terminology and where necessary or convenient I will add other variants as well. In the first section my primary source is going to be the book *A natural science of society*, for it covers topics otherwise neglected, namely meta-theoretical assumptions. The book is a record of discussion that Radcliffe-Brown delivered at the University of Chicago in 1937. That is in and of itself of no particular interest for us, but the pretext on which he delivered it might be. It was a reaction to a popular view at that time, that social science was supposed to be pursued in terms of psychology. To this Radcliffe-Brown strongly opposed.

In the text he deals with a question, whether there is a possibility of a natural science of society, concluding that there is, and there can be only one unified science of that kind, but it is not yet in existence, partly because of the lack of unified and binding terminology.²¹ By natural science he means application of methods of physical and biological sciences. By unified is meant that all social phenomena, like economics, law, religion etc. should be part of this science and should be inquired with their relation to the whole social structure in mind. The only possible exception is language, having a relative autonomous stance. As for the relation to psychology, he maintains that it must be distinct as "*physiology is from chemistry*". It is a common theme which we can find for example in the writings of his American contemporary Kroeber.²² Culture, or in Radcliffe-Brown's view social system, is something existing on its own level and cannot be reduced to individuals' psychology.

2.2.2 Laws of nature

Other discipline, towards which he makes a demarcation, is history.²³ It deals with the particular, while our science is supposed to deal with general propositions. These he calls "*laws of nature*" and adds that they have a general form "*Any instance of X is also an instance of Y.*"²⁴ It may strike us at first as surprising, but when we try to substitute some known law of nature, for example Newton's law of universal gravitation, as an archetypical example of the natural law, it fits rather well. Whenever we have any two bodies, each having a certain mass, that is the "X", then we also have an instance of force, which has a definite relation to the mass and distance of the bodies, that being the "Y". He then furnishes the notion of the

21 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 3–4.

22 e. g. KROEBER, A. L.: *Causes in Culture*, in *Nature of Culture*, University of Chicago Press 1952, pp. 108.

23 This is of course a statement in terms of idiographic vs. nomothetic dichotomy.

24 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 6.

natural science with its purpose, which is "*a systematic investigation of the laws of nature*."²⁵ It might seem a little amusing that a science of society, however a natural one, is concerned with the laws of nature, but he apparently understood this notion as meaning approximately "what exists of itself, independently of any conscious creation, and what is always the case". In other words, we are not presented with the opposition nature vs. culture. Instead culture, or rather social system, is a natural phenomenon of a certain kind, characterised by a limited number of possible forms it may acquire. People live in societies which show some recurrent characteristics and these are not a result of planned actions but are much more presuppositions for any conscious, purposive or planned action. I would like to pause here for a moment to make a little digression. The notion law of nature is, I think, basically an expression of a belief that the reality is not accidental, it is not a haphazard mess nor is it a result of whims of some higher being. On the contrary, the reality makes only some things permissible and it does it always in the same ways, which makes it accessible to cognition. The product of cognition, knowledge, can be stated either in mathematical or statistical form or in what Radcliffe-Brown calls relational. The latter is the form applicable to social sciences.

As for the motivation of this natural science, I have already mentioned that it is being pursued for its own sake. Radcliffe-Brown acknowledges the relation of natural laws to expectability and therefore their role for action, and the relation of mutual dependency upon each other between theoretical and practical sciences. Nevertheless he seems to maintain as his final word on the subject that this is not the main drive behind a scientific enterprise.²⁶

A few relevant characteristics of natural laws according to Radcliffe-Brown which I have not mention yet, are that they should be based on systematic observation, logically connected and are immanent in the universe. The last point means that it is neither a convenient fiction as pragmatist would have it, nor a mere regularity in observation as positivists would claim. It is something really existing in the universe and constituting natural order.²⁷ I believe this remark can easily be overlook or undervalued. To prevent it I will quote a bit which shows the weight of this assumption. "*The statement [of a law of nature] will, if true, be true of societies a thousand years from now as well as those of half a million years ago.*"²⁸

Radcliffe-Brown pays attention to making explicit his philosophical assumptions

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On Social Structure*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952 pp. 204.

²⁷ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 14.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 72.

so I will very briefly concern myself with this subject too. The nature of reality is composed according to him of events and relations between events. Or to be more precise: "*The phenomenal, intelligible reality of entities (or objects) consists of events or sets of events and the relations or real interconnectedness between them. An event is a possible or actual occasion of experience.*"²⁹ It is obvious that he had some training in philosophy, and it is known that he studied under Whitehead while he was a student in Cambridge. He has quite a lot to say on the topic, but most of it is either common-sense or largely irrelevant to anything, so I will not dwell on it any longer.

2.2.3 Classification

Essential in science for Radcliffe-Brown is classification and that goes hand in hand with comparison. He recognizes that class can be defined arbitrarily, but apart from that there are what he calls *natural kinds*, and these are subject of a natural sciences. The criteria for discerning whether a given class is arbitrary or is closer to being a *natural kind* is its expediency. The class which shares many common characteristics which other classes do not possess is an expedient one. I am aware that this is all very abstract and dry. To deal with the first problem, I can state some of Radcliffe-Brown's examples of *natural kinds*. Those are silver, tin, or horse meant as the species, not as a particular animal. And of course there are according to him natural kinds of societies as well.

We can now get back for a while to the notion of natural law, and refine it a little. "*All scientific problems become problems of describing systems; all can be reduced to one statement: 'A natural law is a statement of the characteristics possessed by a certain definite class of natural systems in the universe'*"³⁰ Now we have classes of systems. The word system indicates something consisting of units in certain relationships; Radcliffe-Brown speaks of relations of real interconnectedness. It might be appropriate to discuss the influence of Durkheim and his notion of social facts as things, which very likely served as inspiration here, but it would get us too far from objectives of this study. A system is also something what we can delimit and treat separately from the rest of the universe. The real interconnectedness is quite important because it says that the system is something what exists as a separate unit, i.e. it is a real entity, an integrated whole. An atom, a horse (a one particular animal), or a particular society are examples of systems. A class on the other hand is something we

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 13.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 20.

make by comparing various systems and sorting them into groups with common characteristics. In doing this we have to try to identify natural kinds. To summarize, we can say that actual entities existing in the world, including societies, are for Radcliffe-Brown systems. A system is an organic unity having structure and functional consistency.³¹ These systems we can classify into something similar to species in biology. There are of course certain differences, for example there is no need of genetic relation in case of societies for classifying them as belonging to one type. What concerns criteria of this classification, I will get to that shortly.

An obvious problem with this picture is that it is modelled on things like discerning particular dog as a dog, which is something deeply entrenched in our language practices, or at a more abstract level, classifying dogs and cats into a group called mammals, where criteria are readily at hand. That is not to say they are in no respect arbitrary, meaning dependent on our decision. What makes such a decision in the realm of biology easier, are, among other things, concreteness and tangibility of these systems – dogs and cats – and, from the viewpoint of modern biology, the notion of their genetic relationships. None of this applies to societies.

2.2.4 Model science

It is worth noticing the very broad way in which Radcliffe-Brown uses the term law of nature. Sometimes he speaks of the law of nature as if it were any valid generalization of science. But that would include also making of a class which corresponds to a natural kind and it is not consistent with his definition that already presupposes classification: "*A natural law is a statement of the characteristics possessed by a certain definite class of natural systems in the universe*". It should be clear by now what I meant when I wrote that he was using the notion law of nature in a very broad sense. An example of a law of nature thus defined is a statement: "The (species) horse has four legs." It is a sort of Aristotelian view of science. Science as making of taxonomies by means of induction, i.e. identification of essential characteristics of a species and their comparison and then deducing in the form of a syllogism a scientific statement of such a form as I have indicated above with the horse's legs. In other words, deriving from a notion just that, what we had previously put into it. The Aristotle's vision of science probably served Radcliffe-Brown as an inspiration because he uses the vocabulary traditionally associated with it, speaking of accidental and essential

³¹ Ibid. pp. 22.

characteristics.³² But the model of science he openly acknowledges as his inspiration is less abstract. It is biology and physiology.³³ And a society is construed as analogous to an organism. With his model science in mind he defines three fields of problems for social science. First it is classification. Sometimes he uses for it the term social morphology. It tries to answer the basic question, what types of societies are there. Then we have as a second field that of social physiology, which is concerned with the problem of how societies function, which for Radcliffe-Brown means: how do they persist? And then there is also the third field, in fact marginal in importance for him, of how societies change their type, that is, their structural form. This is a problem analogous to the evolution of organisms.

Here I would like to make a little remark concerning sciences which are supposed to serve as a model for anthropology. Especially, I am interested in some of their implications. An appropriate way to study organisms is, or rather was in Radcliffe-Brown's times, to study their structure or morphology, and their physiology, meaning the way their parts function in relation to the whole. The important thing is that these procedures are carried out at the level of the organic life, without reduction to its chemistry or even physics. The relations here are not of causal nature. I have made already in the text above one passing reference to Kroeber, who shared the general view that cultural phenomena should not be reduced to anything else and the only acceptable explanation of them is in terms of other phenomena of the same level of reality, that is culture, or in Radcliffe-Brown's vocabulary, social system. He even shared the analogy of a culture as organism. But interestingly his model science was not biology and still less physiology. It was linguistics.³⁴ A linguist, according to Kroeber, proceeds by showing how some phenomena of language are correlated with other phenomena of language. He seeks for regularities. These constitute an explanation, or maybe it is better to avoid this word and to use some more neutral one, like the result of enquiry. The main reason I am mentioning this is, that it illustrates how anthropology is, in a way, helpless as to what methods it should apply, and what is more, aims it should pursue. It very often tries to borrow inspiration from some other already established and less dubious discipline. The whole long-winded discussion which I am giving here, and it is only a tiny piece of the discussion on the subject matter in Radcliffe-Brown's book, seems to me as a sort of secondary rationalization of the methods appropriated from biology. And it is probably worth noticing the contrast between a very complicated-looking background assumptions

³² Ibid. pp. 76.

³³ Ibid. pp. 86.

³⁴ KROEBER, A. L.: *Culture, Events and Individuals*, in *Nature of Culture*, University of Chicago Press 1952, pp. 104; KROEBER, A. L.: *Causes in Culture*, in *Nature of Culture*, University of Chicago Press 1952, pp. 107.

of which we have seen only a small part and the relative poverty of the possible outcomes it may actually bring. But it is yet to be shown what these outcomes really are.

2.2.5 Functional hypothesis

A society is for him an instance of a class of objects (natural systems) governed by its own natural laws. This is closely related to the form of explanation he proposes and which he calls functional.³⁵ This way of explaining things he contrasts with the historical one, i.e. viewing a society as a result of previous events, whether historical accidents or some natural lawlike development. These are the forms of explanation in which diffusionism and evolutionism respectively engaged. The functional way of explanation is synchronic in nature, and complementary to the historical explanation in the same way as we can say, to use Radcliffe-Brown's own example, that a horse is a result of the process of evolution, but it does not contradict saying, that it is also an exemplification of the laws of physiology.³⁶ Historical approach deals with the question of how something came into being. Functional, to which he sometimes refers to as sociological, seeks for theoretical understanding of how a social system functions, which is equivalent to the question of how are various parts adjusted to each other in order to produce a persistent whole.³⁷ To put it otherwise, these parts, namely institutions, beliefs, common ways of thinking and feeling in a society, are functional. Their function is a contribution they make to the maintaining of a society. It is good to keep in mind, that it is just a hypothesis, a scheme of interpretation, upon which we can proceed. In other words, not a result of any enquiry but presupposition for one. To be more specific, we assume that the institutions etc., contribute somehow to the stability of the society, and we look for how do they do it.

Above I mentioned of the classification as fundamental for science. What we have missed so far is the criterion upon which this classification is to be based. To this we could answer using the term *social structure* or we could say it is upon the way in which the parts are adjusted in such a way so as to permit a society to exist and continue. To put it simply, the criterion would be how the society manages to persist. The term social structure is yet to be defined, but I believe it is at least roughly intelligible, so I have used it regardless of this formal shortcoming. As for the connection between the two proposed answers, they are not

35 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the Concept of Function*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 186.

36 Ibid. pp. 185.

37 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 3.

in conflict, but are indeed in serious need of a clarification which will follow in the next chapters. There is one little addition which I would like to make to this topic and the way it is here dealt with. Radcliffe-Brown is not particularly clear about the criteria of his classification, so the mention made above is an interpretation. The second thing is, that he openly concedes that such a classification is yet to be made, and it will be a difficult task, but also a necessary one.

After this rather dry discussion, and before we are going to plunge into maybe even dryer one, I would like to make a little mention of less abstract nature. To illustrate what he has in mind when he speaks of natural laws arrived at by means of comparison and on the functional hypothesis, I can give a few examples which he states. "*Every society has a system of morals.*"³⁸ Another necessary conditions of the society are a system of cosmology and the principle of justice.³⁹ These things are for Radcliffe-Brown not of interest of themselves, but as to their relations to the social structure, that is to say, their function. About the last one mentioned Radcliffe-Brown says a little more. He shows various forms it can take. In law it takes the form of the principle of just retribution. In economics it is the principle of equivalent return. Thus fair exchange and eye for an eye are basically expressions of one basic principle, necessary for existence of the society. This necessity is not inferred logically, it stands on the fact, that in all known societies we can find them in various disguises, but fulfilling the same function. The function is the role they play for maintaining of the society.

2.2.6 Comparison

What concerns method, it is hardly surprising that it is mainly comparison. Altogether it seems that the comparison is for Radcliffe-Brown the main way of acquiring knowledge. To put things next to each other and see what they have in common, and making it explicit, that is essentially what constitutes knowledge for him. Knowledge is thus for him not a discovery of some hidden characteristics which operate behind the scene, but more likely it is arrived at by making order in what is always present to us, but is too complex to be discerned directly. It is no wonder that Leach ridiculed it famously as butterfly collecting in his *Rethinking anthropology*.⁴⁰ But it should be noted, that this way of summarizing the situation does not do justice to Radcliffe-Brown's elaborate analyses of concrete data, where

38 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 72.

39 Ibid. pp. 130–140.

40 LEACH, E. R.: *Rethinking Anthropology*, in *Rethinking Anthropology*, The Athlone Press 1971, pp. 2.

there is more than this. It is in accord with his explicit theoretical considerations in *A natural science of society* though. To see its complexity we have to look closer at the procedure.

I have mentioned previously three fields of questions of social science: morphology/typology, physiology, evolution. The third one is largely ignored by Radcliffe-Brown, so I will confine myself almost exclusively to the first two. These three fields of questions are not just three independent classes of problems, they can be understood as stages in proceeding of social science, and in other respect they are mutually dependent on each other. To see the former aspect we can say that first we have to make typology, or classification if you wish, which tells us what types of societies exist in the world, and then by comparing these diverse types, and abstracting what is common, or we can say essential, to all of them, we arrive at generalizations, which hold true not only of all actually existing societies but any possible one.⁴¹ These are the natural laws of societies. In this respect we can speak of stages of one procedure. But the classification itself is a complex procedure, consisting of 1) description, 2) comparing and sorting, i.e. the classification proper. And the description itself is not a simple procedure. We have to know what to look at, or look for, and how to describe it. And this is very closely related to our classification, which is based on a certain criterion. And this criterion is in its turn related to the purpose of the classification, which is to discover laws describing how societies solve the problem of surviving, of remaining relatively stable in spite of the constant change of people who are born and die. This is in a very crude form the functional hypothesis. And as I have mentioned earlier, it is a working assumption which focuses our view on some problems, not a statement. The hypothesis says that the thing to wonder about when we examine the society, is how it is possible, that a group of individuals creates a system and this system manages to maintain its form regardless of the change in its units. It is obviously close to the problems of solidarity which were of great interest to Durkheim, or we could probably even say to Comte, who is the author of the term social statics.

It should be clear from my description that the hypothesis permeates all stages of procedure and in this respect these stages are mutually dependent on each other as the description is shaped by the question we expect to answer in the last stage. The hypothesis is thus present in the description of a society, which is the work of an ethnographer. The ethnographer must take account of how various parts are related to make a consistent functional whole. The hypothesis shapes the classification as well, because the types we arrive at are equal to the various ways of how societies deal with the problem of continuity.

41 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 140.

These ways are equivalent to the various types of social structure which societies may have. And lastly the final analysis the result of which are the laws of society works on the functional hypothesis, for it tries to answer the question, what are the necessary conditions of existence and continuity of human societies.⁴² For Radcliffe-Brown the answer to this question was a statement of the features which all types of societies have in common, to which he sometimes refers to as their essential characteristics. His laws, it seems, thus amount to what has been also called (cultural) universals, though it may be said, that these two categories do not necessarily cover. What might strike us as peculiar is the leap between saying that some trait is found in all types of societies, and saying that it is a necessary condition of their existence. I could refer to the problem of induction, and say, that all inductive reasoning rests on faith, so this is just a special case, and one that does not happen to look particularly plausible. And I do believe it rests on faith indeed, but to the same degree at least on the faith in the assumption, that societies are functional wholes, and that they struggle to maintain equilibrium to which end they shape and organize their parts. In short, it leans on functional hypothesis. And we might ask, whether it really is a hypothesis in the sense it can be tested. The problem is, whether some reasonably definite results can be inferred from it, which could be subjected to testing. Concerning this, I have my doubts.

2.2.7 Some problems

In the last section I indicated some problems. Let's take a closer look. The natural laws are supposed to be inherent in the universe and applicable to every possible society. First of all there is the already mentioned problem of induction. Then there is a problem which relates to the laws. The form they assume is that they name some feature being present in all known types of societies. There is quite a serious problem regarding the question of when we can speak of some feature, an institution for example, as present in all types of societies. Is animism, if there is such a thing at all, comparable in some aspects to Christianity or Buddhism, so we can meaningfully say they are just various forms of one universal phenomenon called religion? Radcliffe-Brown was aware of this problem and suggested the need of precise definitions, and a criterion for discerning, whether some similar features in two societies are to be called by one name. The criterion is the role it plays in maintaining the social structure.

Even if we accept these solutions, we can still ask whether a list of features present

⁴² Ibid. pp. 76.

in all types of societies is the same as necessary conditions of existence for the society. As the features were attained by way of description and classification based on functional hypothesis, we could perhaps say, that they are really necessary conditions of existence for the societies reviewed. But I am not sure, if they can justifiably be called necessary ones for the existence of anything we could describe as a society, in other words, for any possible society. This is, of course, related again to the problem of induction, only the step of inductive generalization becomes a leap rather than just a step. This problem is sometimes referred to as Hume's problem, and it has, as I understand it, no real solution, except for concluding that we have to use inductive reasoning even though it cannot strictly ensure the truth of its conclusion.⁴³ Inductive reasoning is, granted that the empiricist epistemology scientists usually unconsciously hold is not completely false, necessary condition of all knowledge of external world. Even the hard science as physics cannot do without it, since to every experiment which did not falsify our hypothesis, we can always say: but how do you know, that if you repeat the experiment, the result will be the same. And we cannot know that. We just believe it on the same ground as we could believe that all swans are white, given that we have never seen a black one. So induction as such does not appear to be too serious a problem. However, extent of inductive judgement might be problematic, even if, from a strictly logical point of view it does not matter.

What appears as a problematic spot are Radcliffe-Brown's metaphysical assumptions about the nature of the laws of nature. Laws of nature inherent in the universe, like prescriptions which the universe is supposed to follow, become problematic the moment we forget to distinguish them from the natural laws as they can be known to us. There is no way how to check whether the two match. We can only test whether particular conditions which we infer from our theory do take place, given some other conditions. I think the history of science shows that it is often the case that our laws of nature are later found as only partially valid, and they need revisions, so we can, at the most, call them approximations as Popper did. The problem with Radcliffe-Brown's theory is, as I have already touched upon, that we cannot infer much from it. It follows that the "deductive" model of natural science, which allows us to take as true a hypothesis because it was not falsified, seems misplaced. As a result, claims for general validity have no foundation.

As I have tried to show, problem of too vague a vocabulary of social sciences bears on the problem of impossibility of testing. To say, for example, that a certain feature

⁴³ More information can be found for example in: BEEBEE, H.: *David Hume*, in: BERNECKER, S. – PRITCHARD, D. (eds.): *Routledge companion to epistemology*, Routledge 2011.

is to be found in every possible society is, formally speaking, a kind of prediction, and we could test it by simply looking whether it holds true. But even if we searched through all the existing societies and our conclusion was positive, this claim would inspire little conviction. It is nothing like saying that a proton, each and every in existence, has such and such charge or mass. And we do not even have to weight many of them to make this conclusion. The difference in my opinion lies not just in predictions nor in induction, at least not taken separately. It is much more the result of the coherence of physics or other sciences. By it I mean above all the fact that vocabularies of these sciences really work as an inferential structure – a statement in their terms contradicts clearly some other possible statements and implies still others, not least because of the use of mathematics. Consequences of their statements are clear, to put it simply. None of this seems to apply for social sciences, and it is questionable, whether it could be changed by creating some artificial, wannabe scientific language. But that is a question too distant to the subject matter of this study.

2.2.8 Social structure

In the former I have spoken of functional hypotheses which states that various parts of a society are adjusted to each other, for which Radcliffe-Brown uses the term functional consistency, but I have still to expound the nature of these parts and how to get to them.⁴⁴ The parts are parts of the social system. We can for the sake of clarity distinguish two levels of the system. There is a level of individual human beings having some relations to each other, and then there is a level of institutions which are tied-up as well. On both of these levels there is some adjustment. At the level of individuals Radcliffe-Brown speaks of adjustment of interests or social coaptation. The latter term can be translated as fitting together, in order to form a functional whole. At the level of institutions we can use the term functional consistency. However, we have to bear in mind that this way of putting it is just an abstraction made for the sake of clarity. These two levels are in fact not separate. Institutions consist of people having certain relations to each other. There are two ways how we can look at them. We can describe an institution as a rule or set of rules controlling human behaviour. But these rules exist only in their recognition, both verbal and in their observance in behaviour.⁴⁵ In other words, we can speak of an institution whenever we have a mode of behaviour which is observed by somebody and recognized as appropriate by majority of people in a given

44 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 125-128.

45 Ibid. pp. 58.

group. Thus, there is a certain ambiguity when Radcliffe-Brown speaks of institutions, for which he sometimes uses term social usages. It is not always clear whether he means the rules controlling behaviour, or the controlled behaviour itself. From the point of view of an ethnographer describing a society the latter makes more sense, because what he can see are humans acting and interacting with each other, and there are some regularities, or patterns in their conduct. The social behaviour of the people is structured. Out of this raw data, which include what people say and even how they feel and think if we can infer it, the ethnographer reconstructs the structure of the society, which consists of institutions and their relations.⁴⁶

The term social structure means a "*set of actually existing relations, at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings. It is on this that we can make direct observations.*"⁴⁷ In other location in text he defines it as the totality of all social relations recognized in social usages.⁴⁸ Which is not quite the same thing, because the first formulation, given the close link between social structure and institutions, which are in fact sets of rules, implies that all relations among persons in a society are regulated by, or are even the result of, the rules, whereas the second formulation leaves space for behaviour which is not socially sanctioned in any way, and thus not part of the social structure. Besides, there is one thing worth noticing. The quote illustrates Radcliffe-Brown's awkward manner in distinguishing what is really there to observe and what is just an abstraction. It is not consistent not only with the common-sense, but even with his own formulations about social relations as being *derived* from acts of behaviour.⁴⁹ Elsewhere in the text he says that the social relations are "*real things, parts of the phenomenal reality.*"⁵⁰ By contrast people's interests are just a "*logical fiction for describing biological phenomena; it is a shorthand description of a series of acts of behavior..*"⁵¹ In other words it is merely a convenient way of description, since we are currently unable to describe human behaviour in mechanical terms. I am not going into this matter any further, but I would like to draw attention not so much to some inconsistencies in his writing as to what is for him really there, what exists in strict sense. That is relations, and these can exist at various levels, forming various systems and sub-systems.

To get a better idea of the social structure, I will quote a piece which explains how

46 Ibid. pp. 54.

47 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On Social Structure*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp.192.

48 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 152.

49 Ibid. pp. 54.

50 Ibid. pp. 43.

51 Ibid. pp. 44.

to describe a society. It is done by describing a social structure. *"It will involve pointing out that they have certain localized groups: households collected in villages; that they have kinship groups: a moiety organization, clans, etc.; and further there are certain dyadic relations which are regulated and standardized. These will give you the social structure in outline. You can describe that structure in full – but only by describing a set of social usages, and by describing also ... the characteristic inner behavior as far as you can determine it – the beliefs, sentiments, ideas current in the society..."*⁵² This gives us fairly definite picture as to what to actually do as a structural functionalist when on fieldwork. It is of course not comprehensive, but it gives a helpful hint at least.

2.2.9 Structural form⁵³

There is one other term closely related, which must not be confused with the social structure. It is structural form.⁵⁴ It is an abstraction made of the social structure, which describes normal form of relations of persons in a given society. This is the true aim of ethnographer. By person is meant not just human individual, but an individual seen as a unit in social structure, a position in it, and thus defined by his social relations. It would be perhaps more natural to use the term social structure for this abstraction, and I think it was employed in this sense by Radcliffe-Brown's successors, but for Radcliffe-Brown social structure consists of actual social relations, and these of course change all the time. What remains relatively constant is the structural form. It is another way of saying that the society as a whole remains little affected by constant flux of individuals, who are born and die, or sometimes just migrate. These two things, the particular people with their actions – what Radcliffe-Brown calls social life - and the structure which shapes their actions, are mutually dependent, or I could use one of the most well-worn and at the same time mysterious philosophical terms, saying there is a dialectical relationship between the two. I will quote a passage which states it concisely. *"The concept of function, as I employ it, is used to describe the discoverable interconnections of the social structure and the processes of social life. The social life is determined by the structure; the structure is maintained in existence by the social life."*⁵⁵ In short, there would be no social structure, were there not for the process of social life. On the other hand this process of social life is not an amorphous, haphazard bunch of people acting and interacting

⁵² Ibid. pp. 124.

⁵³ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, The Free Press 1952, pp. 9–11.

⁵⁴ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 84.

⁵⁵ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Functionalism: A Protest*, *American Anthropologist* 51 (2), pp. 322.

randomly, but it has a certain form, there are recognizable patterns of interaction and action, and this is to say that it has a structure.

2.2.10 Culture

In the next section I would like to mention only a few short reflections on the subject of culture. Radcliffe-Brown generally avoids this term, but he devotes a considerable attention to it in his *A natural science of society*.⁵⁶ Culture for him means a way of standardizing human behaviour, which is necessary in order to get a society. As it is always the case with him we get a number of definitions, but in short we can say that culture refers to a set of rules of behaviour, which are necessary for establishing of what he calls social coaptation. Coaptation is an uncommon term, but it may be translated as "fitting together". It refers to the fact that "*the individual members of the society have their behavior fitted together in some way so as to maintain a social life as a result of that fitting together.*"⁵⁷ He speaks also of correlation of interests.⁵⁸ It is done by 1) rules producing uniformity of action, 2) common symbols and meanings, which includes categories as diverse as language, art, rituals and myths, 3) common set of feeling and thinking.⁵⁹ The last category is closely related with the second one, as the common sentiments and beliefs exist only by virtue of the symbols and rituals. Thus defined, we might wonder whether it really meaningfully describes anything, given the diversity and, I would say, incommensurability of the categories which he subsumes into it. But I am not entering any scholastic discussion concerning the precise relations of the terms.

An interesting point here is, that he says, that there can be no science of culture. Culture, he says, is just an abstraction, a feature of the social system, in the same way language is abstraction compared to speech.⁶⁰ What is really there in phenomenal reality is behaviour. Rules exist only in their recognition, both verbal and in behaviour. We can say that culture has no superorganic reality.

To illustrate this more general distrust of the term culture among British anthropologists I can mention Evans-Pritchard's characterization of it as mere "*customs*". According to him, when we are interested in examining a society, we are interpreting certain behaviour in terms of social structure, of persons and their relations and functions of institutions, whereas when

56 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 92–108.

57 Ibid. pp. 90.

58 Ibid. pp. 138.

59 Ibid. pp. 99–102.

60 Ibid. pp. 96, 107.

we are interested in culture, we pay attention to "*the details of its cultural expression*."⁶¹ The "details of its cultural expression" state the relation of the culture to the social structure in a relatively clear form. The rules, beliefs, rituals, myths and all other devices which shape the society by "homogenizing" behaviour of its members into definite forms, can take various forms and still lead to the same shape, that is, structural form. These details are of secondary importance. They are important only as far as their function, that is to say their relation to the whole, is considered.

2.2.11 Function - a few additions

I have to make a couple of additions to this crucial concept of Radcliffe-Brown's theory. I will first revise shortly what I have said about it already. It is used in the sense it is used in physiology and must be, Radcliffe-Brown emphatically states, rigidly distinguished from "purpose" and "usefulness", in which sense Malinowski used the term.⁶² Function applies to social usages, or we could say institutions, but also customs and beliefs, and perhaps something else, as Radcliffe-Brown speaks vaguely of "*any part of a social system*".⁶³ Function lies in the effects it has in the maintaining of the social structure. He makes a distinction between activity and function of something, and to this he gives an example from physiology. The activity of the stomach consists in the secretion of gastric fluids. Its function in changing nutrients of food into a form in which these are absorbed and distributed by the blood to the tissues.⁶⁴ The activity is simply what it does, the function is what it does for the whole, or how it contributes to fulfilling the necessary conditions of existence of the society. Every part of a society is to be considered from the point of view of its contribution.

Above we have met the notion functional consistency, which is closely related. It refers to the fact that a society seen as a system, or system of systems, has a certain integration. For a society to exist and to keep its structural form its parts cannot be in conflict. That is a sort of negative integration. Moreover they can be functionally related. When this is the case, they require and support each other. As a striking example of this interrelations Radcliffe-Brown reminds us of potlach and *Kula*, which are both basically economic institutions, but one cannot understand them without taking into account practically all other

61 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *Social Anthropology*, Cohen & West Ltd. 1951, pp. 17–18.

62 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 154.

63 Ibid.

64 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the concept of function in social science*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 179.

institutions of their respective societies. To be more specific, to understand a particular trait of a society means to discover its place in the (sub)system of which it is a part and within which it has a function.⁶⁵ And these (sub)systems are themselves functional and tied up with other (sub)systems.

There is one thing I have postponed in discussion up until now. It is the difference between the two notions of function as they were used by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski respectively. The undeniable difference, apparent at first sight, is that the Malinowski's instrumental use is reductionist while physiologist one appeals to the society as a distinct order of reality possessing its own laws. The interesting question is, whether they differ in other respects, especially what concerns their form. The form of explanation is in both cases seemingly: "one thing provides for some other thing", whether the other thing is maintaining of the social system, or it is satisfying of some biological human need. Both of them appear in this simple form as teleological. It is worth examining it a little further. Causal explanation, as a form of explanation thought sometimes, I believe mistakenly, to be the only one scientific form of explanation, has a form: something prior is given, prior either in the sense of time or prior in what we could call logical sense, that is something more basic, as an atom is to a molecule, and the fact we want to explain is a result of these things and principles which are already known. Teleological explanation takes some more complex reality as given and explains characteristics of parts and their organization as a result of this higher order reality. An example could be: we have the stomach to digest our food. For Aristotle it would probably constitute a valid explanation. We could use it as well, but it would carry a more modest meaning. It would be a physiological explanation. It just describes the function of the stomach in relation to the whole, but it does not explain it in the strong sense. It says nothing about what was first or what is more basic and what derived. Put another way, it does not answer why we have it, although its form might suggest it. An explanation in this sense would be in causal terms citing Darwin's theory of evolution. As for Malinowski, I can only speculate, for I have read little of his writings. Since his theory is not subject of this study, I will mention it only for the sake of completeness. His theory is often stated as: function, meaning purpose, of an institution is in satisfying some human need. This implies that an institution is designed with an aim in view. I think that it is, in fact, also only a way of speaking, and no teleology is involved. We could rephrase saying that there are human needs as something given, and (relatively) basic. These find their expression in institutions, which are thus only something derived,

65 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 6, 13.

and the relation is causal, though vague since forms of institutions are numerous while there is only handful of universal needs.

With Radcliffe-Brown it is another story. Radcliffe-Brown's necessary conditions of existence clearly are not causal explanation. On the other hand, there is no need to assume that there are only teleological and causal explanations. Necessary conditions are, I think, a sort of transcendental argument, as it is sometimes called. It is an argument with the form: for something to exist/be the case, it is necessary that some conditions must be fulfilled. Since we know, that it exist/is the case, we can deduce that something else, namely the necessary conditions, must be the case as well. A weak spot of this argument is the link between the existence of the given fact and the conditions deemed necessary for its existence. I believe Radcliffe-Brown's function to be of this kind of argument. It takes the existence of societies, an empirical reality, as its point of departure, and then tries to explain what must be the case for them to be possible to exist, given the flux of people and the continuity of structure. There comes his functional hypothesis, stating that there is an adjustment of various parts to each other. And the aim of anthropology is to describe how this is done in particular and what principles are there to be found in every society.

As I am already trying to defend structural functionalism, I would like to address one other topic, a criticism often made against it. The line of argument goes somehow like this: structural explanation says nothing about how the structure came into existence, it just takes for granted that the whole structure in all its immense complexity and interconnectedness just sprang into being. The force of the argument does not lie merely in ignoring history. Much more it has to do with the fact that every part already presupposes other parts in their present form and organization. I believe this line of reasoning is based on the same misconception as popular creationist argument against evolution. According to this argument a magnificent and complicated structure, the human eye for example, could not evolve to the present form as it is a complex structure which necessitates all its parts having exactly the present shape in order to function. To this the usual response of evolutionary biologists is to present a series of pictures showing eyes of other animals variously distanced in terms of evolution from man. It shows convincingly how the structure – the eye – evolved from simpler forms to more complex ones. What it shows as well, is that in every case, that is, at every stage of evolution, it was a functional, i.e. interconnected and mutually adjusted structure. I think the same argument could in principle be used in defence of structural functionalism.

2.2.12 An appendix of a sort

There are many more terms and topics in Radcliffe-Brown's writing which I could mention, but I am afraid what was supposed to be a short account of his theory has already become longer than permissible. For that reason I omit terms like organization, role, evolution and others, which he only briefly mentions, completely. As for the concept of social pathology I will say only that the comment often made on functionalism, that it ignored colonial situation and the changes colonial encounter brought about in traditional societies, is not entirely true. Radcliffe-Brown was aware of this problem, at least in theory.⁶⁶ Another question is, whether he and his followers paid attention to this problem in their ethnographies.

I have said nothing of kinship and politics, subjects traditionally associated with structural functionalism. It is mainly because in his texts on theory Radcliffe-Brown pays no attention to them, save for a few short remarks. Given the central stance of this concept I will nevertheless make a few brief remarks on it. Behind the kinship system "*the idea is that in a given society we can isolate conceptually, if not in reality, a certain set of actions and interactions amongst persons which are determined by the relationships by kinship or marriage, and that in a particular society these are interconnected in such a way that we can give a general analytical description of them as constituting a system.*"⁶⁷ We could in any given society isolate conceptually various systems, but that of kinship has a prominent role in functioning of the society, or we could say in its maintaining. That is why, if I am not mistaken, he speaks of making a typology of kinship systems as one of the important tasks, which is yet to be done.⁶⁸ It is not quite clear whether this kinship typology would be the same typology based on the types of social structure, that is structural forms, to which I have referred earlier as one of the steps in the general procedure of anthropology, or it would be only a part of it, or what the relation would be.

There is one last notion which I want to introduce, because it plays a certain role in the Evans-Pritchard's ethnography which I am going to examine further. The notion is adaptation. Radcliffe-Brown tells in appendices to his *A natural science of society*, that we can look at social systems in terms of adaptational systems. The essential or proper *activity* of the social system is to provide a) a certain adaptation to environment b) integration, i.e. a uniting of individuals into an orderly arrangement.⁶⁹ These two kinds of adaptation are merely a two

66 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On the concept of function in social science*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 182–183.

67 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 6.

68 Ibid. pp. 13.

69 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *A Natural Science of Society*, Free Press 1957, pp. 154.

aspects of adaptational system. In *Structure and function in primitive society* he devotes to it considerably more attention, distinguishing three aspects of it: a) the ecological adaptation; b) institutional adaptation - this provides for institutional arrangements by which an orderly social life is maintained, which implies establishing of co-operation and restraint or regulation of conflict; c) there is the cultural adaptation, which ensures the "*social process by which an individual acquires habits and mental characteristics that fit him for a place in the social life and enable him to participate in its activities.*"⁷⁰ "*The stability of the system, and therefore its continuance over a certain period, depends on the effectiveness of the adaptation.*"⁷¹

Before I commence with the second part of my treatment of structural functionalism, that is, with the analysis of an ethnography done under its name, I will add only one last comment instead of conclusions. Direct bearings on ethnography has the question, whether, or how much, definite a theory is. In other words: does it provide some usable guidance for doing fieldwork and analysis? With the problem of definiteness the problem of verification, as I have already indicated in the relevant section, is connected. The former question I will answer in the affirmative. The latter with some qualifications. The final possible results of the theory, the natural laws of society, seem to be, aside from trivial, beyond verification. The reasons for it I have hinted earlier. On the other hand, verification of a particular ethnography with some lower-level generalizations I consider very well possible. This answer follows naturally from saying, that the theory provides some definite guidance. This implies both, the way from data, or more appropriately description, to final analysis can be made clear, and the re-study according the same principles is possible. At least in theory.

2.3 Ethnography

2.3.1 The procedure

In this section, I would like to deal with the question, announced in the introduction, how theory, in this case structural functionalism, shapes, or at least affects, an ethnography. The theory is supposed to provide for an orientation: what do we want to know, how can we attain it, what kind of things are we to take into account, how are they related and so on.

⁷⁰ RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp. 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

These are my concern here. In other words I am not interested in details and particular data. Only the types of data and the relations constructed between, or sought behind them are relevant. And not to forget the question, what does an explanation look like. We should bear in mind however, that Evans-Pritchard's book is just an ethnography, an account of one particular society, so we cannot await being presented with any laws. These are to be arrived at only by means of comparison of various societies, or their types to be more precise. Nevertheless even what is mainly descriptive account should exhibit its theoretical assumptions, namely the structural functionalist view.

What is it that I am going to do here exactly, what is my method, so to say? First I am interested in the general picture, whether it accords with what Radcliffe-Brown proposes. In that, I cannot focus just on terms, because these can have different meaning or on the other hand the same concepts can be expressed in a different language. Therefore it is not the words, but rather questions posed, the form of answers given to them, subjects that are put under scrutiny, the way they are depicted etc. It obviously is not very specific and can therefore hardly be called a method. At least not in any proper sense of something which leads every step of the procedure in some fairly clear way, so everyone can, after learning the rules, follow the method and achieve the same, or at least reasonably similar, outcomes. I am afraid no such thing is possible in this matter. It is just an interpretation, an exercise in persuading the reader by using the right rhetoric, showing apt examples, and perhaps a few other techniques.

As I have already indicated, I am not interested in particular facts, whether they are accurate or not, whether the record of the facts and the theoretical conclusions based upon it still holds true today, or it was revisited or dismissed by later anthropologists. Nor am I paying attention to the questions of style of the book, to the problems of how does Evans-Pritchard convince the reader by using sophisticated literary techniques. To reader with inclinations towards this kind of problems I can only recommend Clifford Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Speaking of which, I completely ignore all matters concerning Evans-Pritchard's reflexivity, or lack of it, of his involvement in colonial business and other popular topics associated with *Writing culture* or *Anthropology as a Culture Critique*. I even omit his own description of the conditions of his fieldwork and his fieldwork methods. For one thing, he says very little about it, and besides it does not seem relevant to my purposes. The only thing of at least modest importance in this respect is, that

it is "based almost entirely on direct observation and participation in their everyday life."⁷² These observations took place during several trips between 1930 and 1936. The total residence among the Nuer was about a year.⁷³

2.3.2 The choice of book

I had to choose a book representing an ethnography made in structural functionalist fashion. Such a choice cannot be but arbitrary, but I believe there are some grounds in favor of the book I have chosen. The book is, as mentioned in the introduction, *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, by Evans-Pritchard. The main reason for this choice was also already touched upon, it is considered a mature instance of structural functionalism. But of course it is not the only one, so I will state some more reasons. It is a classical book written by a renowned author, and a student of Radcliffe-Brown. Another ground is the acknowledgment of the book by Radcliffe-Brown himself. He calls it an admirable book.⁷⁴ And then there is what Evans-Pritchard himself says on the matter of his relation to Radcliffe-Brown's theory. In the preface to the book he states explicitly that Radcliffe-Brown's "influence on the theoretical side of my work will be obvious to any student of anthropology,..."⁷⁵ Moreover his intentions were not to write an objective, neutral,⁷⁶ purely descriptive account of the Nuer, but to write it from the perspective of theory, which includes a narrow focus on a certain limited set of questions. I can quote his own words on the topic. "In the way we have written this book we have in some measure broken away from the tradition of lengthy monographs on primitive peoples. These weighty volumes generally record observations in too haphazard a fashion to be either pleasant or profitable reading. This deficiency is due to absence of a body of scientific theory in Social Anthropology, for facts can only be selected and arranged in the light of theory."⁷⁷ Speaking of lengthy monographs full of haphazard records Malinowski's *Argonauts* probably come to mind.

72 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Clarendon Press 1940, pp. 15.

73 Ibid. pp. 14.

74 RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.: *On Social Structure*, in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Free Press 1952, pp 191.

75 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Clarendon Press 1940, pp. viii.

76 I am very well aware of the problematical nature of these notions, but in Evans-Pritchard's time they were, I believe, rather commonly accepted. The time of *The writing culture* and notions like *crisis of representation* came into fashion only much later.

77 Ibid. pp. 261.

In contrast Evans-Pritchard set himself a task to answer only definite questions and for this reason, "...omitting much material... have recorded only what is significant for the limited subject of discussion."⁷⁸

For all the above stated grounds the book commends itself for my survey. However, there could be an objection, which I have to resolve. In the history of anthropology Evans-Pritchard is presented, apart from other things, as a sort of a breakthrough figure. He abandoned the search for laws and sociological approach of British social anthropology, and began to regard anthropology as a branch of humanities, close in aims to historiography, instead. Because of this he is sometimes referred to as a predecessor of interpretive approaches in anthropological textbooks.⁷⁹ His shift in theory I do not deny, but it applies only to the later period of his career, approximately after the Second World War.⁸⁰ I am not going into the matter of how sudden or gradual this shift was.⁸¹ The only thing of importance for this study is the fact that *The Nuer* stems from earlier period. It was first issued in 1940 and the material for it was gathered well before.

Still I could have chosen otherwise. There are two names especially which come to the fore. First that of Radcliffe-Brown himself. To use his book would have an advantage of the slightly larger unity of terminology, even though, as we have seen, he is not thoroughly consistent. With Evans-Pritchard we find some divergences in terminology used, but I believe it is not a grave obstacle. The reason for which I have not taken any of Radcliffe-Brown's books is simple. He has only one full-fledged ethnographical monograph, *The Andaman islanders*. The fieldwork for this was done in 1908 and it was only what Adam Kuper calls survey research,⁸² meaning a short stay among the natives and the employment of an interpreter. As a result, it is a rather superficial, which disqualifies it as an appropriate text for my purposes.

The second major name which comes to mind when speaking of structural functionalism is that of Meyer Fortes. An africanist and a pupil of Radcliffe-Brown, both of which he had in common with his colleague Evans-Pritchard. In contrast to him, Fortes

78 Ibid. pp. 7.

79 BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 158 – 162.

80 KUPER, A.: *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*, Routledge 1996, pp. 121, 124 - 126.

81 More can be found in BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 161. Barnard cites two opposite views on the subject. According to Mary Douglas, Evans-Pritchard was always an interpretive thinker; according to Kuper he changed his mind during his career. I will go with the latter. To support his conclusion Kuper states that Radcliffe-Brown took Evans-Pritchard as one in the same mould, and that his work does not differ much from the work of his colleagues, only he paid attention to the systems of beliefs.

82 KUPER, A.: *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*, Routledge 1996, pp. 40.

is known for remaining faithful to structural functionalism to the end of his days and passionately defending it. The only reason I have given preference to Evans-Pritchard is that I was afraid of getting lost in Fortes's intricate accounts of kinship systems. Other than that I believe him to be an excellent choice.

2.3.3 The content

In this chapter I give a rather simplified account of the content of the book along with some discussion of it. More general observations will follow in the next chapter. The Nuer are a Nilotic pastoral people living in the south of Sudan along the upper Nile. They are remarkable for having no laws or leaders in any strong sense, and being significantly individualistic and egalitarian among themselves, while aloof and disdainful to any other people, most notably the Dinka. The Dinka live next to the Nuer and are close to them physically, linguistically and culturally. The life of the Nuer is oriented around cattle, mainly cows, and their values are related to the cattle in various respects.

As indicated above, Evans-Pritchard treats only of some aspects of their social life, namely ecology and economy, the concepts of time and space, political institutions, certain aspects of kinship, age-sets, and interrelations between these fields. We encounter practically no mention of usual topics like religion and magic, even though there is something on myths in connection with politics and kinship. As for the kinship, it is dealt with only at the more abstract level of what Evans-Pritchard calls social structure. It is not quite the same as social structure was for Radcliffe-Brown. We could say it is used here in a more restricted sense, describing only the larger and more persistent groups of society and their relations, thus excluding personal relations and family, which disappear with the disappearance of its members. The problems of relations within the family and the like were given separate volume.⁸³ Moreover, social structure for Evans-Pritchard corresponds more to what Radcliffe-Brown called structural form. It is an abstraction describing a persistent shape of the groups and their relations, not actual interactions of individuals.⁸⁴

The book begins with an introduction which summarizes what Evans-Pritchard is after and at once many of his findings. He formulates his aims several times, each time a bit differently. The shortest version claims to "*present true outline of their social*

83 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Clarendon Press 1940, pp. 3.

84 Ibid. pp. 262.

structure."⁸⁵ A slightly longer one says that "*The inquiry is directed to two ends: to describe the life of the Nuer, and to lay bare some of the principles of their social structure.*"⁸⁶ However, not the whole social structure is of concern. The main subject are political institutions, but to understand them, one has to take into account environment and modes of livelihood.⁸⁷ It already sounds functionalist, it is in accord with a creed of holism to take other institutions into consideration in order to comprehend. But it could very well be just a statement in cultural ecology or other materialist fashion. The final result of these considerations is that "*...the Nuer political system is consistent with their oecology.*"⁸⁸ Oecology means environment and economy. The more complicated question is what consistent means. It could mean simply well adapted to the natural conditions, in which case we can still ask in what way – is there a sort of causal relation, meaning that the political system is determined by the environment, or is it just not in conflict? Or, is something else than adaptation to the nature meant by the word consistent? A functional relation? And what would that mean? Probably some interdependence, some kind of mutual adjustment, but it is obscure. As oecology means not just environment but also the way people cope with it, the economy, it is a rather complex notion, which includes, among other things, institutions and values, and these are closely related to, or we can say interrelated with, the political structure. Therefore it would seem plausible to interpret the term consistent as meaning functional relation. The problem is, that in final passages of the book Evans-Pritchard makes a statement which apparently discerns consistency and interdependence. "*...the consistency is not an interdependence.*"⁸⁹ At the same time the notion of consistency as used above contains adaptation to the physical environment as well, so this sense of the word is not entirely absent. What the exact nature of this term is, is never stated with much precision.

The main subject is political structure, but this is just one part of the social structure and related to other parts of it. Evans-Pritchard distinguishes other two systems apart from the political one, and is interested in their relations to it. These are lineage system, based on certain kinds of kinship relationships, and age-set system. The political system is based on territorial relations, or we could say, common residence. A defining feature of the Nuer social structure is a segmentary principle. There are a number of related terms, like structural relativity, relativity of values, fission and fusion, but these are aspects of the same phenomena. It describes the fact that solidarity of a group exists only in opposition to other

⁸⁵ Ibid. pp. 15.

⁸⁶ Ibid. pp. 7.

⁸⁷ Ibid. pp. 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid. pp. 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid. pp. 257.

groups of the same order. Seen from the perspective of individual, his identity and his allegiance within a particular system (political, lineage, to lesser extent age-set) depends on the situation he finds himself in. He defines his identity, that is his belonging to a particular group, which is viewed as a group within a system of hierarchically ordered groups, in opposition to the group his opponents belongs to. As I have implied, the systems are viewed as hierarchical, the larger units contain the smaller ones. So the hierarchy is not meant as degrees of subordination but degrees of generality, or simply just size. In Evans-Pritchard's own words: "*Each segment is itself segmented and there is opposition between its parts. The members of any segment unite for war against adjacent segments of the same order and unite with these adjacent segments against larger sections.*"⁹⁰ But I fear this way of presenting things is still too abstract to be intelligible. One example will make it clear. Fighting the men from a neighbouring village one identifies himself with his village and people from his village will come to his aid. Fighting the men from a far-away village belonging to a different Nuer tribe, one identifies himself with his tribe and his tribesmen see him as one of them. Fighting the Dinka or colonial forces one is Nuer, that is, his identity is even more general. The fission and fusion I have mentioned above regards the fact, that people within lower-level unit may fight each other and see each other as belonging to different groups, but they may both belong to the one higher-level group and when faced with an opponent of some other higher-level group they will unite against him. Moreover, by their opponent they are taken as members only of that higher-level group, which to him is undifferentiated. By fission the tendency of the Nuer to pick up the fight easily and split into belligerent groups is meant. That is why I speak here of opponents. The fusion relates to the uniting into one group depending on their structural relation to the opponent. I have presented it in an extremely crude manner, but I do not want to get entangled into minutiae of their ethnography. Important thing are changing obligations, or values as Evans-Pritchard calls it, dependent on the situation.

To summarize I can quote Evans-Pritchard own succinct short summary. "*Thus a man is a member of his tribe in its relation to other tribes, but he is not a member of his tribe in the relation of his segment of it to other segments of the same kind. Likewise a man is a member of his tribal segment in its relation to other segments, but he is not a member of it in the relation of his village to other villages of the same segment. A characteristic of any political group is hence its invariable tendency towards fission and the opposition of its segments, and another characteristic is its tendency towards fusion with other groups of its own order in opposition to political segments larger than itself. Political values are thus always,*

90 Ibid. pp. 142.

structurally speaking, in conflict. One value attaches a man to his group and another to a segment of it in opposition to other segments of it, and the value which controls his action is a function of the social situation in which he finds himself."⁹¹

The associated term structural relativity describes that a man belongs to a certain group and thus his behaviour is determined by a certain set of values, depending on the situation. These values may appear contradictory. But they are not seen in that manner by the people themselves. Therefore we have to take into account situation. Situation is a decisive factor which determines structural relations. To quote Evans-Pritchard: "*They [values] are only seen to be consistent when we view structure as sets of relations defined by reference to specific social situations.*"⁹² The notion of structural relativity is strongly connected with the segmentary principle. But, if I understand it correctly, and Evans-Pritchard is not particularly clear about it, it has a much broader validity. Only the segmentary principle implies it in a very pronounced form. The structural relativity holds for all social groups. At least this is the way I construe the following passage: "*An examination of the word *cieng* will teach us one of the most fundamental characteristics of Nuer local groups and, indeed, of all social groups: their structural relativity.*"⁹³ All social groups are meant in general, not as all Nuer social groups. And this reading is consistent with both, his examination of the Nuer word *cieng*, and with what he says in his conclusions. *Cieng* can be translated as home, and has a relative meaning, depending on the situation. A Nuer man, when asked what his *cieng* is, will most likely indicate his village. But it depends on the situation. When asked the same question outside the territory of his tertiary tribal section, he will give the name of his section. When asked outside the territory of his tribe, he will name his tribe. And when asked outside the Nuerland, he will state Nuerland as his home. These shifting meanings correspond to shifting allegiances or identities a Nuer may have. For the sake of clarity, Evans-Pritchard gives an example of something very similar within our, Western culture.⁹⁴ The example goes like this, an Englishman, when asked about his home outside England, will answer that England is his home. When asked outside his county, he will state his county, and so on, up until he shows his house when asked in his street. Since there is no notion of segmentation in our society, and yet we use very similar relative concept of home as they do, I take it that Evans-Pritchard meant the structural relativity, appearing in the above quotation, as characteristic

91 Ibid. pp. 137.

92 Ibid. pp. 263.

93 Ibid. pp. 135.

94 Ibid. pp. 136.

of really all social groups in existence. The other support for this reading is the following statement on theory: "*Social anthropology deals at present in crude concepts, tribe, clan, age-set, &c., representing social masses and a supposed relation between these masses. The science will make little progress on this low level of abstraction, if it be considered abstraction at all, and it is necessary for further advance to use the concepts to denote relations, defined in terms of social situations, and relations between these relations.*"⁹⁵ As I understand it, he emphasizes social situations as crucial in describing social structure. And it is because, as stated above, the related values would otherwise appear inconsistent, while in fact they are consistent, but apply in different situations. After this digression I would like to resume the exposition of the content of the book.

In the political, which is the same as territorial, system, the largest unit is tribe. It is defined, among other things, by the fact that it is taken as a distinct local community by both its members and outsiders, and by affirmation of its members of their obligation to combine in warfare against outsiders and acknowledgement of the rights of its members to compensation for injury.⁹⁶ In short, by certain values, as Evans-Pritchard calls it.

In Nuerland there are several tribes, but they do not cooperate in any way with each other and acknowledge no common value which would bind them to any action as a whole. Therefore there are no values which could be said to define any higher political unit than tribe. The tribe is differentiated into hierarchical segments, which are by its members regarded as distinct communities and their members can combine for common action. Evans-Pritchard recognizes three or four levels, but the number is not rigid.⁹⁷ He calls them primary, secondary and tertiary sections or segments. The tertiary section is the smallest political unit. It consists of several villages. These could thus be regarded as the true smallest political units and he speaks of them at times that way, but they are not self-sufficient. The above stated example of changing allegiances applies for the tertiary segments too and even within villages. When one faces the man from other tertiary segment, his identity is his tertiary segment, when his opponent is from a different secondary section, than our man takes up his secondary section as his identity and so on. His identity is thus always defined in opposition

⁹⁵ Ibid. pp. 266.

⁹⁶ Ibid. pp. 5; Fuller account of the tribe characteristics goes like this: "...tribe has been defined by (i) a common and distinct name; (2) a common sentiment ; (3) a common and distinct territory (4) a moral obligation to unite in war ; and (5) a moral obligation to settle feuds and other disputes by arbitration. To these five points can be added three further characteristics, which are discussed later: (6) a tribe is a segmented structure and there is opposition between its segments; (7) within each tribe there is a dominant clan and the relation between the lineage structure of this clan and the territorial system of the tribe is of great structural importance; (8) a tribe is a unit in a system of tribes and (9) age-sets are organized tribally." Ibid. pp. 122.

⁹⁷ Ibid. pp. 5.

to members of other group. I will say a little more about it later, but it is necessary for understanding the discussion of the following chapters, so I have to deal with it already in the introduction.

There are several points of special importance. One is that an analogous principle of segmentation is present in the lineage system. People define themselves within the lineage system in opposition to other groups, and identification brings some obligations with it. The highest unit in the lineage system is clan. Clans are differentiated into lineages. There are also four levels of them. Maximal lineage which differentiate themselves into major lineages, and these in turn into minor, and these into minimal lineages. There is a certain correspondence between the clan sections and tribal segments. The thing to notice is that *"Each of these groups is, or forms part of, a segmentary system, by reference to which it is defined, and, consequently the status of its members, when acting as such towards one another and to outsiders, is undifferentiated."*⁹⁸ The notion of undifferentiatedness means simply that the man is regarded by his opponent as a member of the group of the level where they differ from one another. In other words, from without groups seem as homogenous, although for its members it is differentiated. What is important are the obligations relevant for the situation and these are the same for all the members of the group concerned because they are defined by opposition in the social structure. Another thing worth noticing is the fact that the relativity applies to all levels, including the highest ones. Therefore the clan, which is defined as a system of lineages, can be seen as a lineage itself, and the tribe can be seen as a segment of the political structure. Evans-Pritchard says that the Nuer political structure comprises of everybody with whom they have contacts, including neighbouring peoples like Dinka or Shiluk and even Arabs and the British. I will save the rest of what is essential to the political and lineage system for later. This overview should be enough to understand what follows.

After the introduction the chapter called *Interest in cattle* comes, containing a fairly exhaustive account of the role of the cattle. The cattle is, in short, ubiquitous. Economy, politics, kinship, religion, all these aspects of Nuer life are intertwined with the cattle. Moreover it is a subject of songs and the only thing Nuer men desire. They attain prestige because of their bulls and even take up their names. This chapter is followed by one called *Oecology*. In it the physical environment and the ways the Nuer cope with it are discussed. Its subject is thus economy in the substantivist sense⁹⁹, or the mode of livelihood, as Evans-

⁹⁸ Ibid. pp. 22.

⁹⁹ WILK, R. R. - CLIGET, L.: *Economies and cultures: foundations of economic anthropology*, 2nd edition,

Pritchard calls it. Their environmental conditions consist of marshes and savannahs. The Nuer are chiefly pastoralists. However, the conditions do not allow this to be the single mode of their subsistence. They are dependent on agriculture and fishing as well.¹⁰⁰ As a result of the environment and their modes of livelihood seasonal migration takes place. Otherwise the Nuer live in a country very poor on natural resources. There is practically nothing except for grass, and water in the rainy season. In virtue of this the Nuer material culture is very simple. There is also almost no trade. The consideration of Nuer economy and environment is not an end in itself, it is contained in the book because Evans-Pritchard seeks to examine relations between it and the political structure, or social structure in general. He gives us a list of characteristics of the environment. *"The main characteristics of Nuerland are: (i) It is dead fiat. (2) It has clay soils. (3) It is very thinly and sporadically wooded. (4) It is covered with high grasses in the rains. (5) It is subject to heavy rainfall. (6) It is traversed by large rivers which flood annually. (7) When the rains cease and the rivers fall it is subject to severe drought. These characteristics interact with one another and compose an environmental system which directly conditions Nuer life and influences their social structure. The determination is of so varied and complex a nature that we do not attempt to summarize its full significance at this stage of our description."*¹⁰¹ The importance of this subject matter cannot be underestimated. Evans-Pritchard spends more than forty pages on it, partly in truly descriptive records of how a certain economic activity is done, but a large part is devoted to the much more general matters ranging from relations of ecology to the distribution of the Nuer; the limitations their environment imposes upon them; the way the environment conditions their social structure; the subject of ownership of resources is treated; the raids on Dinka, which is a means of acquiring cattle; and he pays attention even to the questions of their character, which he considers, at least partly, a result of their harsh conditions and of raiding the Dinka, which both harden the Nuer men. Evans-Pritchard makes several conclusions relating to economy and environment, which I will briefly recapitulate, for it shows well his interests.

Their ecological adaptation, to use Radcliffe-Brown's term, is according to Evans-Pritchard as good as it can possibly be given the ecological conditions. He speaks of oecological equilibrium. Ecological conditions – above all climate, hydrological conditions, and the rinderpest, which was introduced some fifty years prior to Evans-Pritchard's

Westview Press 2007, pp. 32.

100 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Clarendon Press 1940, pp 69–70.

101 Ibid. pp. 55.

fieldwork, necessitate the mixed economy, as neither of their sources of livelihood – herding, agriculture, fishing – provides enough food to be used alone. These are all seasonal activities and therefore closely related to their migrations. The migration is thus also a necessity, and neither fully sedentary nor fully nomad life would be possible. One point Evans-Pritchard makes can be seen as an example of functionalist view. He says that the environmental conditions support the preference of cattle to other two modes of subsistence, and before the epidemic of rinderpest this preference was even more pronounced. At the same time he says, that this preference is in accord with the superlative value of cattle.¹⁰² Obviously he avoids saying, that the high value of cattle is a result of the ecological conditions which are in favor of this mode of subsistence. The only relation he admits, is, we could say, that of consistence of some sort - they are just in accord. To put it another way, there is no causality. I gather this is close to physiological explanation – some parts are mutually adjusted in respect to some whole.

The rest of the conclusions follows. Climatic conditions together with a pastoral mode of life necessitate relations beyond the limits of a village and give wider political groups an economic purpose.¹⁰³ This point is very important, because it states one of the relations between their oecology and social structure. It can be added, that the scarcity of food, a low technology, absence of trade, all that make people living together interdependent and turns them into economic units instead of just residential ones. The same conditions lead to the indirect dependency between persons living in much larger areas and thus compels their acceptance of conventions of a political order.¹⁰⁴ This point is, at this stage of exposition at least, obscure. And lastly, the migratory tendencies and the desire to replace the losses of their herds caused by rinderpest by riding Dinka enhances the political importance of units larger than villages, because these cannot, for economic and military reasons, be independent. This fact of the dependency of villages enables him to treat the political system mainly as a set of structural relations between territorial segments larger than village communities.¹⁰⁵

After the *oecology* comes an exposition of the Nuer concepts of time and space, where he distinguishes ecological and social time and space. The social ones are shown to be relative in various ways to social structure. In case of time, it is related to outstanding, chiefly economic, activities. The Nuer say that it is this or that season because they are now doing this or that. For longer periods of time, the indication is made by referring to age-sets or some

102 Ibid. pp. 92.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid. pp. 93.

105 Ibid.

lineage relationships. As for the relativity of the space, or rather distance, it pertains to the fact, that in indicating distances the Nuer do not work with a simple notion of distance as it can be objectively measured. Instead, they take into account either the nature of the terrain dividing the two places, or when speaking of the distance between groups of people, they allow for the structural distance between them, that is their distance in the social structure. Thus two villages, having the same physical distance from a third one, can have various distances to it depending on whether they belong to the same tribe or some of its sections or not.

This chapter is closely related with the former on oecology. Evans-Pritchard begins it by saying that: „*Their oecology limits and in other ways influences their social relations, but the value given to oecological relations is equally significant in understanding the social system...*“¹⁰⁶ And he continues by emphasizing the role of *oecological* relations in understanding of the social system, which is a system "*within oecological system, partly dependent on it and partly existing on its own right.*"¹⁰⁷ The concepts of time and space are according to him dependent on physical ambient, but the values they embody are just one of the possible responses to the ambient, and are also shaped by structural principles, which are of a different order of reality. This theme links the chapter with the following ones, the subject matter of which is the social structure. Overall, his concern in this chapter is to show how oecology influences political institutions.

It would be cumbersome to present just the content of the chapter in some schematic way and to bring in some illustrating examples later, therefore I will linger on it here a little longer and make at once some comments on it. One is that Evans-Pritchard never much clearly states how he sees the nature of the relations between oecology and other institutions including the time and space reckoning, although he states many connections. Above I quoted a piece which states that the relation is one of limitation. Moreover it says: "*and in other ways influences*". The first part is pretty much common sense, the second one hopelessly vague. Treating environment as merely a limiting factor to which various responses, that is, various ways of adapting, are possible, is a commonplace in anthropology. Apart from the more materialistic approaches, of course. I have already mentioned that there is a link between the social structure and the environment in discussing the chapter on oecology. The link consists in the necessity of co-operation, which the environment and the mode of livelihood imposes upon the Nuer. In the present discussion I will confine myself

106 Ibid. pp. 94.

107 Ibid.

to the concepts of time and space. Evans-Pritchard admits that the concept of time is ultimately derived from the seasonal changes. The year, to give an example, is divided into two main sections, the time of villages and the time of camps. The former is in the period of flood, when people concentrate in the villages built on elevated stretches of terrain. The latter is connected with the period of drought, when people have to follow sources of water. It is quite clear that this migration is driven by the seasonal changes, and the name which Nuer give to it does not seem to me to be of any great importance. Some aspects of this chapter feels to me like exoticizing, showing how much they are different with their peculiar concepts of time and space. When he speaks of the notion of time as derived from outstanding activities, what he describes is, I believe, much less exotic than it might seem at the first sight. The notion of time used by European peasants was not that of the exact and calendar time we use nowadays. It more likely was, I think, a time derived from the seasonal changes and activities connected with them. So to say that something happened at the time of harvest or at the time of milking was probably much more common than saying that it happened in August or at six AM. It is not so much related with the social structure as it is with a particular technology and perhaps labour relations.

After the chapter on the concepts of time and space three chapters concerning social structure follow. Each deals with one system within social structure – political, lineage and age-set – and with the relations the two other have to the political system. To large extent I omit age-set system, as the record of ethnography is not a subject here and Evans-Pritchard himself thought the age-set system rather marginal in importance. As for political and lineage system, I have already said something about them in the beginning of this chapter so I will just add something to it and then try to focus more on the way Evans-Pritchard treats his data.

The political system is based on territorial relations, or we could say common residency, and is made up of the segments of several levels. The lower we go within the structure "*the stronger the sentiment uniting its members. Tribal sentiment is weaker than the sentiment of one of its segments and the sentiment of a segment is weaker than the sentiment of a village which is part of it.*"¹⁰⁸ In other words, the force of the values that tie the people up and oblige depend on the size of the unit. The identity is always dependent on an opponent as already stated above. What needs to be added is the institution of the feud, which is a sort of the other side of the coin of the principle of segmentation. Segmentation takes place because of the people are having feuds with each other. They can be variously distant to each other in terms of social structure, and this affects their subsequent identities.

108 Ibid. pp. 137.

The feuds are most likely to develop where people have many contacts with each other. The reasons for feud are numerous, stealing a cow, adultery, homicide etc. For the sake of simplicity let's say a feud evolves when somebody gets killed. Then his kinsmen are obliged to avenge him. The obligation lies on his kinsmen, that is, on the members of his lineage, but in practice they are likely to be assisted by their neighbours and so the political unit is involved. How many of them have this obligation depends on the relation between the killer and the killed - what their structural distance was. If they were for example members of the same secondary tribal segment but of two different tertiary segments, then their identity is going to be that of the tertiary segment and they are going to be backed up by their respective segments. The feud is according to Evans-Pritchard structural principle which leads to segmentation. But the way it is stated now it could lead to endless avenging and splitting of groups, which especially in smaller units would be a serious problem, because of the necessity for co-operation. Therefore there has to be another principle which allows people to make peace again. I have already said that there is no government and no law in usual sense. Yet there is an institution of the so called leopard-skin chief. It is in fact no chief, the name came into existence by misunderstanding of his role by former ethnographers. He has no power. His role is ceremonial. It is to mediate between the feuding groups, so that they can make peace without losing their face for not avenging one of their kinsmen. His social function thus is *"to be a mechanism by which the equilibrium of the political system is maintained through the institution of the feud."*¹⁰⁹ Here we can clearly see structural functionalist assumption that there is equilibrium and this equilibrium needs to be maintained. To this end an institution serves. The function of the leopard-skin chief is exactly in this.

I have mentioned that the obligation for homicide regards lineage, but in practice this would be helped by other people of the respective territorial unit. The relation of the lineage and the political system is close and intricate. The kinship idiom is used generally by the Nuer in referring to other people. And it is not just a manner of speaking. Even if two people living in one political unit have no agnatic relationship to each other, and thus belong to different clans, they are related by either cognation or by fictive relationship, or in case of Dinka by adoption, so they are kinsmen anyway. I reproduce it here in an extremely crude way, but my intention is not to make a comprehensive summary of the Nuer social structure but more likely to give the reader a general taste of Evans-Pritchard's argument and to show what does his explanation, or record of the society made in structural functionalist terms, looks like.

109 Ibid. pp. 174.

I will mention very briefly a few more things about the lineage system. A lineage is "a group of agnates, dead or alive, between whom kinship can be traced genealogically, and a clan is an exogamous system of lineages."¹¹⁰ The last feature can be as well phrased so that clans are segmented into lineages, which are diverging branches of descent from a common ancestor. In spite of the numerous relations of the lineage system to political system they do not overlap for in the lineage system the relationships are based on descent, whereas in the political system on residency, and lineages are dispersed and do not compose exclusive local communities. Nevertheless in every political unit some lineage is dominant, not some much in terms of numbers, but influence. The political units even take up the names after their dominant lineages, even though these usually form only a small part of its inhabitants

and at the same time its members live also in other territories. This establishes a certain correspondence between political and lineage groups.¹¹¹ This correspondence rests on the identification of people of various lineages with the lineage dominant in their territory. For this to be possible the lineage system is adjusted to political relations, or we could say it is bent after it. Only the kinship relations that epitomise the established political relations are maintained. As we can see, the political system is thus dominant. I can quote Evans-Pritchard's conclusion on the matter: "*In our view the territorial system of the Nuer is always the dominant variable in its relation to the other social systems. Among the Nuer, relationships are generally expressed in kinship terms, and these terms have great emotional content, but living together counts more than kinship and, as we have seen, community ties are always in one way or another turned into, or assimilated to, kinship ties, and the lineage system is twisted into the form of the territorial system within which it functions.*"¹¹² At this point I will stop with the summary, as it has already taken far too much space.

2.3.4 Some conclusions

In this part of my discussion of the Evans-Pritchard's book I would like to make, apart from a few additions, some general points regarding chiefly my main task, which is to show, how a theory is present in the ethnographical record. First, the whole book is a sociological analysis. As already mentioned, the ethnographical record is subordinated to specific inquiry. Part of this inquiry is a (re)construction of the Nuer social structure. This is regarded

110 Ibid. pp. 6.

111 Ibid. pp. 194, 206.

112 Ibid. pp. 265.

as a system and as an abstraction. Evans-Pritchard is interested only in, we could say abstract, relations of groups, which create a system, not of individuals who create them. Evans-Pritchard likens it to the "*study [of] the relation between organs of the body without studying the interrelation of the cells that compose the organs.*"¹¹³ Here we can see society as organism analogy as a background assumption. This is closely connected with what we could call the holistic outlook. Groups can be defined only with respect to a whole, in this case the whole is social structure, or more precisely political, lineage, age-set, systems respectively. Besides, the focus is on interrelations between various parts of society. However, it is not done in the "everything is related to everything else" fashion, the result of which would be endless enumeration facts. Instead the treatment and the choice of facts are strongly shaped by the main questions. I do not dare to judge, whether it is at the expense of the facts, whether they are distorted in some ways. It is possible that it is so, and some indications of it can be found in the literature,¹¹⁴ but I have explicitly rejected to deal with this issue. The positive side of this approach of his is, that he presents us with much more definite picture of the Nuer society, even though it is not a full picture. It is a partial one, but with clear contours. And such a picture could possibly be used in comparisons, so dear to structural functionalists. The Nuer social structure, or just political system, could be taken as a distinctive type, as a one way of solving the problem of political integration in the given natural conditions.

The main subject of the book are political institutions. The problem of solidarity is posed, which is obviously a question a structural functionalist would ask about. As I have stated above, the Nuer are egalitarian, meaning they recognize no hierarchy of power and thus yield to no one.¹¹⁵ However, they are capable of organized action and co-operation. The interesting question therefore arises, of how this is done or even possible. What are the principles driving them? The principle of segmentation and the opposition between segments, or of fission and fusion, which I gather are just different names for one phenomenon, could all be stated as an answer to the question. However, one might ask, why the fission is necessary? Could they not just live in harmony? It seems, the necessity of both, fission and fusion, is related to their environment. It does not allow large concentration of population. At the same time, however, it necessitates co-operation. The above stated principles serve establishing equilibrium between the numbers and distribution of population and the

113 Ibid. pp. 265.

114 KUPER, A.: *Anthropology and anthropologists: The modern British school*, Routledge 1996, pp. 90.; BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 159.

115 EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E.: *The Nuer: A description of the mode of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Clarendon Press 1940, pp. 181.

environment. These principles are but a shorthand description of the complex set of interrelated or consistent values. These, embodied in action, create social structure. To put it in less abstract terms, we can remember the feud, which is a mechanism for establishing and maintaining the equilibrium. It is therefore construed as an institution, quite vital one in fact, and in no way threatens to overthrow the social structure. *"The tribal constitution requires both elements of a feud, the need for vengeance and the means of settlement. The means of settlement is the leopard-skin chief,... . We therefore regard the feud as essential to the political system as it exists at present."*¹¹⁶

Speaking of the social structure, it is of course this very notion and the assumption that there is such a thing as a stable social structure, which can be isolated conceptually as a skeleton of a society which gives it lasting shape despite the constant change of its constituents, what is characteristic of structural functionalism. That, along with our goal being to describe this structure. Apart from the term social structure there are some other terms in existence close to the structural functionalism and I could look for them in the book and examine, whether they are present, and if so, whether they are used in the same way as they were used by Radcliffe-Brown, but I think it an unprofitable endeavour. One exception I am going to make is the word function, taken both as a noun and as a verb.

The term function has approximately forty occurrences throughout the book. But in no way is their meaning the same in all the cases. Roughly five or six meanings can be distinguished, and it is necessary to say, that in some cases it is not clear which category they fall into. The sense defined by Radcliffe-Brown, that is the role something has for the whole, is present too, but is rare. An example of this usage is following: *"The function of the feud, viewed in this way, is, therefore, to maintain the structural equilibrium between opposed tribal segments which are, nevertheless, politically fused in relation to larger units."*¹¹⁷ Or elsewhere he speaks of the function of the leopard-skin chief for the structure.¹¹⁸ But in relation to leopard-skin chief other meaning of the word function is much more common. It describes his duties, authorities and actions. Still other, although related, is the sense of function as the way something works, functions, exerts influence, as in: *"...for lineages are not corporate groups, but are embodied in local communities through which they function structurally..."*¹¹⁹ Yet another is a function in the sense of aim or purpose something serves, which makes some one or two appearances. But it might be difficult

116 Ibid. pp. 161.

117 Ibid. pp. 159.

118 Ibid. pp. 173.

119 Ibid. pp. 240.

to distinguish it from the first mentioned sense. And then there is quite frequent notion of function which is close to mathematical usage of the term. A relation of determination or conditionality. Something is a function of something else, meaning it is determined by the thing. In other words, it is a dependent variable. An example might be: *"One value attaches a man to his group and another to a segment of it in opposition to other segments of it, and the value which controls his action is a function of the social situation in which he finds himself."*¹²⁰ Or: *"...unity within a group is a function of its opposition to groups of the same kind..."*¹²¹ Or: *"Political relations can be isolated and studied independently of other social systems, but they are a specific function of the whole set of social relations. These are mainly of a kinship type..."*¹²² I do not claim the list of various meanings, or uses we could say, of the word function in the book to be complete, and possibly the division could be made differently. The last thing concerning vocabulary used in the book I want to mention is that the term functionalism or structural functionalism does not once appear in the book.

For even absence might be telling, I will mention what we do not find in the book. There is utter neglect of actors, another feature typical of structural functionalism, and something which follows naturally from Evans-Pritchard's interests. The emphasis is on structures. Agency has no place in his analysis. In other words, no attention is paid to individuals and they are certainly not seen as rational, calculating, decision-making beings, which pursue their own interest within the established field of social structure, or even try to affect its institutions to their advantage. Everyone is seen in terms of the role he has in the system, or we could as well say, in terms of his position in the social structure. Evans-Pritchard admits, that people do not always act according to the values, but they tend to do so.¹²³ And what is more, he is dealing with abstractions, with a society as a system, and everything is viewed from this perspective.

The structural functionalist perspective is more pronounced in the second part of the book, dealing with the social structure, than it is in the discussion of oecology and the concepts of time and space. This is because the social structure with all its intricacies are constructs of the theory to much greater extent than saying, for example, that the people live on cattle husbandry combined with millet cultivation and fishing. In this respect a question suggests itself whether the concepts Evans-Pritchard uses in describing the social structure are native categories or at least close to them, or they are completely etic

120 Ibid. pp. 137.

121 Ibid. pp. 138.

122 Ibid. pp. 190.

123 Ibid. pp. 264.

perspective. The social structure as he presents it is to some extent drawing on what people told him about relationships of the groups, but it is obvious that a great deal is inferred, and what is more important, the whole is translated into universal (anthropological) notions. And it is more than likely that for a Nuer man Evans-Pritchard's picture would be foreign. It is no translation of their perspective into our terms. There is nothing of their perspective, save for the concepts of time and space. I imagine the bewilderment or perhaps fury of a Nuer man on hearing that, for example, the Nuer political structure "*can be understood only in relation to their neighbours, with whom they form a single political system.*"¹²⁴

Closely related to this problem is the question how Evans-Pritchard defines the groups or systems within the social structure he is dealing with. It is mainly, though not exclusively, by values attached to them. The values can be understood as something which drives people, controls their behaviour. Other than that, they are just abstraction, or merely a verbal claim that something ought to be. In this respect the distinction between political and lineage system can be seen most clearly, as their respective values apply in different situations. For example in ritual context the values of lineage system are relevant. Only people of the same lineage can take part in some rituals. In everyday life, however, people have to co-operate in economic and other activities, and that is possible only among people who share the same residence. Thus a group of people is defined by their activity as creating a unit within the social structure. Examples of other values which define a group could be exogamy. To say that a clan is an exogamous unit is to say that people within it do not intermarry and they know that they ought not to. A different way how to put it, is to say that there is a rule both recognized and observed. Another example of value as defining a group, an example Evans-Pritchard discusses thoroughly, is blood-wealth. It is a compensation for homicide, recognized within a tribe. Outside the tribe there is no compensation, but within it, it is deemed right to pay a compensation, although at the level of tribe it stays usually at verbal recognition, and only at the lower levels, that is when the homicide involves two men of the same lower-level tribal segment, it is likely to be actually paid. The smaller the unit the bigger the probability. And of course the most striking example of values as defining a group is the whole principle of segmentation, or fission and fusion if you like. Fighting within, but unity towards others, depending on situation. Again I do not intend to give any fuller account of Nuer values. It is just an illustration of the way Evans-Pritchard proceeds. And it is consistent with what Radcliffe-Brown says to this matter as we have seen formerly.

Now I would like to deal with ways of explaining things. In case of the feud, as it was

124 Ibid. pp. 125.

with the value attached to the cattle, we find no causal explanation for it in the book, only some correlations stated and its necessity for maintaining the social structure. Evans-Pritchard often speaks of the natural propensity of the Nuer for feuding and adds that conflicts are more likely to occur where people have more contacts with each other. So the conflicts at the level of villages or tertiary sections are more frequent than at the level of tribe, and for this reason the recognition of the compensation for injuries or homicide is acknowledged much strongly at the lower-levels of political system, i.e. village, tertiary section, than it is at the higher ones. It is because the need for settling of the feuds is much strongly felt among people who live together and are by their economy forced to co-operate. This sounds like a functional explanation, stating some facts about what Radcliffe-Brown called physiology. We are never really told whether their natural propensity for picking up a fight is just a psychological fact, perhaps result of the harsh conditions they live in,¹²⁵ or need for acquiring cattle partly by stealing it from the Dinka,¹²⁶ or it is conditioned by their social structure and upbringing within it. Their society has no institution of court or any other authority who could impose any enforceable judgement, so the best guarantee of personal safety, property and rights, is to be strong and willing to fight for it.¹²⁷ Even whether one can obtain some redress which is due to him depends very much on the strength of the man, even though not just physical strength but more on the strength of his lineage. The thing to notice in all these varying explanations, and we could find more of them in the book, is that they are never definitive statements in causal terms. All we are given are meaningful relations of some facts, correlations and in some cases dependencies, but no causal explanation. Very often Evans-Pritchard says about some two facts that they are in accord or consistent, and that is all. This too, I believe, is rather typical of structural functionalism. All questions of origin and causation are banned or ignored, instead, we are presented with a largely static system and its functioning, with a way various parts are mutually adjusted to each other. Ideally, what our point of departure in describing the system is going to be is more or less arbitrary. There is no level of facts more basic than others. We can walk through the system starting from various points and still encounter the same connections of parts. It is in accord with the society as an organism analogy. An organ is shaped in order to perform some function, but this function exists only in relation to the whole. The Empedoclean doctrine of evolution by way of adding together various already shaped parts makes no sense, for the shape

125 "Some outstanding traits in Nuer character may be said to be consistent with their low technology and scanty food-supply. I again emphasize the crudity and discomfort of their lives." Ibid. pp. 90.

126 Ibid. pp. 50.

127 Ibid. pp. 150, 184.

is dependent on, or is a function of, to put it in Evans-Pritchard's idiom, the whole.

The picture I gave in the previous paragraph is a bit simplified, but broadly it holds. One factor is after all more basic than others, the oecology, because it contains environment. We have seen one positive statement about it and its relation to the social structure. The natural conditions limit modes of subsistence. The cattle herding, the mode best suitable in the conditions, necessitate people to co-operate. But the relations between environment and the social structure cannot be said to be of causal nature. They are too loose for it. We know that the neighbouring peoples, the Dinka, Shiluk, Annuak, living in the same or very similar natural conditions, have very much different social structure. In other words, there is more ways how to cope with the conditions, more ways how to adapt, how to have a social structure consistent with it. To make the point explicit, what I am trying to say in this oblique way, is that even the environment, nor taken together with economy, explains the social structure in such a way we could say it is determined by it. It is at best consistent in a rather vague sense this word carries.

In the last part of my discussion I would like to look at some possibly problematic spots. I have ignored the age-set system so far. I am not going to expound it now, but there is one interesting thing Evans-Pritchard says about it, which relates to the question to what extent can the functional hypothesis be tested, or if that is too strong a claim, to what extent is it compatible with any state of affairs. Evans-Pritchard spends a lot of pages in showing how the lineage and the political system are related. The conclusion might be summarized by saying that they are related very closely. These are the words of Evans-Pritchard on the matter: *"...there is interdependence of a kind between the Nuer lineage system and their political system. This does not mean a functional relationship between clan groups and territorial groups... But it means that there is structural consistency between the two systems—a consistency between abstractions. We are unable to show a similar interdependence between the age-set system and the political system."*¹²⁸ To the non-existent functional relationship I will return later. Now I wish to bring attention to the last part of the quotation. Elsewhere we are told that age-set system exhibits something which resembles segmentation,¹²⁹ but it does not seem to be of great importance. Other than that, it is not in any close relation to the rest of the social structure, which would render it a necessary part of it. Evans-Pritchard makes an interesting remark about it: *"It is significant that among the Nuer, as among other East African peoples, the age-set system is the first*

128 Ibid. pp. 264.

129 Ibid. pp. 255.

institution to undergo rapid and great modification under European rule and that the other social systems do not appear to be affected by the changes in its constitution. This tends to confirm the opinion we have earlier expressed, that whilst the age-set system is combined with the territorial and lineage systems in the same social cadre and is consistent with them, the consistency is not an interdependence."¹³⁰ I think, what we can infer from the quotation, is, that not every state of affairs actually found in the society is automatically taken for fully, and in the Radcliffe-Brown's physiological sense functionally, interrelated system.

The last quotation leads me to the next subject I would like to broach at least shortly. Interestingly, given the common vilifying of structural functionalism for neglecting change and the colonial context, Evans-Pritchard does mention some changes which has occurred in the recent decades, and which had a severe impact on the Nuer. One is the spread of rinderpest, the other one is involvement of the colonial government. The governmental pacifying campaigns against the Nuer and prohibition of raiding the Dinka, which for Nuer was a means of acquiring cattle, among other things, had some serious repercussions. In combination with the rinderpest it decreased the numbers of their cattle. As the cattle is connected with almost everything else in the Nuer culture, it brought about some changes pertaining to the social structure. The involvement of the government led also to some structural changes. Most notably to the emergence of prophets, which rallied the Nuer to fight against the government and can be said to have some political power. When dealing with these issues, Evans-Pritchard uses historical records and narrates the story of the emergence of prophets. He cannot therefore be said to ignore the change and history utterly, though it might be conceded that his treatment of this subject is rather superficial and he is more interested in synchronic study, which is understandable in regard to his circumscribed field of questions.

Now, returning back to the penultimate quotation, I want to draw attention to the various names for relations Evans-Pritchard uses. In the quotation he discriminates between interdependence and functional relationship. Then he seems to identify the interdependence with "structural consistency". But in the last quotation, the one about changes under European rule, he says: "*...whilst the age-set system is combined with the territorial and lineage systems in the same social cadre and is consistent with them, the consistency is not an interdependence.*"¹³¹ Here, obviously, consistency cannot be identified with interdependence. One problem is thus inconsistency of his own

130 Ibid. pp. 257.

131 Ibid. pp. 257.

terminology. The other, intimately related, is that he does not define his terms, so their meanings can be only inferred. In many cases I am in doubt as to how to construe meaning of a passage containing these terms. There is one last issue connected with these terms. The problem with them is not just one of missing unambiguous definition and consistency. Possibly their content might be problematic.

Often an explanation, if we can call it that way, Evans-Pritchard offers, has a form of showing that some things are consistent with each other. Ideally, he seeks to show that they are related, mutually dependent, form a system. But it can be hard to tell, whether some traits of a society are really dependent on each other. Radcliffe-Brown distinguishes between merely a negative adjustment and real interdependence. However clear it may seem, I think it may not be sufficient. When we speak of consistency, we can mean very different things. Provisionally I suggest a distinction between morphological consistency and interdependence. The former refers to the fact that two things share some features which give them apparent similarity. This can be only a matter of coincidence, and what is more, it depends on us, what we are willing to see as apparent similarities in different things. An example of probably far-fetched morphological similarities is Ruth Benedict's book *Patterns of culture*.¹³² And a striking example is Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, where everything is regarded as an expression of some basic core idea specific for each of the great cultures Spengler treats.¹³³ But this core idea is only to be inferred. What is really there, accessible to the gaze, at least for Spengler, are similarities between all cultural traits one can think of – gothic cathedral, baroque fugue, and Shakespeare's play – all share, according to Spengler, something which tells us, they are deeply related. This is an extreme example, but it shows the principle well, that it depends on us no less than on the thing itself, what we regard as similar. The other option, interdependence, modelled on the organisms consisting of interrelated organs, is what a functionalist tries to discover. But in contrast to the body and its organs the interrelations among institutions, concepts, beliefs etc., are not so readily at hand. In other words, the two categories I have brought in, though clearly different, are not so easy to distinguish in practice.

It is likely that it would require much more thorough investigation before I could state some strong argument against functionalism with some authority, but there is no place for it. I therefore confine myself to this rather tentative argument and add only a more general formulation. It seems to me, that to say that some cultural traits are consistent or even

132 BENEDICT, R.: *Patterns of Culture*, Houghton Mifflin, 1934.

133 SPENGLER, O.: *The Decline of the West*, Trans. Charles F. Atkinson, Alfred A. Knopf 1926.

functionally related, is in practice much more problematic than it sounds in the abstract. When we accept functional hypothesis as our working hypothesis, we assume that there are interrelations between parts of society/culture, but we do not know what they are, where they are, nor how to find them. But this brings us back to the problem, whether the functional hypothesis can effectively be disproved, of which I am, despite what was said about the age-set system, not sure. After all, nothing seems to contradict a supposition that a cultural trait can be consistent, at least in the sense of negative adjustment, i.e. not to be in conflict, with any number of other traits and their configurations.

3 Interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 The Label

The title of this chapter reads Interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz. As far as Geertz is concerned, there is a couple of names which emerge in connection with the theory he proposed. Apart from the one used here one can come across symbolic or semiotic anthropology or hermeneutic approach and possibly some other name. Geertz himself preferred the label "interpretive anthropology".¹³⁴ The term symbolic anthropology, which is used very often with reference to him, is broader. Spencer says to it that: "*The term symbolic anthropology is usually used to cover a broad tendency in the anthropology of the late 1960s and 1970s. Symbolic anthropology involved the study of *culture as a relatively autonomous entity, a system of meaning which the anthropologist would attempt to unravel through the decoding or interpretation of key symbols and *rituals. If symbolic anthropology ever constituted a distinctive school, its home was in *American anthropology, especially in those students and colleagues who had been influenced by its three key figures—†Clifford Geertz, †Victor Turner and †David Schneider.*"¹³⁵ Since the works of the three key figures named in the quotation differ considerably, I will adhere to the name interpretive anthropology. And regarding this name, I mean under it always the theory Geertz has submitted and specifically the form he has given to it, no matter how others might have developed it further.

3.1.2 Interpretive anthropology in secondary literature

In this section I would like to present a brief outline of interpretive anthropology as it can be found in textbooks and encyclopaedias. This will be followed by some reflections on it, and then, I would like to elaborate upon this textbook picture using Geertz's own texts and some commentaries on them. Making the secondary literature my point of departure is both, a matter of convenience, and more importantly, it shows what was incorporated into common

134 GEERTZ, C.: *Passage and Accident: a Life of Learning*, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 17.

135 BARNARD, A. - SPENCER, J: *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Routledge 2002. pp. 806.

anthropological knowledge and perhaps toolset, which are not necessarily the same things the author of the theory valued most, or in some cases even had in mind. But as it is not my task to pursue this sort of comparison, that is Geertz's original texts, or rather my reading of them, versus common appraisal, I will not pay any systematic attention to it.

There is a bunch of notions and topics which appear almost unanimously in the secondary literature dealing with Geertz. As a starting point I can quote from the *Companion encyclopedia of anthropology*: "He focuses on ethnography, or 'thick description', as a way of 'cutting...the culture concept down to size' and, through a semiotic approach, of searching for the webs of meaning by which culture is constituted (1973:4–6). For Geertz, 'the aim of anthropology is the enlargement of the universe of human discourse' (1973:14), although he admits other aims, such as 'the discovery of natural order in human behaviour'... Geertz focuses on the orientation of actors in particular events and attempts to clarify what each event and the actors' behavior in it mean. ... In a critique of formal analysis, he writes that 'Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape' (1973:20)." ¹³⁶ In this piece of quotation we encounter several key topics related to Geertz. It is the notion of *thick description*, whose adoption to anthropology Geertz is credited with. *Thick description* is presented here as synonymous with ethnography, or more precisely, as a specific way of doing ethnography. The latter part of the quotation is a rather obscure. The way ethnography is done is connected with "cutting the concept of culture down to size" and "semiotic approach" which leads us to "webs of meaning", in some way constitutive of culture. The cutting down part refers to Geertz's narrow mentalistic definition of culture. Culture are webs of meaning, which we are supposed to discover with the help of "semiotic approach." I will skip the aims of anthropology for now and proceed to "orientation of actors" part. Seemingly, interest lies in actors and interpretation of events and behaviour. What is not clear, is, for whom the behaviour and events mean something, is it the actor or the ethnographer? And what is meant by actor? Is it every single individual with all his peculiarities who happens to be subject of an ethnographer, or some generic member of his culture? Answer for the last question cannot be found in the text quoted, but based upon Geertz's own texts we can reasonably conclude that the first option is not the case. He is not interested in individuals and only partly in various groups within a society. His actors are

136 INGOLD, T. (ed.): *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003. pp. 370–371.

more likely instances of their society. As for the former question concerning the interpreter of the meanings, we can say it is both, the actors and the ethnographer. The actors are driven, in some way, which needs to be clarified later, by their culture. It enables them to make sense of their experience, give it a meaning. To uncover this meaning, or rather webs of meaning, is a purpose of ethnographer. And as these webs of meaning are always local, specific for a society (strictly speaking it is not clear where are their borders) we can infer that the aims of anthropology are very far from discovering laws or universals, and much closer to what Malinowski in *Argonauts* spoke of as getting the native's point of view, or perhaps what Evans-Pritchard in his study on Azande witchcraft did.¹³⁷ Anthropology in this manner is more like translating one culture into another, which is in accord with the "*enlargement of the universe of human discourse*", stemming from Geertz's most famous essay,¹³⁸ and which we have seen in the quotation made above.

The above mentioned notions of *thick description* and culture in Geertz's sense are no doubt in need of a serious clarification. I will come to that later, now I would like to add some other topics customarily appearing in the secondary literature in connection with interpretive anthropology. These topics include symbols as guiding action and an emphasis on their being public; culture as text and anthropology as interpretation of this text made of human behaviour; ethnography as a kind of writing, or writing down; second grade interpretation of an anthropologist; Geertz's enigmatic quotation on the subject of relation of the anthropologist's local and particular discoveries to some broader context: „*small facts speak to large issues*“¹³⁹; Geertz's intellectual roots or inspiration, which covers philosophers Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paul Ricoeur and Suzanne Langer, sociologists Max Weber and Alfred Schütz, or literary critic Kenneth Burke, to whom all Geertz explicitly claims allegiance. In more critical texts, we find moreover remarks on, on the one hand Parsons, and on the other hand the whole Boasian tradition in American anthropology, which generally tended towards humanities, understanding, relativism, particularity, and we could say mental aspects of culture.¹⁴⁰ Other than that there is a host of standard passages taken from Geertz's works which appear persistently in the secondary literature, resembling at times

137 More on the matters of contextualizing Geertz's work can be found for example in BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004. pp. 160–163.

138 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 14.

139 Originally from: GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 23. Quoted e. g. in INGOLD, T. (ed.): *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003. pp. 693.

140 e. g. BARNARD, A. - SPENCER, J.: *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Routledge 2002. pp. 808.

quotations from some sort of holy scripture – metaphoric, seemingly telling it all, and in fact not very clear. The most profound example is the credo from his *Thick description* essay: „*The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. 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 interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical. But this pronouncement, a doctrine in a clause, demands itself some explication.*“¹⁴¹ The last sentence, which concludes the paragraph, does usually not make it into the quotation and more often than not is its content ignored. I will attempt some explication in the next section. Now there is one last standard theme which gets cited regularly, of which I want to make a brief notion and which will serve me as a sort of a bridge towards more thorough and at once critical elucidation. It is Geertz's essay on Balinese cockfight, generally taken as a superb example of application of interpretive anthropology.¹⁴² Another reason, why I pay some attention to it, is the fact that Geertz's theory is hard to explain without examples, not least because of Geertz's own manner of presenting things, in some respects resembling Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*. What he does in his texts is more showing things from a certain perspective, not rarely a perspective which renders common assumptions on a given subject implausible, than explaining in some conventional, argumentative way. And that of course comprises some examples. The story of Jewish trader Cohen, which serves illustrating the notion of *thick description* can be remembered here.

I will start again with a piece of quotation, this time from *Social and Cultural anthropology – the key concepts*: "*Much of Balinese culture 'surfaces' in a cock ring, Geertz contends, and cockfighting, a popular (if sometimes illegal) obsession, can be read as providing significant insights into what being a Balinese is really about.*" What being a Balinese is really about catches my attention, for I have no clear idea of what being a Czech is really about, and that despite living almost all my life in the Czech republic. I do not even see what could be a form of a statement summarizing it succinctly. And the question suggests

141 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 5.

142 GEERTZ, C.: *Deep play: Notes on Balinese Cockfight*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 412–453.; mentioned e. g. in RAPPORT, N. - OVERING, J.: *Social and Cultural Anthropology – The Key Concepts*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003, pp. 352.; And in BARNARD, A. - SPENCER, J: *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Routledge 2002. Spencer mentions that most of Geertz's analysis „has now been almost completely rejected by many area specialists.“ pp. 809.

itself again, whether all the members of a society/culture share the same "experience"? I guess there is no yes or no answer to this question. It is more a matter of what we take as „the same,” and perhaps we can gain something by taking inspiration in the realm of languages, where, in spite of regional variants and individuals' idiosyncrasies, there are some relatively clear boundaries, although in the case of languages they are probably more pronounced than they are with culture. Seeking the answer to the former question about a form I will quote a little further: *„First, Geertz explicates how Balinese fighting cocks are locally viewed as symbolizing the ambulant genitals of their male owners. Then, he goes on to show how the ramifications of this symbolic usage touch further and further features of Balinese life; so that cocks and cockfights come to be symbolically informed by a multiplicity of Balinese structures of signification. Precisely, here is the narcissistic male ego concretized and magnified; also, a momentary letting loose of archetypal animality; also, an oblatory blood sacrifice to cannibalistic demons and threatening powers of darkness; also, a representation of the social matrix and tensions constituting village and locale ... also, a celebration of status rivalry, of gaining and losing esteem, ... also an art-form which renders ordinary everyday experience comprehensible, imaginable and meaningful to its own protagonists: an encompassing and displaying of the cultural themes of masculinity, pride, death, loss, rage, beneficence and chance. Here, in short, is an inscription, a fiction, a model, a metaphor, a meta-social commentary, which the Balinese construct about themselves.”*¹⁴³

I think this paraphrase of Geertz's essay very concise and reasonably precise, so I have quoted such a large piece. We can see a number of topics in it. Obviously there is stress on actor's, that is, the Balinese's perspective, which is wholly in accord with Geertz's *„our formulations of other peoples' symbol systems must be actor-oriented.”*¹⁴⁴ As for what being a Balinese is about, it is stated in large part in terms of psychology, perhaps Jungian, judged by the dark forces and normally sanctioned modes of behaviour, resembling the Jungian shadow. Moreover there is a mention of a representation of the social matrix, and of status of rivalry and esteem, which could perhaps associate the social structure, but altogether is not very clear. And lastly there is something about art-form, making everyday experience meaningful and comprehensible for actors. On the whole, given the hotchpotch nature of the list, I find it difficult to give, so far at least, any answer to the question of the form of a final account summarizing what it is about, being a member some culture.

143 RAPPORT, N. - OVERING, J.: *Social and Cultural Anthropology – The Key Concepts*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003. pp. 352.

144 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 14.

Getting back to the quotation, the item last mentioned, the art, is, to my mind, stated not quite appropriately in terms of category, since its position at the end of the list themes which the Balinese cockfight symbolises, suggests that it is just another item on the list, while in fact, what Geertz had more likely in mind, is that the whole performance is a sort of an art-form symbolizing all those other things on the list and thus imposing meaning onto Balinese world, or experience if you like. To understand better this impressive essay, as well as other Geertz's writings, it would be useful to clarify a few questions. First, in what way exactly does the cockfight symbolize those things? And in what way does the cockfight, a ritual of a sort, impose, by way of symbols, meaning on the experience of people. It shapes their categories, or more generally, ways of thinking, or even more generally and more vaguely, their perspective of the world, in some way, but it is not easy to see, how it is done. As to this question, I am afraid there is no proper answer to be found in Geertz's texts, if we want to know some mechanism through which it functions, instead the answer we get has a form a stating a function – what it does, but I will have more to say about it in discussing culture as a program analogy. As for the former question, which can be re-stated as: how does an anthropologist discover those symbols and their meaning in the cockfight or any other „cultural text,“ the simple answer is through *thick description*. Which, of course, only postpones the question one step and more needs to be said. I will deal with that in the next chapter. And as far as the original question: what is it about being a Balinese, is concerned, I think what it really amounts to, is the same as what are the guiding or orienting symbols which structure Balinese's experience, which is in turn the same question as what is their culture. Seemingly the original question might refer to some sort of empathic experience made by ethnographer. That it is not to be understood that way makes Geertz's quite clear. „Putting the matter this way—in terms of how anthropological analysis is to be conducted and its results framed, rather than what psychic constitution anthropologists need to have—reduces the mystery of what "seeing things from the native's point of view" means. ... To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.“¹⁴⁵

145 GEERTZ, C.: *From the Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*,

In the last section of this chapter, based, though not exclusively, on secondary literature, I would like to ruminate a bit more on the subject of Geertz's style and the way his theory is customarily depicted in the secondary literature, which are not altogether fully independent topics. Reviewing the secondary literature of the more general kind dealing with Geertz, mostly textbooks and encyclopedias, there is one thing quite conspicuous.¹⁴⁶ Practically all of them say the same. Not just in terms of the content, that would be trivial, and the only thing one could infer from it would be a unanimity of general reception or interpretation. What is striking is the phrasing, which differs only very subtly, using a few key topics, examples and unusually large amounts of quotations. One way it could be explained is by citing a common academic vice of parroting what others said on the subject, what is not only easier but also much safer than paraphrasing something in one's own words. However, I do not think it is the appropriate explanation in this case. More likely it seems to me that, first, that there is really not much more to say, but this is naturally still to be shown, and secondly, the dependency on Geertz's own words is really high due to his style of explaining things, as I have already indicated. He has very little in the way of arguments in any strong sense with clear premises and conclusions. His writing is more evocative, suggestive and full of metaphors and analogies, which makes it pleasure to read, but at the same time leaves many questions, or should I say problems, open. I hold Geert's rhetoric in high esteem, but at the same time, I find it the main vehicle for spreading his influence. In almost every account of his theory we encounter bombastic statements about his influence both within anthropology and in other disciplines like history and literary criticism.¹⁴⁷ Stripped of the rhetoric, there seems to be relatively little to tell. And using, in expounding some thoughts, unless they are of artistic nature, large amounts of original texts, sometimes about a half of the resulting text, is always suspicious. It could be a toll for

In *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 57–58.

146 BARNARD, A.: *History and Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge University Press 2004. pp. 160–163.; BARNARD, A. - SPENCER, J.: *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Routledge 2002; BIRX, J. H.(ed.): *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Sage Publications 2006; INGOLD, T. (ed.): *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003. pp. 370.; RAPPORT, N. - OVERING, J.: *Social and Cultural Anthropology – The Key Concepts*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003. pp. 352; ERIKSEN, T. H. - NIELSEN, F. S.: *A History of Anthropology*, Pluto Press 2001; MOORE, J. D.: *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*, Altamira Press 2009; BARTH, F. - GINGRICH, A. – PARKIN, R. – SILVERMAN, S.: *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, The University of Chicago Press 2005; KUPER, A.: *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Harvard University Press 1999; KUPER, A. – KUPER, J. (eds.): *The Social Science Encyclopedia*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

147 e. g.: "For the last 40 years, Clifford James Geertz has been the most influential and controversial anthropologist to capture the interest of both scholars and the general public." BIRX, J. H. (ed.): *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Sage Publications 2006. pp. 1027.

the use of metaphors and analogies, without which the thoughts are hard or plain impossible to articulate.¹⁴⁸ I am certainly not against using metaphors or analogies. They lead us to see things in some definite way by telling us how to look. Therefore we can see some abstract, amorphous thing, like culture, as something we already know how to look at, which can generate both, some answers and some meaningful problems to wonder about. But, despite fully acknowledging their immense values for cognition and reasoning, I do not think they should serve as definitive answers. We can probably contend that knowledge in general can be characterized as translating the unknown into something known – something yet unknown is defined as something known in certain (i. e. known) relations with something else which is also known, and through this, we have made it certain, definite, in other words, known to us. A metaphor or analogy has seemingly similar form, but instead of A consists of B and C in such and such relation, in case of a metaphor we can only say: A could be viewed in the manner of B, but it holds only for some aspects of it. In others they have nothing in common. Metaphors bring to light some aspects of a thing, but not the whole. When a functionalist says that a society is an organism, what he is saying is, that it is a system consisting of interrelated parts, not that it is born, grows according to its innate properties and dies, (unless he is overfond of Spengler). Related problem is, that it is not necessarily clear, which aspect an author wishes to bring to light, for a metaphor can be interpreted in more than one way, and it is not always obvious, which one is the right one. Such metaphors as culture as text for example, are certainly anything but apparent.

3.2 Closer look

In an attempt to find answer to the question mentioned above, of how does an ethnographer discover the symbols of which culture consists, I will concern myself somewhat more with the concepts of culture and *thick description*. In a way, they should be treated separately, as they belong to different categories, and what is more, *thick description* is not necessarily dependent on Geertz's view of culture. On the other hand, his view of culture necessitates some interpretive approach, which we can, at least roughly, take as synonymous with *thick description*. Because of this close connection of the matter and the way of penetrating it I will not separate them into distinct chapters, and my whole procedure is not going to be fully satisfactory in terms of systematization, for I will try to delve into the subject repeatedly from

148 I take the concepts of metaphor and analogy to be quite close, and that is why I will, for the sake of brevity, use usually just metaphor as standing for both of them.

various perspectives, in hope of finding some deeper insights. One of the question to which I will try to find some answer, is whether *thick description* can justifiably be viewed as a full-fledged method.

The *thick description* is sometimes spoken of as if it were some new revolutionary method of doing ethnography. But is it? The way Geertz presents it in his eponymous essay is for the most part by using two stories. One, borrowed from Ryle along with the term itself, about winks and twitches, and the other about a Moroccan Jewish trader.¹⁴⁹ Concerning the winks, the point is, that the same overt and observable behaviour can have very different meanings, depending on the context in which it is produced and interpreted. The emphasis in this case, is not so much on the context as referring to the situation and intentions of the actors, although that is necessarily present too, but on the context as a (cultural) frame in which this behaviour can be interpreted as having a certain meaning. In other words, a frame in which this gesture is a sign. For something to be a sign existence of a code shared by the producer and a receiver of the sign is necessary. As we are talking of culture, this code is shared by a community, and Geertz stresses that it is public, as opposed to something residing in people's minds. In the example there is a multitude of possible meanings which can be attributed to the contraction of the eyelid. It can be just twitching, meaning nothing, but it can also be a means of communication – sign of conspiracy. Further it can be mimicking of this means of communication and so on. A description which is *thick*, is a description which distinguishes what is the meaning of a behaviour for actors, as compared to mere phenomenistic, or behaviouristic, account of an event. But, as was already indicated, it is not the actors as such and their mental states which are of interest. These are more taken for granted. It is the frame of interpretation which the actors use in interpreting events, or to put it differently, by virtue of which they can wink, parody winking etc., instead of just contracting their eyelids. So far the matters seem clear, which is at least partly due to the simplicity of the example. We could perhaps only restrict the novelty of the approach. The contrast towards which he is drawing his *thick description* is merely a behaviouristic account of what people are doing. Which is certainly not the only, and I doubt prevalent, way ethnography was being done. When we look for example into Malinowski's *Argonauts*, we can see that he speaks all the time about what the actions people take mean to them. The main difference in the ethnography thus is, in my opinion, that Malinowski's and other records are done in a slightly haphazard fashion - everything deserves to be mentioned

149 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 6–9.

and everything is in some way or other connected with everything else. So the final picture is hard to summarize unless one takes just the Kula and forgets all the rest, which is probably the most natural way to summarize the *Argonauts*. Geertz, in contrast, has a much more definite and narrow idea of what culture is. It is his "web of meanings," the frame of interpretation the actors use to make sense of the world, which is of itself amorphous, sheer potentiality.

As indicated above, Geertz claims this frame, consisting of culture patterns, i.e. symbols, or „*ordered clusters of significant symbols...* [through which] *man makes sense of the events through which he lives*,“¹⁵⁰ to be public, though not readily accessible to ethnographers look. And because of this quality it can be examined. Here the question arises, how does this frame, context, web of meanings, structure of meaning, cultural pattern or even accumulated totality of these patterns, to give just a few of the profusion of names Geertz uses for culture, look like. What form does it take? How can it be meaningfully described? And, of course, how can it be discovered? The questions we have already met in slightly different phrasing in discussing Balinese cockfight.

3.2.1 Being public

What is meant by symbols being public? At first sight, a symbol is a device for communication and therefore it is naturally something public, accessible to others. But common-sense view of a symbol has it that it is something which stands for something else, and that something else is its meaning. This meaning is then considered as something separate from the symbol, something which emerges in man's mind when he understands the symbol. But how could we say that he understands the symbol correctly, when obviously we cannot see what is in his mind? I must here warn a reader, that I summarize it in the crudest possible manner, and in fact this debate, drawing upon late Wittgenstein, is fairly intricate and there is anything but a consensus regarding its interpretation. Moreover, Geertz is not very clear about it, so I paraphrase it the way I understand it. As we cannot see into somebody else's head, it is reasonable to replace the above model of meaning with a different one. Instead of viewing meaning as a mental entity it is better to see it in terms of what people do. I can recognize if somebody understands what I am saying simply by observing what he does. He makes some gestures, utters some words, does what is told to do etc. Whatever that

150 GEERTZ, C.: *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 362.

will be, I will take his actions as expressing something, that is, as having a meaning. And that I take it this way rather than another is in turn expressed by what I do. In this way, all cultural behaviour is viewed as symbols or signs. What is important is that there is no recourse to any assumptions about people's minds in this view. Stated this way, the discourse about symbols loses the air of esoterism. But that does not mean everything is crystal clear.

As already said, for something to be a sign, there has to be a code, in which it has a meaning, much in the same way a word is a word only in the context of its respective language. And this context – culture – is what Geertz seeks to discover. This context is something which enables us to interpret signs, that is, to see them as having a meaning, and to produce (meaningful) signs. It is again tempting to see it as something mental, and in a way it undoubtedly is, as it must be connected with some processes taking place in brain, but seen this way we cannot reason about it much. Thus it is again public. It is in the behaviour. But how? It rests, vaguely I would say, upon Wittgenstein's discussion of the rule-following and private language.¹⁵¹ What does it mean to follow a rule? It is a matter of neither intentions or beliefs of an actor, nor is it a matter of mere regularity. The first option would preclude the possibility of telling whether somebody else is really following a rule or he just thinks he is doing it. The other one cannot account for mistakes, as it is always possible to construct a rule in such a manner that it covers all the actual instances. Wittgenstein's solution, or at least in Kripke's famous interpretation,¹⁵² is to say, that a rule is above all normative. It is approval or disapproval of a community what constitutes a rule. This sanctioning is itself expressed in behaviour, so we can say that a rule exists because people do something, and they do it publicly. And, despite the air of something extraordinary and original, often associated with Wittgenstein's ideas, it does not seem altogether that different from Radcliffe-Brown's saying, that the reality of an institution is created by its being observed in behaviour, and recognized as what ought to be. We can look at it from a slightly different perspective as well. Symbol, despite being public, that is, potentially accessible to everybody, does in itself contain no instructions as to how it should be read. It is arbitrary. How it is supposed to be read is a matter of functioning praxis of a given community, and this in turn rests on sanctioning of some practices by its members. In other words, something becomes a symbol by virtue of how it is treated.

151 WITTGENSTEIN, L.: *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing 2001.

152 KRIPKE, S.: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Harvard University Press 1982.

3.2.2 World-view and ethos

There is one thing in this Wittgensteinian business, of which I do not know what to make. For Wittgenstein the context in which something has meaning is called language game. There is moreover a notion of form of life, which is anything but clear, but let's assume, for the sake of simplicity, that it is a totality of language games of a community. The problem is, that it is probably impossible to tell from Wittgenstein's writings, whether these language games are in some way integrated into a whole, whether they are somehow adjusted to each other, or consistent, to put it simply. For Geertz, it is actually not very clear either. We are not told directly, as far as I am aware, what kind of integration culture possess. But judged by terms like structure of meaning, culture system, and even web of meanings, it does seem reasonable to expect that it is not of a „shreds and patches“ nature, but rather it is in some way a consistent whole. This question is not so random as it might at first appear. When we descend to lower and more practical planes, where questions a real anthropologist might wonder about occur, it is related to the question that haunts me from the beginning of this chapter. What form does an anthropologist's account of culture made under the auspices of interpretive anthropology take? Is it more something like core ideas, beliefs or sentiments, of which every actual cultural behaviour can be said to be an expression – something close to ethos or world-view of a given culture? To view it this way, it would render the enterprise close in some respects to culture-and-personality „school“. We can certainly find words ethos and world-view many times in his writings. Mostly in texts concerned with religion. One of his essays in the *Interpretation of cultures* even bears the name: *Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols*¹⁵³ And in his essay *Religion As a Cultural System*, we encounter following passage: „As we are to deal with meaning, let us begin with a paradigm: viz., that sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos - the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood - and their world view - the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes, while the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life.“¹⁵⁴ Judged by these examples it is ethos and world-view as some concentrated

153 GEERTZ, C.: *Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 126 – 141.

154 GEERTZ, C.: *Religion As a Cultural System*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 89–

statements of characteristics of a given culture what we are after. That does not say that it is completely clear what it is, but it is at least a little more definite. Ethos is concerned with values and sentiments, the world-view is more a general picture of how things are, and these two things are interrelated. But apart from these and like statements, which can be found in essays dealing with religion or ideology, we can find one of a very much different kind. In it, he criticizes a view of culture as a *purely* symbolic system, that is, culture as cut off from the actual behaviour. *"Culture is most effectively treated, the argument goes, purely as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, "in its own terms"), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way-according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based. ... the source of some of the most powerful theoretical ideas in contemporary anthropology, this hermetical approach to things seems to me to run the danger (and increasingly to have been overtaken by it) of locking cultural analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life."*¹⁵⁵ Here he seems less inclined to sweeping abstractions like world-view and ethos, defining a whole culture in a few succinct words. Instead the emphasis is on the actual behaviour of people, which is much less regularized than notions like ethos would suggest. I think there are two things to say to this confusion. One is to point out the special nature of religion in informing people in some general, yet profound, and not least, uniform way. In other fields, like economy or politics, which are to be understood as other distinct structures of symbols, matters are hazier. As a result, these fields are probably less susceptible to generalized conclusions. In other words, anthropologist's account here must take humbler form, stating likely some rules characteristic of a given field. This would amount to something like trying to reconstruct rules of a *language game*. But this conclusion I make here, is more of a guess than an authoritative statement, for I have not found any unambiguous answer to it in Geertz's texts,

Returning once more to my question, what form does Geertz's culture, or more precisely its inscription, take, and with it returning to the "what is being a Balinese about" question, I can only say, that even after the discussion made above, I have no idea what my own frame of interpretation is. I could not possibly express it. Well, we could say that this objection is of no bearing. Trained anthropologist has his methods and moreover he has the advantage of the view from without, while an actor uses his frame of interpretation

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155 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 17.

implicitly, he does not see any symbols. If anything, he sees the world and events in it as having meaning, but he is typically not aware of the fact that it is just one conceivable perspective or interpretation, made possible by virtue of some public symbols. As a man seeing does not see his eye through which he sees. It is a bit like Kantian categories, making all experience possible, but culturally specific and thus relative, and, of course, much more specific. *Thick description* should somehow uncover these “categories”. There is still a lot of obscurity as to how this is done, and even as to precise, or, if that is too strong a word, more definite nature of culture.

3.2.3 The nature of culture and of its enquiry

There are several passages in Geertz's writings regarding how to enquire about culture, which often get quoted in secondary literature, but say surprisingly little. We can look at a few of them. *"Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour."*¹⁵⁶ In short, doing ethnography consists in interpreting behaviour, or we could say cultural behaviour. Of itself this does not say much. The culture as text analogy implied here is not very clear as to its ramifications so far. „*Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.*"¹⁵⁷ Again, nothing particularly surprising. The only thing worth mentioning is the stress on an ad hoc quality of the interpretations as compared to a priori models of the inner workings of human thought, as in structuralism and perhaps some versions of cognitive anthropology. The next piece comes from the last pages of the essay on the Balinese cockfight. *"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. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to make a Freudian quake, and some moral perplexities as well. Nor is it the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. Functionalism lives, and so does psychologism. But to regard such forms as "saying something of something," and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their*

156 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 10.

157 Ibid. pp. 20.

substance rather than to reductive formulas professing to account for them. As in more familiar exercises in close reading, one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else. ... But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them."¹⁵⁸ He contrasts his approach with approaches which try to explain things by way of reduction, either to psychology or some biological or other needs. Instead, he is interested in the way the actors interpret things. In understanding rather than explaining things, to put it in the classical Neo-Kantian idiom. Questions of why something has the form it has, are out of place and with it questions regarding how actors create their culture and how they can change it. To this matter it should be said, that Geertz is not altogether uninterested in change – the story about the Jewish trader in *Thick description*, and especially the essay on Balinese funeral are certainly dealing with change.¹⁵⁹ But they do it, and I do not wish to make a cheap paradox here, in a very static way. They just show, how a culture, the frame of interpretation people use, can no longer account for their changed life circumstances. This leads to another question. What is the relation of culture to social structure, economy, environment, politics etc. I will get back to this question later, now I would like to continue with the questions posed earlier. As for the "*saying something of something and saying it to somebody*", appearing in the above quotation, we are left in the dark. That somebody should be an actor, while in fact it is an ethnographer guessing what actors might think, but what concerns me more, is what is being said of what. And then, of course, how can an ethnographer discover it. So far we have only seen that what is being said is being said in public and it is made up mainly of behaviour. "Saying something of something" relates in some very dim way to the fact, that people impose meaning upon the world. They order it so to say, in order to make it intelligible. But we are not told any details. To shed some light on the subject, it is good to look at two analogies of culture Geertz uses. We have already met culture as text analogy. The other one is culture as a program analogy. I believe they have different purposes. Culture as text analogy is closely related to his saying that a work of an ethnographer is similar to that of a literary critic. This analogy is directed towards highlighting aspects of culture which are relevant for examining it and should advise us, how to go about our inquiries. The other analogy, culture as program, is aimed at telling

158 GEERTZ, C.: *Deep play: Notes on Balinese Cockfight*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 452–453.

159 GEERTZ, C.: *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 142–169.

us something about culture itself, namely about its function.

3.2.4 Culture as program

The analogy with a computer program emerges repeatedly in Geertz's texts along with a mention of human dependency on these programs. Human nature is always cultural. It is a necessity for human beings to have some culture. Human nature as something common to all humanity is a void concept, a potentiality which has to be actualized first to attain some definiteness. Human nature is always nature of a member of some specific culture, and a common background or substrate plays according to Geertz little role. The relation is obviously modelled on the hardware-software relation – physical components do not determine what a computer does on the higher plane. They just provide a field of possibilities. This rules out any attempts of explaining things in sociobiological or psychological fashion. And now to program analogy proper: *"I want to propose two ideas. The first of these is that culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns - customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters - as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms - plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs") - for the governing of behavior. The second idea is that man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extragenetic, outside-the-skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior."*¹⁶⁰ We can see control-mechanisms, recipes, rules and instructions, programs in short. This analogy might be misleading, as a computer program is strictly determinist (jokes about Windows aside), it merely follows instructions. It would be a peculiar image of human situation to picture human beings as robots strictly following some sort of unconscious instructions, despite the fact that this is what so called scientific approaches to human behaviour almost inevitably presuppose, in one way or other. But Geertz is no determinist in regard to human behaviour. *"As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly - that is, thickly-described."*¹⁶¹ Here we have culture as a field in which one can act meaningfully. *"It represents the power of the human imagination to construct*

160 GEERTZ, C.: *The Impact of The Concept of Culture on The Concept of Man*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 44.

161 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 14; or even more simply: „...code does not determine conduct, and what was actually said need not have been." Ibid. pp. 18.

an image of reality in which, to quote Max Weber, "events are not just there and happen, but they have a meaning and happen because of that meaning."¹⁶² In connection with the program analogy he uses some other terms, which can best be seen in the following succinct statement. *"Whatever their other differences, both so-called cognitive and so-called expressive symbols or symbol-systems have, then, at least one thing in common: they are extrinsic sources of information in terms of which human life can be patterned - extrapersonal mechanisms for the perception, understanding, judgment, and manipulation of the world. Culture patterns - religious, philosophical, aesthetic, scientific, ideological - are "programs"; they provide a template or blueprint for the organization of social and psychological processes, much as genetic systems provide such a template for the organization of organic processes."*¹⁶³ In this passage the stress is not just on the culture as control mechanism for human behaviour – telling us what to do - , but also on the imposing of meaning onto the world – structuring it cognitively. Again, it must be remembered that the analogy with a program and here even with DNA is a loose one. The relation of culture – these templates or blueprints – to behaviour is not one of strict determination. It only makes something possible, as a language enables us to speak, that is, to utter meaningful sentences, without making us to go for particular ones. Speaking of language, there are many similarities, I believe. Out of the continuum of sounds man is able to produce only some sounds are picked in each language, same as only some kinds of behaviour are characteristic for each culture. Moreover, the phonemic system of language is but a small part of it, and there are issues of, for example, how to express (or actually think) complex thoughts, of which again, there are numerous possible ways, but each language actualizes only one or some of them. In the same (vague) way, workings of culture are manifold, but one characteristic they share is that they specify something – tell us who is a relative, whom to marry, whom to fight, where gods dwell and how to appease them etc.¹⁶⁴ A functionalist of a Malinowskian type would say, that these things, institutions, cognitive categories, beliefs and whatever else, are means of satisfying some needs, but he cannot account for the immense diversity of their forms, and precisely this point is something Geertz constantly emphasizes, and rejects explaining it in favour of describing it.

162 GEERTZ, C.: *Ethos, World View, and The Analysis of Sacred Symbols*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 131.

163 GEERTZ, C.: *Ideology As a Cultural System*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 216.

164 GEERTZ, C.: *The Impact of The Concept of Culture on The Concept of Man*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 52.

3.2.5 Culture as text

In the previous section I expounded the culture as a program analogy, consisting of instructions of how to interpret the world and what to do in it. In the following section, I would like to tackle culture as text analogy. Culture is both a text made up of behaviour seen in terms of symbols and the context, in which this text, made up of behaviour, can be a read. This peculiarity is, if I understand it correctly, draws upon the public meaning discussion which we have seen above. What is not very clear is the ethnographer as literary critic analogy, closely connected with it. A literary critic does not use only the information contained in a text he interprets. On the contrary knowledge of the era of the origin of the text and knowledge of other texts and perhaps other things are indispensable in his effort to expound meaning of a text. What is more, given the nature of culture as caught in culture as program analogy, it seems odd to see literary critic as decoding a program. Therefore, I think, we have to bear in mind tentative and limited nature of analogies.

What a literary critic does is that he translates texts into other texts. He tries to catch a meaning of text and writes it down. I personally cannot say, even after reading so many of Geertz's texts, that I do not find this analogy artificial, and what is worse, not very clear as for its practical consequences, and therefore it is very well possible that I am missing some point. Nevertheless, I think that the analogy stems from such view of a critic, which, frankly speaking, makes one wonder about all the fuss about it. Geertz speaks of doing ethnography as a kind of writing. "*The ethnographer "inscribes" social discourse; he writes it down.*"¹⁶⁵ What he writes down are not events in their particularity but their meaning, or what was "said" in the social discourse. Geertz contrasts this view of ethnography with a more traditional one, according to which what an ethnographer does is that he "*observes, he records, he analyzes*".¹⁶⁶ This picture is false according to him, because "*these three phases of knowledge-seeking may not, as a matter of fact, normally be possible; and, indeed, as autonomous "operations" they may not in fact exist.*"¹⁶⁷ This leads us to realize, that for Geertz there is no sharp, if any, distinction between description, meaning some sifted through record of what an ethnographer saw, and interpretation and analysis. An ethnographer sees reality always as interpreted in some way, though not necessarily the way actors see it, or, to be more precise, he never sees it the way they do, but he can be close or far from it.

When I ponder this analogy a bit more, I find it more confusing than illuminating.

165 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 19.

166 Ibid. pp. 20.

167 Ibid. pp. 20.

What a literary critic does, apart from what was said already, is trying to find some deeper, not at first sight accessible meaning of a text. When he speaks of a meaning of a poem, it is not quite the same as when a linguist speaks of a meaning of a word or a sentence. The meaning in the latter sense, which seems to be at least in some important aspects rather close to what Geertz says about culture, especially considering program analogy, consists, vaguely speaking, in some rules stating how something is used. Much like rules of Wittgenstein's language games. The meaning of a poem or generally a text, does not seem to enable this way of rendering. These two meanings are in some way related, so I would not go as far as to say that it is a mere homonymy, but I do not venture to tell what way that is. Yet, I would certainly hold them apart, and it is my impression that Geertz conflates, or perhaps confuses, them.

Now I will try to follow the ramifications of the literary critic analogy further, although my knowledge of this field is too limited to permit any convincing conclusions. My main problem with it, aside from the one stated in the last paragraph, is its vagueness. A literary critic has so vast a range of possibilities of how to write his interpretation, that I am not utterly sure there are any limits, and with it anything resembling a method. He can focus on presumed individual motivations (of either the author or of his characters) which relates his enterprise to psychology. This would hardly be inspiring for Geertz. But he can also, and here the inspiration is likely to rest, try to interpret the whole opus or any part of it in terms of its cultural context. Stated in this way, it is inevitably ambiguous. What I mean by it is something like showing that the work, or, for example, actions of some character, are something natural, given the context of its origin. And it is capturing of this context which Geertz is after. Which is of course only little less vague. Perhaps is the precise nature of Geertz's concept of culture and its inquiry something like the nature of time was for St. Augustine, something obvious when we do not think about it, but hard to articulate. In the next section I will concentrate more on the way an ethnographer can catch it, by which I mean both, discover and write down, but again, we cannot expect much clarity. As Geertz himself says to it: „*However that may be, it is, this catching of "their" views in "our" vocabularies, one of those things like riding a bicycle that is easier done than said.*"¹⁶⁸

3.2.6 Hermeneutics of culture

Here I would like to examine the methods of the study of culture somewhat deeper,

168 GEERTZ, C.: *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 10.

and to go beyond the „looking over their shoulder“ and „guessing at meaning“ statements, which are of little help to somebody trying to learn a way of doing anthropology. So far I have said of this matter little more than that an ethnographer is interested in actors' point of view and his method is not based on empathy. He starts with what people say about what they do. In other words, an ethnographer makes interpretations of their own interpretations.¹⁶⁹ Concerning the essence of this interpreting business, a hallmark of literary critic, Geertz makes a handful of statements on the subject. Let's take a look at a few of them. In *Thick description* essay he lists some characteristics of ethnographic description: „So, there are three characteristics of ethnographic description: it is interpretive; what it is interpretive of is the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the "said" of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms. The kula is gone or altered; but, for better or worse, *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* remains. But there is, in addition, a fourth characteristic of such description, at least as I practice it: it is microscopic."¹⁷⁰ To the microscopic quality I will return later, in dealing with the questions of generalization. To the present question only the „flow of social discourse“ is relevant. Although it is not particularly illuminating term, it refers to behaviour which is seen as exchange of symbols, in terms of what I dealt with in the part on being public.

Let's take another piece: „*Interpretive explanation—and it is a form of explanation, not just exalted glossography—trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are. As a result, it issues not in laws like Boyle's, or forces like Volta's, or mechanisms like Darwin's, but in constructions like Burckhardt's, Weber's, or Freud's: systematic unpackings of the conceptual world in which condottiere, Calvinists, or paranoids live.*“¹⁷¹ Institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs etc., that is almost as specific as Tylor's famous all-encompassing definition of culture, scorned by Geertz.¹⁷² On the other hand, the emphasis is not on the content but on the actor's perspective and the way of accounting for these things, which is not by scientific reduction. Other than that, the row of Geertz's intellectual heroes does not yield

169 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 15.

170 Ibid. pp. 20–21.

171 GEERTZ, C.: *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 22.

172 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 4.

much in the way of a specific method. Closest we get to something resembling a method is when he talks about hermeneutics, but he at once qualifies how much it can be stated explicitly. *"This enterprise, 'the understanding of understanding,' is nowadays usually referred to as hermeneutics, and in that sense what I am doing fits well enough under such a rubric, particularly if the word 'cultural' is affixed. But one will not find very much in the way of 'the theory and methodology of interpretation' (to give the dictionary definition of the term) in what follows ,... there are enough general principles in the world already. What one will find is a number of actual interpretations of something, ..., all these so variously aimed inquiries are driven by a settled view of how one should go about constructing an account of the imaginative make-up of a society."*¹⁷³ The term hermeneutic he uses as synonymous with the term interpretive, as we have already seen, and it is basically a view that we should conceive *„of social life as organized in terms of symbols (signs, representations, signifiants, Darstellungen... the terminology varies), whose meaning (sense, import, signification, Bedeutung...) we must grasp if we are to understand that organization and formulate its principles..."*¹⁷⁴

Moreover he specifies it a little further by referring to Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of hermeneutic circle, explaining it as a back and forth movement between a particular symbolic form, detailed as much as it is possible, and the general structure of meaning, that is the culture, which is both created by these particular expressions, i. e. symbolic forms, and cannot be understood without them, and at the same time gives meaning to them.¹⁷⁵ He gives a nice down-to-earth summary of the notion by citing baseball game, in which one has to understand what a hit, a bat, an inning and other terms mean to understand the game, but at the same time one can understand them only when one already understands the game, in which they only acquire their meaning.¹⁷⁶

To summarize: the hermeneutic understanding has a circular course, and the meaning of an expression (whatever we are trying to understand) is seen as dependent on its context, the situation in which it was made, and I believe there are no clear boundaries as to what

173 GEERTZ, C.: *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books. pp. 5.

174 GEERTZ, C.: *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 21.

175 "Practically, two approaches, two sorts of understanding, must converge if one is to interpret a culture: a description of particular symbolic forms (a ritual gesture, an hieratic statue) as defined expressions; and a contextualization of such forms within the whole structure of meaning of which they are a part and in terms of which they get their definition. This is, of course, nothing hut the by-now familiar trajectory of the hermeneutic circle : a dialectical tacking between the parts which comprise the whole and the whole which motivates the parts, in such a way as to bring parts and whole simultaneously into view." GEERTZ, C.: *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton University Press 1980. pp. 103.

176 GEERTZ, C.: *From The Native's Point of View: On The Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 69.

is included in that situation (how broad the context is supposed to be). We start with some pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), that is, some provisional assumptions about the context in which it was made, which enable us some partial understanding of particulars. And this understanding leads us then to revise our understanding of the whole, the context, and so on. There is theoretically no end to it, no definitive understanding, only deeper and shallower. Geertz's says to it that cultural analysis is „*intrinsically incomplete*“.¹⁷⁷ The question arises: how can we know that our interpretation is not just a projection of our prejudices, biases, expectations? In other words, how can we know, that we have been successful in „*the penetration of other people's modes of thought*“?¹⁷⁸

3.2.7 Problems with verification

One possible answer to this question might draw upon the analogy between the situation of actors themselves and that of an anthropologist. They both make interpretations. So how do the actors know, they do it right? One possible answer, I believe one in the Wittgenstein's spirit, would refer to the fact, that they are able to communicate and co-operate, that they have functioning praxis, which is no doubt result of the fact that they see the world in reasonably similar manner. We could transplant this to the anthropologist's situation, claiming that if he is able to communicate effectively with them, then he must to some degree participate in their intersubjective world. There are at least three problems with this interpretation. One is Geertz's general uninterest in the question of verification, as a result of which we do not find evidence for it. Another one is his explicit denial of anthropologist's going native.¹⁷⁹ And finally, probably the gravest one: anthropologist's interpretation is stated in terms very different from those in which the actors themselves would state it. Remembering the Balinese cockfight example mentioned earlier, it is utterly doubtful that the Balinese would accept such an interpretation of what they are doing.¹⁸⁰ The anthropologist's interpretation does not stop at what people say, it goes beyond it and constructs some meanings of which the actors are thoroughly unaware. So when Geertz says that an „...*explanation comes to be regarded*

177 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 29.

178 GEERTZ, C.: *From The Native's Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 69.

179 "We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (a compromised word in any case) or to mimic them. Only romantics or spies would seem to find point in that." GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 13.

180 More on this subject can be found in Kuper's critical evaluation: KUPER, A.: *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Harvard University Press 1999. pp. 106–110.

as a matter of connecting action to its sense rather than behavior to its determinants,"¹⁸¹ it is not clear whose sense is it, for the actors, as already said, are not aware of this sense. Speaking of which, it renders his words concerning aims of anthropology somewhat implausible. „*The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is, as I have said, to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.*"¹⁸² Conceptual world about which its subjects have no notion is slightly peculiar and it is not very clear, how it could help us in conversing with the others, whatever is implied in the "extended sense". But perhaps it could, in some way similar to that of a psychoanalyst, who understands actions of his patient better than the patient himself. Or at least that is what they both believe.

Geertz's own treatment of the problem of verification is very relaxed, to put it mildly, as if it were some sort of a trifling problem. Yet he calls his endeavour science.¹⁸³ No doubt, there are more ways how to characterize science and Popperian falsification is likely to be too strong a criterion for social sciences, not least because it presupposes predictions which can then be subjected to refutation. Nevertheless there should be some meaningful difference brought about by our theory, lest it is empty. And it should provide us with some definite way of looking at things along with problems to inquire about. With all these conditions interpretive anthropology complies. But there is more to it. Perhaps the most fundamental condition of science is that its results are independent of a person submitting them. There are no doubt creative geniuses who invent theories, but when a theory is already established, then it should serve as a frame in which everybody who has learnt the rules of the game can participate on a par with others. A basic criterion of any scientific enterprise is that the results can be checked somehow, to put it simply. In this respect Geertz's theory fails. He himself says to it quite light-heartedly: „*The besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything - literature, dreams, symptoms, culture - is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment. You either grasp an interpretation or you do not, see the point of it or you do not, accept it or you do not. Imprisoned in the immediacy of its own detail, it is presented as self-validating, or, worse, as validated by the supposedly developed sensitivities of the person who presents it; any attempt to cast what it says in terms other than its own is regarded as a travesty - as,*

181 GEERTZ, C.: *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 34.

182 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 24.

183 Ibid. pp. 24.

the anthropologist's severest term of moral abuse, ethnocentric."¹⁸⁴ You either see or you do not. There is not much more to say. Interpretations, that is to say results of interpretive anthropology, are not verifiable. And with it goes the problem of comparing and evaluating various interpretations of the same society, and that implies, of course, questions of scientific advancement.

The thing most resembling a criterion we meet in his writings is his saying that *„a good interpretation of anything - a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society - takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation.*"¹⁸⁵ But we are again left in the dark as to the question, how to recognize, that we have gotten into the heart of the matter. Apart from that he speaks of the degree of reducing puzzlement – how much is an ethnographer able to clarify things, so they appear natural given the context.¹⁸⁶ *"It is not against a body of uninterpreted data, radically thinned descriptions, that we must measure the cogency of our explications, but against the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers."*¹⁸⁷ And the same principle naturally applies to the question of advancement. The only criterion is whether a new interpretation goes deeper and in some way enables us to understand better. But there is no formal criterion. As a result there is little of anything close to cumulative development.¹⁸⁸

As to the charges of subjectivism, Geertz does not take them seriously. He says that *"...the trick ... is to steer between overinterpretation and underinterpretation, reading more into things than reason permits and less into them than it demands."*¹⁸⁹ But he does not say how the trick is done.

There is one other statement on the subject worth quoting, since it contains a new theme. *„My own position in the midst of all this has been to try to resist subjectivism on the one hand and cabbalism on the other, to try to keep the analysis of symbolic forms as closely tied as I could to concrete social events and occasions, the public world of common life, and to organize it in such a way that the connections between theoretical formulations and descriptive interpretations were unobscured by appeals to dark sciences. The danger that cultural analysis, in search of all-too-deep-lying turtles, will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life - with the political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained - and with the biological and physical necessities on which those surfaces rest,*

184 Ibid. pp. 24.

185 Ibid. pp. 18.

186 Ibid. pp. 16.

187 Ibid. pp. 16.

188 Ibid. pp. 25.

189 GEERTZ, C.: *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 16.

is an ever-present one. The only defense against it, and against, thus, turning cultural analysis into a kind of sociological aestheticism, is to train such analysis on such realities and such necessities in the first place."¹⁹⁰ The emphasis is on two things here. Concrete social events, which is to be understood as being close to actual events, what he sometimes calls microscopic approach, as opposed to a priori theorizing. The interpretations thus tend to be more ad hoc, than reflecting theoretical assumptions. The other theme is hard surfaces of life, to which I will return later. Regarding the present question, I can only say that the relations to these hard surfaces are very, or even completely, indefinite, so they cannot be seriously taken into account in searching for some formal criteria or method of verification, assessment, evaluation or whatever we are to call it.

I think we may conclude that Geertz has no clearly definable formal criteria of assessment of an interpretation, at least I have not been able to find any, and given what he said on the subject, he obviously did not hold it important. And I am certainly not the only one reaching this conclusion.¹⁹¹ In the end then, we are, after all, thrown back at the situation of the „natives“ and their way of telling whether some interpretation is correct. The only real criterion is consensus of the competent people, which does not allow stating any real foundations any more than „natives“ can state them. Only in case of anthropologist's interpretation it is less the „natives“ who is in this position of a competent judge. This position is taken by other anthropologists or specialists in the given area. What complicates it further is the fact that the judges or evaluators have no access to what an author has seen during his fieldwork. They have only his interpretations. Which brings us to other topic.

What might seem peculiar on Geertz's theory is that there is practically no distinction between the data and anthropologist's interpretation of them. A point which Geertz avows.¹⁹² And something his critics point out. For example Shankman in his critical assessment identifies one of the weak spots as: „*Loose equation of description with analysis, analysis with explanation, explanation with description and theory with all of these...*“¹⁹³ For Geertz

190 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 29–30.

191 SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 274.

192 "The major theoretical contributions not only lie in specific studies-that is true in almost any field-but they are very difficult to abstract from such studies and integrate into anything one might call .. culture theory" as such. Theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them. This is so, not because they are not general (if they are not general, they are not theoretical), but because, stated independently of their applications, they seem either commonplace or vacant." GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, In *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 25.

193 SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 263.

it would be no critic. As for the evaluation, we have seen it is not done by trying to compare somehow our interpretation with some sort of uninterpreted data, raw facts or any other such entity, perhaps mythical, and certainly hard to discover. Moreover, he seeks to understand other societies, and such an understanding cannot be but particular, limited to the society we want to converse with. That is why his results are always close to the concrete conditions of a given society, and without it they would be meaningless. Nevertheless Geertz has something more to say on the subject of generalization.

3.2.8 Generalization

Above I discussed some criteria of science. There is another characteristic typically associated with it. Its results are in some way general. The terms general and particular are best seen not as absolute opposition, but in terms of degrees. Geertz's analysis, as indicated above, operates at the very local and specific level. He even speaks of it as microscopic.¹⁹⁴ However, he admits, or should I say claims, that the results of these particular and detailed analyses can be extended to wider contexts, so as to account for the whole societies or civilizations. And in this the motivation of the analysis lies.¹⁹⁵ A question arises of the relation of these small facts and large matters, to put it in his own words. As is often the case with Geertz, there is little in the way of justification. He obviously does not think the relation to be of microcosm to macrocosm kind, nor is it to be understood in terms of laboratory experiment.¹⁹⁶ But as far as some positive characterization is concerned, he says that „*social actions are comments on more than themselves; that where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues... because they are made to.*"¹⁹⁷ Or another often quoted spot: "*The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods. . .); they study in villages. You can study different things in different places, ... and some things... you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn't make the place what it is you are studying.*"¹⁹⁸ Or commenting on his Jewish trader story he states: "*But the point here is not to describe what did or did not take place in Morocco. (From this simple incident one can widen out into*

194 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 21.

195 Ibid. pp. 21.

196 Ibid. pp. 21–23.

197 Ibid. pp. 23.

198 Ibid. pp. 22.

enormous complexities of social experience.)"¹⁹⁹ The content is clear, I believe, the anthropologist's findings, which he made in a village or other narrowly confined locality, apply somehow on a much larger-scale. What is missing is any real justification for this assumption. In a way it is of course a matter of common sense. On the other hand, taking something discovered in some backward Indonesian village somewhere in the middle of a jungle to be representative of the matters in Jakarta seems to be far-fetched, to say the least.

All and all his stance toward generalization can be well summarized by his own words from one later essay. *"We can at least say something (not of course that we always do) with some concreteness to it. I have never been able to understand why such comments as "your conclusions, such as they are, only cover two million people [Bali], or fifteen million [Morocco], or sixty-five million [Java], and only over some years or centuries," are supposed to be criticisms. Of course, one can be wrong, and probably, as often as not, one is. But "just" or "merely" trying to figure out Japan, China, Zaire, or the Central Eskimo (or better, some aspect of their life along some chunk of their world line) is not chopped liver, even if it looks less impressive than explanations, theories, or whatnot which have as their object "History," "Society," "Man," "Woman," or some other grand and elusive upper-case entity."*²⁰⁰ Generalizations are meaningful only up to some level, when they are still grounded in some society. To broader and more abstract generalizations he is, judged by this quotation, very sceptical. However, he is not thoroughly consistent on the matter, and occasionally implies something closer to those upper-case entities, for example in his essay *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*,²⁰¹ where he pursues some broader speculations about the nature of man. We can even find a passage, pointing in, I would say, quite the opposite direction. *"Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the "said" of social discourse, and to construct a system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behaviour."*²⁰² Here the second one of our tasks is discovering what applies generally to culture, which seems far from understanding particular societies. In a way, it undoubtedly is, but what, I think,

199 Ibid. pp. 19.

200 GEERTZ, C.: *"Local Knowledge" and Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta*, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 137–138.

201 GEERTZ, C.: *The Impact of The Concept of Culture on The Concept of Man*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 33–54.

202 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 27–28.

these generic features really amount to, are mainly human utmost dependency on them and diversity of cultural forms, which brings to the fore a lesson of relativism, so very typical of American anthropology. So the most general message would be, to carry it a step too far, that no generalizations stating something reasonably specific are possible.

There are two more things worth discussing related to the subject of this chapter. One concerns these broad abstractions and with it Geertz's view of more conventional scientific approaches in anthropology, which, in turn, leads us to aims of anthropology. The other topic is comparison, closely connected to generalization. I will start with the latter question.

3.2.9 Comparison

What is a condition of a comparison? Trivially enough, the things compared must be somehow comparable. Here the dichotomy emic and etic can be remembered. Cold, artificial and distanced etic concepts make things comparable because they catch just some of their characteristic and translate them into what we could call universal notions. Or, to sound less pretentious, to concepts which derive their meaning from the language game called science. Since this game is played by all (or most of) the scientists, propositions stated in these notions can be meaningfully subjected to comparison. On the other hand emic concepts are impossible to compare, as they are meaningful only in the context of their original culture.

Now, what type of notions are Geertz's explanations closer to? Seemingly simple question, but in fact not so simple at all. He certainly does not present his accounts in "native's" terms. On the other hand, there is little technical vocabulary and virtually none formal methods involving statistics, measurements and other boring useful tools, which are relatively easily susceptible to verification and criticism. The etic-emic dichotomy is of little help here I think. Geertz himself speaks of experience-near and experience-distant concepts dichotomy, borrowed from psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut.²⁰³ In some respects this dichotomy covers the same differences as the former one, but is looser, and, more importantly, it is not a polar opposition. Experience-near concepts are concepts used and understood by actors ("natives" if you like). Experience-distant are concepts used by anthropologist for analysis, but there is no strict boundary how they should be constructed and how near

203 GEERTZ, C.: *From The Native's Point of View: On The Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 57.

or far to the actor's experience they are. Nor is one side to be preferred over the other. As Geertz puts it: "*Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon.*"²⁰⁴ The point is: "*To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin.*"²⁰⁵ Again, we are not told many details as to how to carry out this delicate task. And as far as comparison is concerned, it is not clear to what extent can accounts stated in some balanced mix of experience-near and experience-distant concepts be compared, especially when Geertz stresses what I called ad hoc quality of interpretation. Or in his own words: "*This is the first condition for cultural theory: it is not its own master.*"²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, experience-distant concepts could provide some, limited, possibility for comparisons, for they furnish certain orientation by giving us, at least partly, uniform vocabulary. "*In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself - that is, about the role of culture in human life - can be expressed. Aside from a couple of orienting pieces concerned with more foundational matters, it is in such a manner that theory operates in the essays collected here. A repertoire of very general, made-in-the-academy concepts and systems of concepts - "integration," "rationalization," "symbol," "ideology," "ethos," "revolution," "identity," "metaphor," "structure," "ritual," "world view," "actor," "function," "sacred," and, of course, "culture" itself - is woven into the body of thick-description ethnography in the hope of rendering mere occurrences scientifically eloquent. The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.*"²⁰⁷

Although comparison might seem rather marginal issue for Geertz, as his theory is hardly well suited for it, reading his "*Local Knowledge*" and its *Limits* article one might reach completely opposite judgement. In it, Geertz speaks more than favourably about comparisons, though vaguely as usual. "...comparison is both possible and necessary, and it is what I and others of my persuasion spend most of our time doing: seeing particular things against the background of other particular things, deepening thus the particularity

204 Ibid. pp. 57.

205 Ibid. pp. 58.

206 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 25.

207 Ibid. pp. 27–28.

of both. Because one has located, one hopes, some actual differences, one has something genuine to compare. Whatever similarities one might find, even if they take the form of contrasts . . . or incomparabilities . . . are also genuine, rather than abstract categories superimposed on passive “data,” delivered to the mind by “God,” “reality,” or “nature.”²⁰⁸ It may strike us as surprising that he spends most of time on comparisons, since there are not many traces of it in his writings. Unfortunately, he does not tell us many useful details on it. Still, what is clear, is that comparison in his fashion are not designed to achieve abstractions by sifting out the accidental features. It is designed to deepen our understanding of particulars.

In concluding notes of his Balinese cockfight essay he tells about it that: „One can move between forms in search of broader unities or informing contrasts. One can even compare forms from different cultures to define their character in reciprocal relief.”²⁰⁹ It is not particularly instructing as practically everything Geertz says in the matters of theory. What broader unities or informing contrasts he has in mind he does not tell us. Very likely it is related with what a literary critic does. We could say that he searches for some „logico-meaningful“ relations. This term, the exact form is logico-meaningful integration, Geertz uses to express contrast between social structure and culture. The former has „causal-functional integration.”, while the latter is characterized by „logico-meaningful integration.“ „By logico-meaningful integration, characteristic of culture, is meant the sort of integration one finds in a Bach fugue, in Catholic dogma, or in the general theory of relativity; it is a unity of style, of logical implication, of meaning and value. By causal-functional integration, characteristic of the social system, is meant the kind of integration one finds in an organism, where all the parts are united in a single causal web; each part is an element in a reverberating causal ring which “keeps the system going.”²¹⁰ The type of integration of Bach fugue or Catholic dogma are hard to state, and one is left with a vague feeling they possess some sort of integration. But, of course, I do not deny that part of what literary critic or other humanistic scholar does, is try to translate this vague feeling into some articulate form. The only problem is to say how this is done. And here I find myself again confined to vague feeling, that they, at least occasionally, do not just conjure their conclusions up.

208 GEERTZ, C.: “Local Knowledge” and Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 138.

209 GEERTZ, C.: *Deep Play: Notes on Balinese Cockfight*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 453.

210 GEERTZ, C.: *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973, pp. 145; The terms are borrowed from Sorokin as Geertz informs.

3.2.10 Aims of and stance on the social science

I concluded the section on generalizations by posing two questions. One of them I have discussed in the last section. Now I would like to tackle the other, that is, Geertz's stance towards conventional social science, as it may shed some additional light on his own approach. Moreover this question is closely related to the aims of anthropology, the topic I already touched upon several times.

To make it short, I just say that he holds the more positivist approaches in social sciences, which derive their inspiration from natural sciences, in low esteem. He usually speaks of mimicking the natural sciences and deems this way as evidently stray. Not so much because of their methods, but because of their aims and possible outcomes. For example he dismisses search for human universals, as for these to be meaningful, they would have to say something substantial and non-trivial, and not to be empty categories.²¹¹ Very much illustrative in this matter is his candid declaration: "*If you want a good rule-of-thumb generalization from anthropology, I would suggest the following: Any sentence that begins, "All societies have . . . " is either baseless or banal.*"²¹²

He is apparently more fascinated by the multitude of forms human existence that with their common characteristics. The common cultural characteristics defended often by reference to some underlying realities of social, psychological or biological order, make no impression on him, for the link between them and the cultural traits they are supposed to account for is hopelessly obscure. He then asks, whether it is what is common to all people what tell us most of what a man is. And suggests that "*...it may be in the cultural particularities of people - in their oddities - that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found; and the main contribution of the science of anthropology to the construction - or reconstruction - of a concept of man may then lie in showing us how to find them.*"²¹³

Apart from universals there is other form of scientific results, laws. As for those in relation to anthropology, Geertz openly mocks them as "*dreams of social physics.*"²¹⁴

211 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 36–43; GEERTZ, C.: "*Local Knowledge*" and *Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta*, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 134–135.

212 GEERTZ, C.: "*Local Knowledge*" and *Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta*, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 135.

213 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 43.

214 GEERTZ, C.: *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 23.

As a rule they state something utterly unimportant and trivial or false. "As for laws, I have already suggested that I can't think of any serious candidates in my field with which to contend. One of the most irritating things in my field is people who say you're not doing "real science" if you don't come up with laws, thereby suggesting that they themselves have done so, without actually telling you what these laws are. On the rare occasions they do tell you — two miles a year, cannibalism and protein shortage — the situation is worse. Scientism, and here I will talk of the human sciences overall, is mostly just bluff."²¹⁵ By two miles a year he means diffusionist "law", stating average speed of the propagation of culture traits, by cannibalism and protein shortage Marvin Harris's causal explanation of cannibalism by reference to nutrition necessities. In this respect it I find it hard not to agree with Geertz.

He speaks favourably of the general trend in the social sciences – sometimes he calls it literary turn - that "*many social scientists have turned away from a laws and instances ideal of explanation toward a cases and interpretations one, looking less for the sort of thing that connects planets and pendulums and more for the sort that connects chrysanthemums and swords.*"²¹⁶ The Chrysanthemums and the sword, referring of course to the famous Ruth Benedict's book, is probably an apt example of the logico-meaningful relationship. To make an interpretation of a society which connects intense sense for aesthetics with propensity for violence in such a way that they look as naturally occurring together is, I gather, something like a holy grail of this approach.

I said that the reasons for Geertz's negative stance towards "positivist" kind of explanations are based more on the result than on the inadequacy of their methods. There is more to it than just unfruitfulness or even ridiculousness of the results, namely what we could call political connotations. He connects seeking for laws in social sciences with efforts to or at least dreams about controlling society. On the other hand, quest for understanding is completely harmless in this matter.²¹⁷ It should probably lead to enlarging of our tolerance and peace on Earth. There is no mention of possible practical (ab)use of this understanding. Nor seems he interested in using anthropology as culture critique.

After discussing his methods and aims, I think it is not entirely devoid of meaning to ask, how this could be a science, where there are no proper means of verification, the aims of enquiry are rather particular and the general aim of the whole enterprise is not gaining

215 GEERTZ, C.: "*Local Knowledge*" and Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 136.

216 GEERTZ, C.: *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 19.

217 GEERTZ, C.: "*Local Knowledge*" and Its Limits: Some Obiter Dicta, in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton University Press 2000. pp. 138–140.

knowledge but it is a rather practical one, to improve our "conversation" with cultures and perhaps to realize something about ourselves. One possible answer we can find in Shankman's critical article.²¹⁸ He traces Geertz's use of the term science back to German tradition of *Geisteswissenschaften*. It is a reasonable explanation, especially given the hermeneutical nature of Geertz's theory. But we find no explicit support for it in Geertz's writing as he was not very interested in justifying his theory in terms of science. Rather he understood the word science in his own way.

3.2.11 A few additions

As we have seen, the aims of interpretive anthropology consist chiefly in "*enlargement of the universe of human discourse*", which is to be attained by discovering other people's structures of meaning, or "*imaginative universe within which their acts are signs*."²¹⁹ We could find several other statements in the similar humanistic spirit, though sometimes with a rather different point. For example: "*...it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes. If interpretive anthropology has any general office in the world it is to keep reteaching this fugitive truth*."²²⁰ Given this kind of aims, it is understandable that he is not interested in explaining cultural forms, as a result of which he is neither interested in relations of culture to other levels like biology, psychology, environment and economy, and social structure. It is enough to describe and contextualize them. However, we have seen his statements about „hard surfaces of social life,“ which included fields like economy and politics. Now this subject of relations of culture to other fields and levels, which I, in large part, ignored so far, is due. I have postponed it up until now because of the logic of explanation. Nevertheless, Geertz has only very little to say to it, so it should not change the above outlined picture in any profound way. Especially because his statements on it are of so general and vague nature, as it is hard to think of any consequences they might have. He criticizes what he calls "*stratigraphic conception of the relations between the various aspects of human existence*" and suggests to replace it "*with a synthetic one; that is, one in which biological, psychological, sociological, and cultural*

218 SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 264.

219 GEERTZ, C.: *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 13.

220 GEERTZ, C.: *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books 1983. pp. 16.

factors can be treated as variables within unitary systems of analysis. The establishment of a common language in the social sciences is not a matter of mere coordination of terminologies or, worse yet, of coining artificial new ones; nor is it a matter of imposing a single set of categories upon the area as a whole. It is a matter of integrating different types of theories and concepts in such a way that one can formulate meaningful propositions embodying findings now sequestered in separate fields of study."²²¹

His main reasons for his criticism are that it separates the various fields and makes it hard to bring them back together, and when we try to do that, their relations are hopelessly obscure.²²² This remark might seem strange, when made by somebody who focuses in his analyses only on cultural level, but that is of lesser importance now. What is, by contrast, of importance are his other statements on the matter. In another text he quotes approvingly what Parsons has to say to it. The message is, in short, rejection of reductionism in social sciences. Levels – organism, personality, social system and culture – form a hierarchy, and the lower levels condition or constrain the higher levels, but they do not determine it, as the form of the higher levels is a matter of organization, that is to say, of how those lower-level factors are connected to each other in order to form a structure, a whole of some kind.²²³ What is peculiar is that this seems to be exactly the "stratigraphic conception" which Geertz in other text refuted. Moreover, it is hardly original, we could find statements in the same vein in many texts by diverse authors, for example Radcliffe-Brown or Kroeber.

As for relations to economy and ecology, we find nothing worth mentioning. Here it should be noted, that I speak only of his works done in interpretive anthropology fashion, not his early conventional works. These are here completely irrelevant. As for politics, he writes about extensively, but his interest is again in symbolic aspects, not in relations of power, classes, wealth or other traditional themes in the field.

He says slightly more on relations of culture to social structure, though it is neither very telling, nor, I think, coherent. We are advised to keep them separate, at least conceptually, that is not to reduce one to the other. They cannot be regarded as merely reflecting one another. Nonetheless they are interdependent in some, not specified way.²²⁴ *"One of the more useful ways - but far from the only one - of distinguishing between culture*

221 GEERTZ, C.: *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 44.

222 Ibid. pp. 37–44.

223 GEERTZ, C.: *Ideology As a Cultural System*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 216–217.

224 GEERTZ, C.: *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 143–146, 169; GEERTZ, C.: *Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 362.

and social system is to see the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols, in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself. On the one level there is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments; on the other level there is the ongoing process of interactive behavior, whose persistent form we call social structure. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations. Culture and social structure are then but different abstractions from the same phenomena."²²⁵ To say that they are different abstractions from the same phenomena and that they are interdependent, without specifying somehow, unless negatively, what sort of relation it is, seems to me quite empty. They are "*...independent, yet interdependent, variables.*"²²⁶ The only thing we can infer is that the relation is not one of causality, one side does not determine the other. That is almost as good as saying nothing at all. Geertz adds a reason for keeping them apart, which, however, does not make it any better. It is because of their different types of integration, the issue I already touched upon. Moreover there is a third factor besides culture and social structure, which he calls personality structure. That obviously refers to psychological characteristics of actors. The relations of this factor to the two others is of the same non-specific kind as is it is between themselves.

3.2.12 Some conclusions

In conclusion, I think we can say that Geertz's claim about sticking to hard surfaces of social life, is, at least judged by his theoretical formulations, mere verbal recognition. It is, after all, consistent with general looseness of his theory, which, more often than not, makes an impression as if he wanted to keep all the possibilities open. But, as Popper says, our theories say something precisely because they rule something out. He meant it specifically for predictions, but I believe it applies more generally. Theory worth the name must run the risk of being wrong by saying something reasonably specific. Geertz's: "theory is not its own master" runs directly counter it.

In my discussion of interpretive anthropology, apart from trying to give an overview of

225 GEERTZ, C.: *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 145.

226 GEERTZ, C.: *Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example*, in *Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973. pp. 169.

the theory, though I had to omit some subjects, I focused mainly on problems from the perspective of methodology. There are of course numerous other criticisms, often made, though not always overtly, from the perspective of some other theory. Thus we could mention problems with accounting for or taking into account of change, differences among individuals, groups or classes, ignoring economic and environmental factors, or from the opposite side of the spectrum, not letting actors speak for themselves, lack of reflexivity and so on. Or the very fact that he does not try to explain cultural forms and to tell why this society sees the world this way and other society some other way. Instead he just describes them, which is for some anthropologists in and of itself reprehensible.²²⁷

From my point of view, the gravest shortcomings involve ambiguity at all levels. His use of the term meaning seems confused. Sometimes it bears features which render it close to ethos and world-view – chrysanthemum and sword sort of relation - something a literary critic with help of imagination can penetrate, but at other times it becomes something close to rules, rules of a language game as I understand it. I am not convinced these two, and possibly we could discern more, usages of the term meaning can be reconciled so as to make one meaningful concept.

Ambiguity or vagueness I personally view as critical, because, first, one can hardly take Geertz's statements as a guide for making anthropology. There are too little concrete instructions or anything of that sort. With it, the problem of verification is intimately related, for the path between data and the final account is obscure. Unless one is to regard interpretive anthropology as a sort of art, one has to ask, what was the way from the original data that got us here, and in this respect Geertz fails. Another thing related to this is that his ad hoc interpretations are not very susceptible to comparisons and suitable for providing material for further theorizing. Of course, this might be seen as criticizing Geertz from the standpoint of some assumptions foreign to him, as his aims consist in understanding of particular societies – their socially established structures of meaning embodied in systems of symbols, not in general truths. Nevertheless, this character of his inquiry precludes to large extent possibility for others to use his results, which hardly commends it as science.

227 These and other criticisms can be found in, e. g.: ORTNER, S. B.: *Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties: Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), pp. 126–166.; BARTH, F. – GINGRICH, A. – PARKIN, R. – SILVERMAN, S.: *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, The University of Chicago Press 2005. pp. 287–290, 320; SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 261; KUPER, A.: *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Harvard University Press 1999. pp. 75–121.

3.3 Ethnography – Negara

3.3.1 The choice of the book

I have begun the chapter on *The Nuer* by citing some grounds on which I have chosen that particular book. In order to maintain at least some structural resemblance between that chapter and the present one, I will say something about this matter as well. As already indicated in the introductory chapter of this study, the main ground is that it is considered a mature instance of the interpretive anthropology.²²⁸ For example both Shankman and Kuper in their critical evaluations of the theory devote considerable attention to it.²²⁹ Geertz has written more ethnographies, but only his later works, roughly since the sixties, can be considered works done in interpretive anthropology. Among these, the only other suitable book for my purpose seems *Kinship in Bali*. As I have dealt with politics in *The Nuer*, I think it wiser to stick to it here, although it is no necessity. The book I have chosen, *Negara*, has one possible shortcoming regarding my purposes. It is not an ethnography in the usual sense, a record and analysis based on fieldwork. At least not exclusively. In large part, it draws on historical sources. But we can say it reflects the shift in the interest of anthropologists from the so called primitive societies, to civilized. To put it more in accord with the political correctness imperative, a shift from societies without written history to literary societies that have such a tradition. Moreover this shift is connected with the role of these societies, sometimes called The new nations, in the modern world.²³⁰ They were undergoing radical changes under the influence of the West, or we could say they were undergoing modernization and becoming part of the "globalizing" world, and that not always happily.

Apart from that, returning back to more immediate issues, the book swarms with notions symbol, expression and the like, and it is overtly permeated with the perspective of interpretive anthropology. Practically everything is regarded as a symbolic expression. But I will get to this later still. The last thing to mention is Geertz's general discussion of the theoretical issues of interpretive anthropology which can be found in the conclusion of the book. There we can clearly see his arguments about symbols as public, as constituting a part

228 KUPER, A.: Culture,... pp. 117

229 SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 267–269, 274–275.; KUPER, A.: *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 114–118.

230 GEERTZ, C. (auth.) – INGLIS, F (ed.): *Life among the Anthros and Other Essays*, Princeton University Press 2010, pp. 221. "This "turn," or "move," or "paradigm shift" was, of course, but part, and a minor part at that, of a general shift in anthropological attention away from deserts, jungles, and arctic wastes, to what came to be known as *The New Nations, The Developing Countries, The Third World, The Emerging Powers, or The Non-aligned States*."

of a counterarguments against accusations of idealism.

3.3.2 Content

In this section I wish to present above all two things, Geertz's general argument which pervades the whole book, and then the outline of the contents of the book along with some analytical commentaries. Moreover I will make a few notes on how the books is written. As to the contents, I will present it in a very schematic way, as my intention is merely to show what kind of things he pays attention to, and how, or in what respect, he treats them. This approach may lead to some little distortions of facts, for what I need are arguments with clear-cut contours, not minutiae of Balinese ethnography which necessary bring about some qualifications and limitations of the arguments.

First of all, what is *negara*, the word appearing in the title of the book? There are many translations of the word depending on the context, and Geertz would perhaps claim, that they are in fact all present in it, whatever the context. The main meanings are town, palace, capital, state and realm.²³¹ The way Geertz uses it, it is an institution, a state, a particular form of state characteristic of Bali between approximately the fourteenth and the turn of the nineteenth century, when it disappeared in virtue of the Dutch invasion.²³² There was not only one *negara* in Bali, but many of them. However one was central and the other ones were in some way formally subordinated to it. In the subtitle of the book we can read: *The theatre state in the nineteenth century Bali*. First to the dating. Geertz's focus regarding time is nineteenth century, chiefly because of the sources, which are from this period, the last century of *negara*, by far most numerous and there are many among them written by foreigners, to which Geertz often refers. The older history is much less reliable and mixed up with legends and myths.²³³ Apart from written sources, he is apparently drawing on his own fieldwork in Bali, and he sometimes refers to his informants, but we are told next to nothing about this matter.²³⁴ Since his fieldwork dates back to the fifties, and the last *negara* was destroyed by the Dutch in 1908,²³⁵ he could possibly speak to someone who remembered the times, but what is more important, he is not interested in particular history consisting of events and persons, but in reconstructing the cultural context in which the events took

231 GEERTZ, C.: *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 4.

232 Ibid. pp. 134.

233 Ibid. pp. 14.

234 Ibid. pp. 6.

235 Ibid. pp. 11.

place, and in which they were meaningful, and this at least partly survives. That is not to say that he ignores particularities. Far from it. But they are not end in themselves for him, but merely a material for the reconstruction of the context, and, to no smaller extent, device for presenting his arguments by showing concrete examples and convincing the reader. In connection with this issue I can spend a thought on how it is written. I have not dealt with this matter in the discussion of *The Nuer* for it seemed of no great importance there. Here it might be worth some mention, since, as I have insinuated in the discussion of Geertz's theory, content of his texts is at times hard to separate from their form.

He uses what we could call, to name it somehow, a method of illustration. It is not only a rhetorical device, however, it is that as well – concrete examples carry much more conviction than abstract generalized discourse. I believe it is related to his "*small matters speaks of great issues*", which we have seen above. We may distinguish three plains on which it operates. That of particular events, that of particular places and times in a broader sense, and lastly the whole analysis of the Balinese politics. By the last one I mean that it is not just an analysis of the Balinese politics. It is meant to help us in understanding of the "*the classical Southeast Asian Indic states of the fifth to fifteenth centuries*."²³⁶ And even more it is an argument in political theory, a criticism of common approaches and suggestion of a new one, or perhaps more exactly, of a complementary one.²³⁷ About this, I will have more to say in the next chapter. Now I explain only the first two. The book opens, introduction aside, with a narration of spectacular event, end of a king of a negara under the Dutch siege. It is not spectacular in a way of heroic exploits. It is in fact a suicide, but pompous one. The king with all his wives and entourage marched into the Dutch fire. This feat, shocking and unintelligible for the Dutch, and occurring repeatedly, that is in more negaras, is not presented as a curiosity - strange ways of strange people. It stand for more than itself. We could say that it epitomizes the whole theatre character of the negara. Geertz uses many particular events with the intention of capturing some general feature of which they are (supposed to be) the epitome. There is one event in the book, taking up significant space and described with attention to detail, chosen specially with this function in mind.²³⁸ A royal funeral, accompanied by king's concubines jumping into the fire; another spectacular gesture. This event again serves mainly as an illustration of not only royal funerals in Bali, but the whole ethos of Negara, its theatrical character.

The other plain on which translation of some small-scale facts to wider context takes

236 Ibid. 10.

237 Ibid. 134–135.

238 Ibid. pp. 98–102.

place, are particular negaras in particular time. He takes them as examples of some phenomenon he is interested in, and which is supposed to hold for all or most of negaras and possibly for other times as well. In other words, he deals with a phenomenon using detailed description of it in one negara, but with the intention of making a more general point. We could thus say that in both cases, that of particular events and particular negaras they are treated as symbolic, as standing not just for themselves but for broader context in which they have occurred, and of which they are expressions. To put it negatively, he is not using statistics, comparisons or any other means of catching or creating a general picture, or when he does, then only in a very limited measure. They would, given his aims and ways of reasoning, make not much sense anyway.

Now, to the main argument of the book, which surfaces repeatedly in it. I have in the previous text mentioned a theatrical character of negara, and the notion of theatre emerges also in the subtitle of the book. It could be tackled from two sides. Either we could begin by explaining the notion of *exemplary center*, thus uncovering the context of beliefs and ideas upon which the Balinese politics rested, or we could start with a more analytic statement that "*Power served pomp, not pomp power.*"²³⁹ We are fortunate to have Geertz's own summary of the matter. "*The expressive nature of the Balinese state was apparent through the whole of its known history, for it was always pointed ... toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture: social inequality and status pride. ... The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.*"²⁴⁰

This shows well what he means by theatre state. It was not concerned with power in the usual senses of monopoly on violence, of coercion, economic dominance or control, governance or administration. It was concerned with spectacle. But we cannot say mere spectacle, as it was no gloss or facade, it was the thing itself. To put it in Geertz's own words: "*Thus the royal rituals ... enacted, in the form of pageant, the main themes of Balinese political thought: the center is exemplary, status is the ground of power, statecraft is a*

239 Ibid. pp. 13.

240 Ibid. pp. 13.

thespian art. But there is more to it than this, because the pageants were not mere aesthetic embellishments, celebrations of a domination independently existing: they were the thing itself. The competition to be the center of centers, the axis of the world, was just that, a competition; and it was in the ability to stage productions of an eleven-roof scale, to mobilize the men, the resources, and, not least, the expertise, that made one an eleven-roof lord."²⁴¹ "Eleven-roof" refers to the height of a cremation tower and is seen as a status symbol. Now there are some questions arising. What was the ideas behind this competition in spectacle, the context in which it was a natural thing to do? And when the state had no interest in ruling, in dealing with issues states usually deal with, how could there exist a state at all? To the latter question, the answer lies in the separation of the real, and now I hesitate to formulate it in these terms, executive and legislative power, from the symbolic power of the *negara*. There is a notion *desa*, which can be translated as a village, and represents what I have called executive and legislation, and what would be more properly described as everyday, practical issues of economy and other fields. Generally it was at a lower level of the system that administration took place. In this connection Geertz repeatedly speaks of a society as being "*stretched taut between cultural paradigms conceived as descending from above and practical arrangements conceived as rising from below.*"²⁴²

To answer the other question, the one about the context, we have to look at the notion of exemplary center. I am aware that I am overusing quotations, but Geertz offers a succinct summary of the matter, and using his own words along with some comments on it lessens greatly dangers of misinterpretation. "*Behind this,... lies a general conception of the nature and basis of sovereignty that, merely for simplicity, we may call the doctrine of the exemplary center. This is the theory that the court-and-capital is at once a microcosm of the supernatural order "an image of ... the universe on a smaller scale" - and the material embodiment of political order. ... The equation of the seat of rule with the dominion of rule, which the negara concept expresses, is more than an accidental metaphor; it is a statement of a controlling political idea - namely, that by the mere act of providing a model, a paragon, a faultless image of civilized existence, the court shapes the world around it into at least a rough approximation of its own excellence. The ritual life of the court, and in fact the life of the court generally, is thus paradigmatic, not merely reflective, of social order. What it is reflective of, the priests declare, is supernatural order, "the timeless Indian world of the gods" upon which men should, in strict proportion to their status, seek to pattern their*

241 Ibid. pp. 120.

242 Ibid. pp. 128.

lives."²⁴³ The crucial ideas are the idea of a model, or paradigm, and the idea of expression. The reverse of these ideas is the idea of imitation. The king himself strives to imitate gods and by this set up a model for his lords. The lords strive to imitate the king and to provide a model for those under them and so on. Moreover, there is competition. Everybody tries to get nearer to those above him and farther from those below him, which is done by means of pomp. Nevertheless, the status is ascribed, so "*the normal result was local commotion and general standoff, an overall maintenance of status relations amid a repeating and often quite vigorous effort to alter them.*"²⁴⁴ Returning back to the king striving to imitate the gods, there is more to be told. The king was considered divine, an incarnation of the god. This, in connection with the idea of god's eternity and serenity, led to a depersonalized king, that is, abandonment of his individual identity and more importantly to his passivity, or "*active passivity, a forceful sitting still.*"²⁴⁵ And this meant his detachment from practical politics. He was a "*pure sign.*"²⁴⁶ His detachment involved general detachment of *negara*, which was a place for state ceremony, or as Geertz sometimes calls it, "*staging the operas,*" not for practical business.²⁴⁷

Another aspect of the idea of exemplary center is the relation of cosmology (or religion) and politics. The *negara*, meaning both king's palace and the state, was itself an image of the cosmic order, and this order was conceived as hierarchical. So was the *negara*, at all levels. One last idea intimately connected with this conception I want to mention, is the idea of time and progressive degeneration. As already mentioned, there were more *negaras* in Bali, but one was above them and provided a model for them. But even this one was only a reflection or imitation of some other *negara* existing previously in half-mythical past. And we could go as far as to the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit, which conquered and civilized, from the viewpoint of present Balinese people, Bali in the fourteenth century.²⁴⁸ This succession of kingdoms along with their multiplying, or in other words segmentation, is regarded as progressive degeneration, as movement away from the gods. The other side of the coin is king's lineage, which is probably the subject of this degeneration proper. This degeneration is not viewed as something necessary, a cosmic law or anything. It is merely a result of accidental history and human weakness. What is more important, the *negara* was supposed to embody the unchanging model upon which the present ought properly to be modelled, and thus, in a way, counter the history. Hence the pomp and

243 Ibid. pp. 13.

244 Ibid. pp. 133.

245 Ibid. pp. 131.

246 Ibid. pp. 133.

247 Ibid. pp. 132.

248 Ibid. pp. 15.

spectacle.²⁴⁹

Much more could be said regarding the concept of exemplary center and negara, but it would lead us too far away from the task at hand. Therefore I only shortly summarize the subjects Geertz deals with, in order to see something of his procedure. After the introduction concerned with historiography and methods suitable for the material available, the chapter named *Political Definition : The Sources of Order* comes. In it he presents the idea of exemplary center and some details of Balinese politics. Besides what I have already said about the matter, there is one notion which perhaps deserves a notion. This is relation of the king to lords, or lesser kings, and the relation of these lords to lordlings all the way down to the common people. I have already mentioned constant competition for prestige. Geertz speaks moreover of two general and opposed tendencies, towards fragmentation or segmentation, that is gaining more independence, and towards unification, that is gaining deference and obedience of those below. These were present at all levels. The means of unification were rituals and ceremonies, the means of fragmentation alliance, intrigues, cajolery. *"On the one hand there was the unifying effect of mass ceremonial under the leadership of this or that lord. On the other there was the intrinsically dispersive, segmental character of the polity considered as a concrete social institution Of, if you will, as a power system composed as it was of dozens of independent, semi-independent, and quarter-independent rulers. The first, the cultural element, came, as we have seen, from the top down and the center outward. The second, the power element, grew, as we shall see, from the bottom up and the periphery inward."*²⁵⁰ This topic might, I think, remind us of the structural functionalist's, or generally sociologist's interests. It deals with relationships among groups of people, here distinguished by rank. Geertz's main conclusion regarding this matter could be crudely stated as a mutual dependency of those with higher standing and those with lower, but stated this way it is trivial and holds possibly almost universally. For I cannot deal with intricacies of the Balinese politics, I will leave it at that.

The second part of this chapter draws our attention to connection of geography or rather topography and politics. Here Geertz discusses, among other things, power relations among negaras depending on their location. In particular relations of lowlands to the negaras situated higher up the slope. Quite typically Geertzian, metaphorical, and rather vague, statement can be brought in: *"The higher up the slope a court was, the greater its crosswise isolation ; the lower down, the more developed its crosswise contacts. On its most general*

249 Ibid. pp. 18.

250 Ibid. pp. 19.

level, *Balinese politics was more a matter of geometry - solid geometry - than it was of arithmetic.*"²⁵¹ What might seem a little strange about this chapter, is that it does not actually make much use of the nature of Balinese impassable terrain. I am tempted to say, that for Geertz, even this matter is seen from the viewpoint of symbolism. And his conclusion is, again characteristically, little telling. *"In short, a bird's-eye view of classical Bali's political organization ... reveals ... an extended field of highly dissimilar political ties, thickening into nodes of varying size and strength at strategic points on the landscape and then thinning out again to connect, in a marvellously convolute way, virtually everything with everything else."*²⁵² Perhaps it is just my personal handicap, but I take statements involving: everything is, in a marvellously convolute way, connected with everything else, not as a particularly deep penetration into the matter. In fact, it feels more like an expression of confusion, of not understanding. Not because it is not true, but because the work of a scientist is to translate the convolute reality into some intelligible form, which, more often than not, necessitates using some sort of abstraction.

There is one interesting point in the chapter of sociological relevance. The fighting between lords or kings was not done because of land, but because of people. Those constituted power.

Next comes chapter called *Political Anatomy : The Internal Organization of the Ruling Class*. This chapter contains full-fledged sociological analysis of kinship system among the nobility along with their struggles for prestige and subsequent splitting; a Balinese version of the caste system; clientship; temples and other things. All is of course closely related to politics. This chapter is so replete with concrete facts that giving any summary would amount to rewriting it in shorter and less elaborate form. Therefore I will skip not just the details but most of it. Interestingly, Geertz is not interested only in what ought to be but he pays attention to irregularities, that is, struggles for authority and prestige, to people whose ascribed status did not match their real standing etc. Part of the examination of client system is trade. A topic appearing several times throughout the book. Trade was usually in the hands of foreigners: Chinese, Javanese, later the Dutch.²⁵³ Even they thus constituted the Balinese society.

As already mentioned, it is mainly a sociological analysis of relations of persons of various statuses and besides of various authority and wealth, and of institutional framework in which they act. I dare say, it is very little, if at all, affected by semiotic perspective.

251 Ibid. pp. 22.

252 Ibid. pp. 24.

253 Ibid. pp. 35.

Only a few notes scattered here and there might be considered characteristic of interpretive anthropology. Saying this, I think it relates to a more general issue connected with interpretive anthropology, the issue I have implied in the chapter on theory. It has very little in the way of technical vocabulary or method, by which it could be recognized. Therefore it is at times difficult to decide whether an analysis of some ethnographical material can be described as carried on using interpretive anthropology. One can tell whether it is an instance of interpretive anthropology perhaps more by references quoted and by what it ignores, than by what it says. But let's get back to the content of the book.

There is one passage which could be said to bring together interests of a sociologist or structural functionalist with those of an anthropologist inclined towards interpretive approach. Its subject is the institution of treaty. The content of treaties among *negaras* were not matters on which the rulers wanted to reach an agreement. It was more matters where there already was a universal agreement, and the function of treaties were not in uniting. Let's see what Geertz has to say about it. *"In such a context of institutionalized perfidy, treaties, like the other expressions of crosswise alliance, functioned in a peculiarly negative, almost perverse manner. Rather than creating political unity they provided a rich dictionary of "reasons"-a delicate insult, a neglected ritual observance, an inadequate gift, or a confiscated cow - by which the nearly complete lack of such unity could be justified and understood. The treaties maintained, in such a way, a sense that the perfect system of integration always lay just barely out of reach, prevented from realization only by the duplicity of this lord or the obstinacy of that one. Their far from unimportant contribution to Balinese political equilibrium was that they made inveterate turmoil seem but a recent lapse from order on the immediate verge of being corrected."*²⁵⁴ The reason I have written that it brings together interests of structural functionalist and interpretivist is the interest in the function of an institution, its relation to group-relationships. Of course, it does not at the first sight appear as contributing to maintenance of the social structure, but that could be said about feuds in general. As for the interpretive part of the passage, it contains simply the ideas working in background. But to state it in this way, i.e. of bringing two perspectives together, is not to say that it is in any way incongruent, consisting of two disparate perspectives. On the contrary, it might show that the differences of theories could in practice come down to matter of emphasis on one thing or other.

The next chapter bears the title: *Political Anatomy : The Village and the State*. The title summarizes succinctly what it is about. The main topic is *desa*, that is, the village

254 Ibid. pp. 44.

and the counterpart to negara. In polemics with some other interpretations made by historians, Geertz specifies their relations: *"The relation between gentry and peasantry in traditional Bali cannot be formulated in terms of a contrast between town and country, but only in terms of two very different yet elaborately interwoven sorts of polity: one centered on regional and interregional political processes of a predominantly expressive cast, the other centered on local ones of a predominantly instrumental nature."*²⁵⁵ This chapter could again be described as a sociological analyses of institutions, chiefly political, economic and religious ones. Desa was the level of real decision-making in practical matters. It was to a large extent autonomous. The main link between desa and negara, or the lord, was *perbekel*, *"a steward, bailiff, and seneschal of traditional Bali,"*²⁵⁶ and rituals, and taxation.²⁵⁷ Apart from this, Geertz devotes considerable attention to the three subsystems of desa: *"the hamlet (banjar), the irrigation society (subak), and the temple congregation (pemaksan)."*²⁵⁸ These were institutions administering the three main spheres of local politics: *"(1) the ordering of the public aspects of community life, (2) the regulation of irrigation facilities, and (3) the organization of popular ritual."*²⁵⁹ They can be regarded as government, productive and ritual groups respectively. I cannot go into details, therefore I will make only a brief comment beyond what was already said. We find a lot on various religious or we could say cosmological beliefs associated with the desa. These are a natural subject matter for interpretive anthropology. This is closely related to clarifying of the relation of the king and the desa, and generally the king and the rest of the Bali. Here we encounter again the exemplary center doctrine, along with the progressive degeneration and splitting of royal lineage. In this connection he brings in the layout of the palace in Tabanan, one particular negara, and shows on it relations of hierarchy. We could say he uses architecture as a text. And it is not the only case of this in the book.

To hierarchy the questions of authority and loyalty are related. Geertz invokes Weber's types of legitimate rule and shows that negara constitutes a different type, thus making one of his general points in political theory.²⁶⁰ *"Rather than flowing down from a pinnacle of authority or spreading out from a generative center, power seems instead to be pulled up toward such a pinnacle or to be drawn in toward such a center. The right to command was not delegated from king to lord, lord to lordling, and lordling to subject; rather, it was*

255 Ibid. pp. 46.

256 Ibid. pp. 54.

257 Ibid. pp. 84.

258 Ibid. pp. 47.

259 Ibid. pp. 47.

260 Ibid. pp. 62.

*surrendered from subject to lordling, lordling to lord, and lord to king. Power was not allocated from the top, it cumulated from the bottom. This is not to say the system was democratic, ... It is to say that it was - radically, pervasively, inveterately - confederate."*²⁶¹

The last note on this chapter I wish to make pertains to economy. Geertz treatment of this subject will certainly not satisfy a reader with a Marxist or generally materialist bent. As far as environment and technology are concerned, Geertz apparently does not make much of them. The only exception is a system of irrigation, but here he is interested more in its social and we could even say symbolic aspects. By that I mean especially the structural congruence of the system of irrigation channels with various aspects of, say, social structure. For example: *"The formal resemblance, which anthropologists at least will have noticed, of figure 5 [depicting a scheme of irrigation channels] to a chart of a segmentary kinship system is thus not accidental. The organizing principle is the same, though the idiom and the field of application are different: there is a complementary opposition of units divider-and-canal-defined) at each level of the system, from the most elemental to the most comprehensive. The whole system is one in which structurally equivalent units are joined in an ascending pyramid of, in this case, jural rights over water."*²⁶²

About property rights, wealth-power relations, and other issues traditionally associated with economics, we are told little. But Geertz has reason for it, granted his data and their interpretation are correct. The property of land was private. This applied to all levels of society. The king was owner of the Bali only symbolically. And the lords "owned" their subjects also only in a very limited sense. The subjects had certain strictly delimited obligations, mainly ritual service and military support, and apart from that they were quite independent of their lords.²⁶³ As to the link between wealth and power, Geertz's conclusion is that it was rather weak.²⁶⁴ Again, Geertz uses his analysis for making another general point, this time against what he calls "hydraulic theories".²⁶⁵ It relates to concepts which link together centralized power, or despotism we could say, with the development and control of irrigation systems. A theory proposed by Karl Wittfogel.

There are more topics worth mentioning, but this chapter has already become far too long. Therefore I mention only one last thing, and that only in a highly simplified way. There is a connection between the irrigation society and temples. This connection in Geertz's rendering is of surprisingly functional nature, so to speak. The limiting factor in the Balinese

261 Ibid. pp. 62–63.

262 Ibid. pp. 72.

263 Ibid. pp. 65.

264 Ibid. pp. 66.

265 Ibid. pp. 69.

agriculture – wet rice cultivation – is water. There is more or less constant amount of it throughout the year. As to the temples, there are many of them, but one is central. This temple serves as a paragon for all other temples. In other words, they imitate it, in the same way lesser negaras imitate the more central ones. There is a rite commencing the season of rice planting – a period of high water consumption - taking place in all the temples. But the rites in particular temples follow in a certain interval, specific for each temple, the performance of the rite in the central temple. So Geertz's conclusion is: "*The main ecological effect of this system (and, though it must have evolved, like the American city or British common law, in a fairly unselfconscious, case-to-case adjustment fashion), its main ecological purpose, was to stabilize the demands upon the central resource, water, over the crop year, rather than allowing its use to fluctuate widely, as it would in the absence of such a system.*"²⁶⁶ This explanation does not include any causality. In fact Geertz's summary make almost an idealistic impression. "*In such a way, a complex ecological order was both reflected in and shaped by an equally complex ritual order, which at once grew out of it and was imposed upon it.*"²⁶⁷

The reason I mentioned it, apart from demonstrating that Geertz is, at least sometimes, engaged in these issues, is that it is an explanation a functionalist, no matter whether structural or not, would likely commend. It shows well interrelations of at first sight distant and mutually insulated fields, agriculture and ritual. I think that this type of reasoning, originally a hallmark of functionalism, with its emphasis on interdependencies and generally relations, became something of a common legacy and thus a common ground, upon which anthropologists of various theoretical bents can agree. If it is not too optimistic a judgement, then maybe there will, by way of sedimentation of approved ideas, once crystalize something resembling a paradigm in anthropology.

The next chapter is called "*Political Statement: Spectacle and Ceremony.*" And the title of its first division is "*The symbology of Power.*"²⁶⁸ This chapter, the main chapter of the book it could be said, states in an elaborate form what was said in the introduction. It demonstrates the theatrical or expressive nature of negara on many examples. Here the interpretation, or hermeneutics if you like, is most present. But it is present in the way of its results, not as a process or method we could follow. Therefore I will deal with this chapter, paradoxically given its central significance, only briefly.

It opens with a five-page long description of the royal funeral, recorded in 1847

266 Ibid. pp. 80–81.

267 Ibid. pp. 82.

268 Ibid. pp. 98.

by a Danish trader.²⁶⁹ I have already mentioned it in the beginning of this chapter. What is interesting about this description is, that it could be described as a fine example of *thick description* in and of itself. It is not just description of an awful spectacle (three concubines leaping into the fire) made by a perplexed foreigner. On the contrary, it contains many explanations of the ritual symbolic and related beliefs. Placing it into the beginning of the chapter serves a certain purpose. It works as a splendid example of the pomp and expressiveness. In the latter part of the chapter Geertz returns to it and adds a detailed exegesis. It might be interesting to compare Geertz's analysis with the text of the Danish trader. Geertz's advantage over the trader is his very definite (pre)conception of the Balinese overall context, which enables him to present it as just another instance of something perfectly natural. Interestingly, the funeral serves to make up the context, central part of which is the idea of exemplariness, in the same measure as it can be interpreted only in this context, that is, against the background of this idea of exemplariness and others. This is the hermeneutics in practice, if we are to employ a posh word for it. Otherwise, it is just a common structure of human understanding, hardly a method. His other advantage over the trader should be the method of thick description. However, as I have said, I cannot see, why the original description itself, as written by the trader, could not be regarded as thick description. It is beyond doubt that Geertz's treatment goes much deeper and at the same time involves much broader context, but in principle they are not that different.

The chapter is full of general statements on the symbolic nature of the Balinese politics. We can look at one of them. "*The ritual extravaganzas of the theatre state, its half-divine lord immobile, tranced, or dead at the dramatic center of them, were the symbolic expression less of the peasantry's greatness than of its notion of what greatness was. What the Balinese state did for Balinese society was to cast into sensible form a concept of what, together, they were supposed to make of themselves: an illustration of the power of grandeur to organize the world.*"²⁷⁰ This statement, a high-level interpretation, is followed by his reflections on the nature of Balinese symbols, and in a way of the concept of culture in general. "*The Balinese, not only in court rituals but generally, cast their most comprehensive ideas of the way things ultimately are, and the way that men should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols - into a lexicon of carvings, flowers, dances, melodies, gestures, chants, ornaments, temples, postures, and masks - rather than into a*

269 Ibid. pp. 109.

270 Ibid. pp. 102.

discursively apprehended, ordered set of explicit 'beliefs.'"²⁷¹ What follows is exegesis of some more sensuous symbols – mainly palace and temple architecture and the cremation as a paradigmatic ritual. During this Geertz unfolds the Balinese cosmology. I cannot recapitulate it here, but I do not think it would make any contribution to my task.

The last chapter carries the name "*Bali and Political Theory*." It contains conclusions, and thus once more repeats in a slightly refined form the central themes of the Balinese politics. In addition to that, Geertz draws some conclusions from his analysis which pertain to the political theory in general, and make explicit some of his theoretical assumptions. These assumptions include reading culture as text, and nature of symbols. The topics I have reviewed earlier. Yet, there are a couple of things which are worth restating. New formulations could cast some more light on the subject, or at least they make us more used to it. *"A structure of action, now bloody, now ceremonious, the negara was also, and as such, a structure of thought. To describe it is to describe a constellation of enshrined ideas. ... Ideas are not, and have not been for some time, unobservable mental stuff. They are envehicled meanings, the vehicles being symbols (or in some usages, signs), a symbol being anything that denotes, describes, represents, exemplifies, labels, indicates, evokes, depicts, expresses - anything that somehow or other signifies. And anything that somehow or other signifies is intersubjective, thus public, thus accessible to overt and corrigible plein air explication. Arguments, melodies, formulas, maps, and pictures are not idealities to be stared at but texts to be read; so are rituals, palaces, technologies, and social formations."*²⁷² His whole analysis is such a reading. According to him, all aspects of society, not just myths, iconography, rituals etc., but irrigation, taxation, village organization and the like as well, can be treated in this manner. Nevertheless, as we have seen, he does not renounce more conventional ways of analysis, at least in practice.

Regarding his conviction about the unity or congruence of structure of thought and of action, he emphatically rejects being labelled as an idealist. We can see part of his argument against it in the quotation above. Especially the part about envehicled ideas and intersubjectivity. He appeals to Wittgenstein, again without stating any of his ideas and thus specifying what he has in mind. It is of course Wittgenstein's private language and rule-following argument, but I find it problematic to just cast a name without specifying what one means. Particularly because there is little agreement on interpretation of Wittgenstein, and, moreover, treating Wittgenstein's ideas as if they were some kind

271 Ibid. pp. 103.

272 Ibid. pp. 135.

of a holy scripture we all unanimously accept, is a very dubious approach. And it seems that Geertz could do without these dim references to Wittgenstein, just accepting pragmatic principle, that whatever has consequences is real. People act upon their beliefs, which is equal to saying that these beliefs find expression in what people do, and therefore, having observable consequences in the world, count as real no less than stones and trees. Part of what people do is that they tell myths, build temples, perform rituals etc., and all these things are expressions of their beliefs or ideas. They are these ideas embodied, to put it explicitly. I believe this is a way of reasoning not strange to social scientists. In fact, I think it is rather close to what sociologists call the Thomas theorem.

As for the message *negara* can offer to political theory it lies mainly in the focus on symbolic aspects of politics. Classical approaches to politics either ignore them, or regard them, one way or another, as merely instrumental. Politics is for them about social control, and pompous ceremonies serve only to induce awe in the subjects and bring them to obedience, or some other external end. *Negara* is supposed to show that there are "*alternate conception of what politics is about and what power comes to.*"²⁷³ Spectacle in Bali was no external embellishment of politics, nor was it an instrument for some other, real political ends. It rests on the model-and-copy conception of reality. Exemplariness of the king, shown in the pompous ceremonies and other acts, ensures well-being of the country.²⁷⁴ To put it this way amounts almost to caricature, but I believe details of Balinese political metaphysics, as Geertz calls it, are of secondary importance here. It shows the Balinese state ceremony, with all its peculiarities, as intelligible, as just another option of what politics may look like, and therefore it presents a challenge for political theories. The challenge is not just in accounting for the particular case, which does not seem to fit into their conceptions, but I think even more in the need of reassessing the role of expressive or semiotic aspects of politics.

3.3.3 Some additional conclusions

Since I have made many commentaries in the previous chapter already, I will now add only a few general remarks. Clearly, *Negara* is written from the perspective of interpretive anthropology, though there are a lot of passages which would in no way stick out from a functionalist or structural functionalist account of society. Geertz claims that his semiotic perspective can be used with any field of society. After reading *Negara*, I am not convinced

273 Ibid. pp. 135.

274 Ibid. pp. 129. et passim.

about it. More precisely, his analysis of, say, irrigation, includes some parts, which could be taken as interpretive anthropology, but generally this perspective is either barely recognizable with these fields, or does not seem to yield much in the way of illuminating results. Or both. Apart from that, it amounts to ignoring or undervaluing of environment, technology, property relations etc. This can be seen in loose relation of *negara* and *desa*, that is, the symbolic, interregional politics, and local, everyday politics in the usual sense of the word. And the same applies for the relation of the *negara* stage politics to its backstage politics, which he describes as a constant hum of intrigue.²⁷⁵ We are told that every lord wanted to build his own *negara*, and as exemplary as possible. To this, he needed the control over men and resources. We are left in the dark as to how he could acquire them. "...the actual control over men and resources (the political center of gravity, so to speak) sat very low in the system, and because concrete attachments were multiple, fragile, overlapping, and personal, a complex and changeful system of alliances and oppositions emerged as the lords tried to immobilize their immediate upward rivals (make them dependent) and maintain the support of their immediate downward ones (keep them deferential)."²⁷⁶ After reading this, the question naturally arises, how could they maintain the support of those downward and make those upward dependent. And I do not think it is clarified satisfactorily in the book. The reason for it is, I believe, that it concerns more earthbound issues, not so readily susceptible to interpretive analysis, the stuff that seems to evade Geertz's sight. In other words, he does not live-up to his claim about sticking to "*hard surfaces of life*," which we have seen in the chapter on his theory. Generally, I believe his way of analysis is much more convenient for fields of more expressive nature, paradigmatically religion, and in other fields it can be employed as a complement but not as a substitution of other approaches.

The problem that remains is that we do not know, how he arrived at his results. The only thing we can see are his results.²⁷⁷ We cannot follow his reasoning. Therefore the only thing we can do, is to accept or reject what we are presented with. In connection with this, it is very well possible that another anthropologist using interpretive anthropology would come up with very different results. It is a consequence of vagueness of this theory. Only very little in the way of concrete instructions can be derived from it.

275 Ibid. pp. 134.

276 Ibid. pp. 134.

277 In Shankman's article we can several statement of experts on Bali which are very sceptical about Geertz's results, and the main two reasons are lack of evidence for many of his conclusions and obscure relation between the available evidence and the conclusions. SHANKMAN, P.: *The Thick and the Thin: On the Interpretive Theoretical Program of Clifford Geertz [and Comments and Reply]*, in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jun., 1984), pp. 267–269, 274–275 et passim. The same criticism appears in KUPER, A.: *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Harvard University Press 1999. pp. 116–117.

The last thing I want to mention are generalization and possible use of his study. In this respect, aside from the problematic verification, it offers surprisingly lot. Not only understanding of one particular society. It should, according to Geertz, contribute to our understanding of some other societies in the region of Southeast Asia existing in history. Given his analysis is correct and these societies were related closely enough, it sounds reasonably. And lastly there are contributions to political theory. Geertz uses Negara as a kind of case-study in polemics with several accepted theories, mainly the theory about oriental despotism, or hydraulic empires. There is large and elaborated irrigation system in Bali, but negara has nothing to do with it. It is in competence of villages, to put it simply. In addition to that, there is his challenge to political theory. So, despite the lack of a) formal vocabulary, b) standardized procedure and c) form of results, which would make it easily comparable with other societies, it cannot be said to relate only to a narrow local area.

4 Conclusions

When I came up with the topic for my thesis, I harboured a vague suspicion that a thorough reading of ethnographies and comparing them with the theories in terms of which they were written, could reveal the recalcitrant nature of the facts an ethnographer is faced with. What I expected was finding some substantive similarities in the way ethnographic material was shaped into some intelligible form, quite independent on the theory. As for this suspicion, probably naive from the very beginning, it was refuted for the most part. We find passages in *Negara*, and there is no scarcity of them, which could be a part of structural functionalist, or perhaps even other account. In a similar way we find passages in *The Nuer* that exhibit no traces of structural functionalism. But it is only understandable that not everything in an ethnography is shaped by a theory. Still, a substantial parts in both of the monographies under consideration carry marks of their respective theories. At the same time, the overall results, despite their different aims and assumptions, does not seem to be radically different. The differences are more a matter of emphases. But it is of course problematic to state, because there is no criterion of what radically different means.

As for the comparison of the applicability of the theories - what I named pragmatic value - since my whole procedure is merely qualitative, the comparison comes down, in a large part, to juxtaposing some of their characteristics and pointing out similarities and variances. Structural functionalism has the advantage of being more definite. It has some technical vocabulary, a few assumptions about the nature of society, and relatively clearly delimited goal. Now I mean immediate goal, that is, the form of the results sought. What we are facing when we accept structural functionalist perspective, are variously defined and organized groups of people, which have certain relations to each other. These relations are believed to be to a large extent constant. The whole of the society is organized in such a way, so as to enable this, that is, to maintain the social structure. The assumptions of equilibrium and of interrelations and interdependencies of parts give us a certain guidance as to what we are after. We want to reconstruct social structure. Moreover there are other notions which could be called technical, like values, institutions, lineages and so on. They are of course not exclusive to structural functionalism, but in it they become really useful and necessary concepts.

In comparison to this, interpretive anthropology, despite the narrow concept of culture, seems to offer much less in the way of a guidance. It holds little or none assumptions about the nature of society. Most of the theory is concerned with the general nature of the notion

of culture. Culture means people's beliefs or ideas upon which they act, and these ideas are treated as embodied in people's action and products. It is a crude way of putting it, but it does not appear as lacking anything essential. The advice to read it as a text is so vague, as to be almost devoid of meaning. And the immediate goal, that is "penetrating the mind" of the people we examine, is not much better in this respect.

In spite of the differences, the theories share some features I can state, but these are mostly not related to their applicability. They are both not interested in origins of the particular forms of their subjects. They take them as systems which they attempt to describe. With this the neglect of change and of individuals are connected. Individuals are viewed merely as vehicles of their culture, or as positions in the social structure respectively. This is understandable, given the forms of explanation, or better of results, they seek. Moreover, for Geertz human being without a culture is a sheer possibility, something like Aristotelian matter. It has to be actualized by a culture first. Only then we can speak of a real human being.

Both of the theories contain something of an interpretation. Interpretation is in a large part a translation. Even structural functionalist in a way translates what he sees and what people tell him into text, but he has the concepts of his theory at his disposal, which makes it less arbitrary. Geertz's approach has less preconceptions about societies, and could thus seemingly avoid distorting of the reality, by making only the assumptions which fit the given situation. His words about social theory not being "its own master" corroborate that this was his intention. I think it rather misplaced, or even naïve. A statement of a sort that the real epitome of freedom is a desert with no paths and no directions. One is completely free to march in any direction. But in order to get somewhere, directions are useful. We cannot simply keep all the possibilities open, we need to choose, even at the cost of running a risk of choosing wrong. Geertz's misgivings seem to rest on a supposition that the reality can somehow present us with our concepts, or to put it more mildly, there are some concepts which somehow naturally fit the reality. In no way I want to suggest the contrary extreme that every concept is as good as any other. But there are various ways of approaching the reality suitable for different ends. In getting knowledge, we cannot do without some creativity on our part.

After these reflections directed narrowly on the theories in question, there are two more subjects I want to touch upon in a broader context. Analogies used by these theories and their aims in the more general sense. These two subjects are not unrelated. Structural functionalism draws its inspiration from biology. It pictures its subject, that is, society, in the way of an organism, and the procedure is inspired by morphology, or we could say

anatomy, and physiology. Interpretive anthropology uses culture as text, culture as program, and ethnography as reading and writing or literary critique analogies. The necessity of borrowing methods and concepts from very much different disciplines bears witness to inchoateness of anthropology. One of our theories purports to be nomothetic, the other is overtly a branch of humanities. An irreconcilable opposition. For those from the first camp, the latter is based on intuition and other capabilities beyond verification, and is more an art than a science.²⁷⁸ For those with a bent towards humanities, the laws of society are either unattainable, void, or undesirable. There can be hardly a more obvious testimony of the pre-paradigm situation of anthropology than this continuing, apparently eternal, disagreement. It does not seem that the debate has evolved much since the times of Windelband.²⁷⁹ And we still find anthropologists on both sides of this divide.

Finally, I want to contemplate a little the possible outcomes of the theories and their aims. With this question, I will not confine myself to the two theories under discussion. This topic is closely related to the question of whether anthropology ought to be nomothetic or idiographic, but it is a broader question. If we knew what it is we want to know about human societies, the answer to the former question should follow naturally. In deciding what we want to know, it would be of immense help to have some use for the information anthropology can bring us. The obsession of some anthropologists with the alleged colonial history of the discipline could be possibly rendered, among other things, as an expression of a despair for some reasons for existence of anthropology, for its justification so to speak. Anthropology as a servant of colonial governments, however morally dubious it might be, at least makes sense. But we can find other possible motives for pursuing anthropology when we look into its history. One of them is a desire for knowledge, the original drive for scientific enterprise as it came into existence in Ancient Greece. That implies seeking some general characteristics of societies, since knowledge is about the general. This was a type of motivation Radcliffe-Brown acknowledged. Even if its actual results came down to something resembling Linnaean botany at best, enriched with some rather trivial general statements about universals.

Another motivation, which would lead us to interest in laws or other general characteristics of societies, would be a belief in applicability of such knowledge in improving of a society – an aim which gave rise to sociology. And anthropology could have advantage

278 Scheff, T. J.: *Toward Resolving the Controversy over "Thick Description"*, Current Anthropology Vol. 27, No. 4 (Aug. - Oct., 1986), pp. 408.

279 One of the more recent statements in this matter can be found in Iser, W.: *How to do theory*, Wiley-Blackwell 2006. Iser makes a distinction between laws and predictions seeking natural sciences and humanities, with their interpretive approaches, which they use for mapping of the world.

in gaining this type of knowledge. It could, studying simpler societies, have access to some elementary forms of generally occurring phenomena. I believe this type of aim and reasoning is nowadays dead beyond recall. Still another use anthropology might have, is in helping us to reconstruct our history and prehistory. A way of reasoning which thrived in Victorian England and slightly later, connected with evolutionist and diffusionist theories. Then we have anthropology as a branch of psychology with other societies as laboratories for testing and mainly disproving general psychological hypotheses. And not necessarily just psychological. We have economic anthropology dealing with the universality or particularity of homo oeconomicus and other suppositions about human nature. Another influential and ambitious version of anthropology was that of Levi-Strauss. Not dreams and unconsciousness fuelled by sexual instincts, but myths as a royal road to human mind. Mind conceived as a universal structure of binary oppositions. These are just a few of the possible motivations for anthropology regarded as a science we can find in its history. I leave aside Geertz's claim, that his version of anthropology is a science as well, for it stands unanimously on the side of idiographic approaches.

Then there are more humanistic approaches. Understanding, leading either to our spiritual improvement, cultivation we could call it, or to better communication and coexistence with the others, or both. Surprisingly, returning to accusations of collaboration with colonialism, the "understanding anthropology" seems much more suitable for such an employment than some abstract, laws seeking science. Understanding of "the others" can be put to use for dominating them, in one way or other. It does not have to be direct colonizing. There is economic exploitation of various kinds. And there is yet another use for Anthropology. It can serve as culture critique.

These are just some of the possible, or impossible but once hoped for, uses, of anthropology. No doubt we could think of some others. What I find interesting and at once disturbing on this list, is its breadth. Or the lack of a common denominator, to put it more directly. It is no wonder then that anthropology cannot reach anything like a paradigm and to establish a period of normal science. Many of the above mentioned motivations has now been discredited, but there is still no agreement in the question, what anthropology seeks.

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