

# Theories of Culture

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## Main reading.

\*Zygmunt Bauman, 1992, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

## Clifford Geertz on culture.

\*“Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.” (The Interpretations of Culture, 1973: 5)

## Culture according to Geertz.

\*“[H]istorically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”

## Culture: differences and similarities.

\*Geertz: an anthropology of difference: people do not have a single culture; the universal functions of culture are performed by particular cultures, different from one another.

\*Main function: to unite. Culture as *συμβολον* : culture unites and homogenizes through shared symbols.

## Maurice Bloch and anthropology of similarity.

\*Very similar images, symbolic associations and ritual practices occur in societies of different time and space. „Partial

recurrences”, „incomplete regularities.”

(*Essays on Cultural Transmission*, Oxford 2005)

Culture as *διάβολον* : culture separates through exclusion, silence and erasure.

## Double function of culture

- \*Culture as *συμβολον* : culture unites and homogenizes through shared symbols.
- \*Culture as *διάβολον* : culture separates through exclusion, silence and erasure.

## William H. Sewell Jr.

“Culture... should be understood as a dialectic of system and practice, as a dimension of social life autonomous from other such dimensions..., and as a system of symbols possessing a real but thin coherence that is continually put at risk in practice and therefore subject to transformation.”

*Logics of History. Social Theory and Social Transformation*

(2005)

## Thin coherence (Sewell)

To share symbols does not necessarily mean integration and solidarity of people who share them

## **Sites of concentrated cultural practice (Sewell)**

External mechanisms of coherence: institutions of power, around which cultural practice is centered (states, business corporations, media, religions). The main function of the “sites” (and thus of culture): to induce coherence (through the ordering of meanings) and to organize difference: “They [the sites] are constantly engaged in efforts not only to normalize or homogenize but also to hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, criminalize, hegemonize, or marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal.”

## Culture and the management of difference.

- \*If culture is about processing difference, we shall study it first of all in the situations in which the difference is blurred, which are ambiguous and contain an element of transgression. Culture as a factory of meanings through which we either learn to live with ambiguity or to “domesticate” it through separating the “familiar”

from the “alien.”

## Zafimaniry anthropology.

When culture matters? When do we ask fundamental questions that culture helps to answer or pretends to do so?

R. Astuti, J. Parry, C. Stafford (eds.). 2007. *Questions of Anthropology*.

?

\*What our experiences of death, sex, violence and the sacred do have in common?

## When culture matters?

\*Existential insecurity in the situations which are:

- \*Ambiguous
- \*Liminal
- \*Transgressive

## Liminality

\**Limen* (threshold); *limes* (border separating two areas)

\*The concept describes “in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes.” (Horvath, Thomassen, Wydra 2009, 3)

Arnold van Gennep: *rites de passage* as ‘rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.’

\*‘Every change involves an interaction between the sacred and the profane that has to be regulated and guarded so that society as a whole will suffer no discomfort or injury.’

Victor Turner: separation, liminality, and aggregation. Liminality as ambiguity. Liminality as the experience of Otherness: “communitas” vs. structure. “Liminal” vs. “liminoid.”

## Liminal situations (Van Gennep/Turner)

- \* Passage and transgression
- \* Betwixt and between
- \* Ambiguity
- \* Outside of categorization
- \* Otherworldly chaos
- \* Anxiety
- \* Danger

## Transgressions.

- \* „An act, process or instance of transgressing: as **a**: infringement or violation of a law, command or duty **b**: the spread of the sea over land areas and the consequent uncomfortable deposit of sediments on older rocks.” (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*)
- \* “According to linguistic or analytical philosophy, a transition from one type of proposition or ‘language-game’ to another.” (*Theological and Philosophical Biography and Dictionary*. <http://dictionary.babylon.com>)

## Culture is...

A way of managing the ambiguities of liminal situations, which transforms anxieties that emerge out of liminal chaos into concrete fears, thus making them bearable.

(Special thanks to Jean Delumeau and Clifford Geertz)

## Case Study 1: Don Giovanni

*Don Giovanni*: an archeology of a cultural text (R. de Simone).

- \* „The seducer” – it’s about having sex (subversion of moral order).
- \* „The murderer” – it’s about subverting the social order.

\* „The libertine” – it’s about subverting the transcendental order.

## Don Giovanni at the grave of the Commendatore:

\* *Dell’empio che mi trasse al passo estremo qui **attendo la vendetta.***

\* *O vecchio bufonissimo! Digli che questa sera **l’attendo a cenar meco.***

\* „... I here await vengeance.”

\* „... I await him to dinner.”

## Death invited to dinner

\* „You invited me to dinner, now you know your duty. Answer me: will you come to dine with me?” (The ghost of Commendatore to Don Giovanni)

\* Reciprocity principle: you offered food to someone, someone must offer food to you.

## Food exchange and its cultural role.

\* FOOD = LIFE: people with whom we exchange food are living people. The sphere of food circulation makes the boundary of our life.

\* We must not exchange food with the dead: they are excluded from life. Except ritual food, brought to graves in order to keep death in the right place (far away).

## The hidden meaning of DG

\* „The man who invited Death for dinner” – it’s about subverting the existential order.

\* Breaking the separation of the dead and the living.

\* How did death come into being (entered the sphere of life)? DG’s story as a mythological explanation of death.

\* Transformation of anxiety into fear: death as a matter of punishment for

sins which could have been avoided, not as a basic unavoidable fact of existence.

## DG as an archeology of culture

- \*The code of sex: DG as seducer.
- \*The code of violence: DG as murderer.
- \*The code of religion: DG as blasphemous libertine.
- \*The code of death: DG as responsible for mortality (one who invited death among the living),

## Culture and liminality

- \*The symbolism („languages”) of death, sex, violence and the sacred as cultural codes in which we can encode our liminal experiences.
- \*They are interchangeable: means that we can encode our experience of death in the „language” of sex or the sacred, and vice versa.
- \*To encode means sometimes to hide.
- \*What is hidden and where, and how particular cultural code is organized, is decided by the sites of concentrated cultural practice.

## Case study 2: New Year ritual of Merina.

- \*Maurice Bloch, „The Ritual of the Royal Bath in Madagascar: The Dissolution of Death, Birth and Fertility into Authority.” (1987)

## Segments of the ritual.

- \*Mourning – visit to family tombs: two faces of death.
- \*Tax collection; gifts: from the bottom to the top (power and hierarchy confirmed as domination).
- \*Bringing water. Foundational myth (Vazimba, Ralambo): violence as the birth of civilization.
- \*„Orgy” – freedom through disorder.
- \*Royal bath.
- \*Family ceremony: confirmation of social structure and reintroduction of order.
- \*Cattle sacrifice: distribution of meat and gifts from the top to the bottom (power and hierarchy confirmed as benevolent).

## Case study 3: Poles and Jews

## Notes from the fieldwork.

### \*A Jew:

- \*„Pious God-killer.” The religious dimension.
- \*„Powerful coward.” The dimension of power.
- \*„Non-sexual, sex-obsessed creature.” The sexual dimension.
- \*„Mortal as we all” but „buried differently.” The existential/eschatological dimension.

## Back to Geertz...

- \*Culture as a web of significance through which we process/construct „otherness.”
- \*„Warp”: death, sex, violence, the sacred.
- \*„Weft”: culture as a boundary-making definition of „Us” and „Them.”
- \*Culture as the factor of (internal) unity.
- \*Culture as marginalization and exclusion – thus as a construction of otherness.
- \*CULTURE AS A TOOL FOR PROCESSING AMBIVALENCE