

## THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN CLIFFORD GEERTZ'S INTERPRETATION

*The article analyzes the concept of culture actualized in C. Geertz essays and their interpretations by the scholars. Geertz's theoretical contribution begins with his descriptions of the definition of culture. The author observes, that the study of culture can be an interpretative one in search of meaning, it draws the reader's attention to the understanding of the cultural forms and cultural systems provided by Geertz. He qualifies culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms.*

*Much attention is given to the analyzing of "thick description" of culture. Therefore, according to C. Geertz investigation of culture may focus on a single symbol, or ritual, such as the cockfight, and "thickly" describe it in the contexts of all the other symbols, social arrangements, and concepts in terms of which it has "meaning". It is noted that C. Geertz examines culture as an ensemble of texts. It is emphasized that C. Geertz proposed a new paradigm for how to study culture.*

**Keywords:** culture, cultural system, ethos, symbol, interpretive approach, C. Geertz, "thick description".

*Topicality.* The studying of is actualizing C. Geertz's legacy by the necessity of the appropriate interpretation of cultural phenomena in various discourses. The multiplicity of cultural meanings shows us the Clifford Geertz as the founder of interpretative approach provides his own explanation of cultural reality. Naturally, the multiplicity of interpretation of cultural meanings shows us the possibility of different approaches of understanding them in the social context. C. Geertz way of theorizing allows us to recognize the culture as an assemblage of texts, and to provide some attempts to find access for understand the essence.

*The aim of this research* is the investigation of cultural phenomena in the Clifford Geertz interpretation.

*The tasks of the article are:* to analyze the peculiarities of the understanding of culture in interpretative approach by C. Geertz; to find out the influence of symbolic meanings on the function of the society; to determine the role of Geertz's contribution to the further cultural studies.

*Historiography.* The analysis of the problem became a subject of interest of scholars in the field of the social and cultural studies in an interdisciplinary discourse. The sources of the research are the works of Clifford Geertz [3]. Accordingly, the researching of the definition of culture in the interpretation of C. Geertz was made by such scholars as Ann Swidler [8], Armin W. Geertz [2], Joseph Errington [1], Matthew Norton [5], Philip Smith [7], Richard Parker [6].

*Presentation of the material.* In 1970s and 1980s, the impact of the American school of cultural anthropology, especially of its symbolic wing headed by C. Geertz, was essentially increased. In the last decades of the twentieth century Geertz became one of the most cited anthropologists.

Clifford Geertz was not only a significant figure in anthropology; he was one of the great intellectuals of the latter half of the twentieth century. Geertz is well known for his hermeneutical stance, called "interpretive anthropology", and is associated with the intellectual movement in anthropology known as "symbolic anthropology". His seminal essay on "Religion as a Cultural System" has for some fifty years dominated the understanding of religion in a wide variety of disciplines. As notes Armin Geertz, most people are unaware of, however, are Geertz's ideas about the interrelations between human cognition and culture [2, p. 176-177].

The essential intellectual foundation for much Geertz's work seems to be most clearly developed in his early essay, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man", by opposing the view of human nature that emerged from the European Enlightenment to the scientific understanding of human evolution developed in the twentieth century, that Geertz most compellingly focuses our attention on the symbolic dimension of cultural forms. For Geertz, the increasing awareness of the cultural contribution

to the process of human evolution, which has clearly been developed in twentieth-century anthropology, cannot help but call into question both this philosophical view of an underlying human nature as well as the stratigraphic intellectual strategies that stem from such a view [6, p 62].

“It is here, to come round finally to my title, that the concept of culture has its impact on the concept of man. When seen as a set of symbolic devices for controlling behavior, extrasomatic sources of information, culture provides the link between what men are intrinsically capable of becoming and what they actually, one by one, in fact become. Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives” [3, p. 52].

Thus, the problem is that “once culture, psyche, society, and organism have been converted into separate scientific “levels,” complete and autonomous in themselves, it is very hard to bring them back together again”. Geertz’s leading aim was to apply theories and concepts from biology, psychology and sociology to the analysis of culture. This cannot be done if, as many have done, scholars simply intuitively correlate cultural facts with the various levels. The stratigraphic approach must be replaced by a “synthetic” approach, by which Geertz meant “one in which biological, psychological, sociological, and cultural factors can be treated as variables within unitary systems of analysis” [2, p. 179].

As Armin Geertz says, this approach makes two strong claims: a) that instead of viewing culture in terms of patterns, one should view culture in terms of “control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”) – for the governing of behavior”, and b) “that man is precisely the animal most desperately dependent upon such extragenetic, outside the skin control mechanisms, such cultural programs, for ordering his behavior”. The scholar provides, that these two claims fit perfectly with present – day social and affective neuroscience, even though it is less accepted by cognitive scientists of religion [2, p. 179].

Geertz’s theoretical contributions begin with his descriptions definition of culture [4]. He qualifies culture as “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life” [3, p. 89]

Before “The Interpretation of Culture” was published, Clifford Geertz had already changed the ways in which most researches study culture. Indeed, the heart of “The Interpretation of Culture” is a collection of essays, published between 1957 and the mid-1960 s, that provided a new vocabulary for studying culture and a new understanding of what enterprise involves [8, p 79-80]. Clifford Geertz was recognized as the founder of interpretive anthropology, and a theorist emphasizing the study of culture can be an interpretative one in search of meaning.

Ann Swidler emphasize, that first Geertz clarified the object of cultural study not hidden subjectivities or whole ways of life, but publicly available symbols, second, Geertz developed a rich theoretical language for analyzing culture. Geertz asked how particular symbols become real for some groups. His answer is that “sacred symbols,” and especially actions, generate an “ethos” – an emotional tone, a set of feelings, moods and motivations, that simultaneously make the religious worldview seem true. This theoretical formulation seems to explain how symbols, or meanings embodied and enacted in symbols, generate experiential realities that in turn make the symbols real [8, p. 79-80].

One of the main ideas focused into Geertz’s theory was the core of culture is a set of moral values that preserve the correspondence of the world “as it is” with the world “as it should be.” Everything that is going on in any culture is specific to contextual behaviors and happenings; one must interpret each of those happenings accordingly. Symbolic anthropology can be classified as a reaction to Claude Levi-Strauss’ structuralist point of view. Geertz mentions Levi-Strauss’s contributions to anthropology, but he expresses his disagreement with structuralism in article “The Cerebral Savage: On the Work of Claude Levi-Strauss [3, pp. 345-360]”. Levi-Strauss focuses meaning as established contrasts between distinct aspects of culture and not on the meaning behind them. Geertz and his followers believed in the operations of culture rather than the ways in which symbols utilize in the social process. Levi-Strauss believed that rituals, institutions, and other aspects of a culture could be understood by the purposes they serve. In the contrary, structuralism applies symbols only with respect to their place in the “system” and

not as an integral part of understanding the system. So, this split between the idealism of the symbolic anthropologists and the materialism of the structuralists dominated the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century discussions [4].

The important Geertz's essays dealt with such issues as the incompleteness of "human nature" without culture to organize action experience ("The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man"), various conceptions of the continuity of human personality in different cultures ("Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali"), the resurgence of ethnic particularism in the new nations ("The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States"), and the problem of when and why ritual practices break down or fail ("Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example") [8, p. 80].

One of his most popular essays was included at the beginning of *Interpretations of Culture* was "Thick Description: Toward and Interpretive Theory of Culture". It is important to the interpretative study. Since anthropology is a semiotic, cultural analysis should be an interpretative practice. The observational material collected by an ethnographer is not sufficient to achieve a thick description of culture, which is the most important aspect to Geertz [4]. Thick description is set apart from this description by the former's attention to the meaning of actions and Geertz explains it with an example. One boy's eye involuntarily twitches, while another boy winks. The physical phenomena are the same, but a wink is cultural stuff, whereas a twitch is not. In researching a culture, the ethnographer must record the winks, not the twitches [4]. So, "The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: 1) deliberately, 2) to someone in particular, 3) to impart a particular message, 4) according to a socially established code, and 5) without cognizance of the rest of the company... the winker has not done two things, contracted his eyelids and winked, while the twitcher has done only one, contracted his eyelids. Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal is winking. That's all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture..." [3, p. 6]. Thus, Geertz states the subject of interpretation depends on the social discourse.

It is acknowledged that Geertz has written some of the most fascinating essays: "Thick Description," "Religion as a Cultural System," and "Ideology as a Cultural System" – these are the items to which we return time and time again looking for ideas on how to interpret action and imagine culture. They are endlessly cited, reinterpreted, and subject to critique. Yet although Geertz has provided several pivotal texts for cultural sociology, cultural anthropology, and cultural theory, one and only one has become truly iconic. This is his "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight". From the one hand, as explains Philip Smith, C. Geertz has opened space for the cultural turn by demonstrating more clearly and persuasively than anyone before that social action should be considered as embedded in an implicit cultural text. From the other hand, as scholar claims, the fateful mistake was that Geertz rejected structuralism. Geertz's vision was of culture as local, flexible, and nuanced. It is but a short step from reading culture as flexible to seeing it as spineless and from reading it as local to taking cultural analysis to be incompatible with broader agendas aimed at building transposable theory [7, p. 19].

The most influential essay is "Deep Play" became a new paradigm for how to study culture: Focus on a single event, symbol, or ritual, such as the cockfight, and "thickly" describe it in the contexts of all the other symbols, social arrangements, sensibilities, and concepts in terms of which it has "meaning". Eventually, this demonstration of a new kind of practice in cultural study shows how to take a piece of culture and treat it as a "text". By placing the text in a context of all other meaning, experiences, practices, or ideas that shed light upon its meaning, the interpreters of a text could find a way explicate the sensibility of other times and places [8, p. 80-81].

As Joseph Erringt suggest, "Deep play: notes on a Balinese cockfight," Geertz's famous article on Balinese culture, is based in a distinct notion of system. Geertz's version used terms poached from another psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut. The anthropologist mediates, Geertz suggested, between what Kohut called the "experience near" and "experience distant." He or she oscillates between what I have distinguished here as meaning "addressed to me" (as participant) and meaning as it appears from a distanced, "demystifying" stance. Geertz meditates in closing on cultural texts, "theirs" and "ours." Here he thematizes his mediating relationship between the Balinese and his readers, suggesting that we read "over his shoulder" as he read "over theirs." He is figuring the cock-fight as a kind of "cultural system". Ricoeur's analogy between social conduct and text helped Geertz because, it brought structural

linguistics into engagement with his text-centered approach to culture. Ricoeur helped Geertz to argue that “cultural systems” cannot be autonomous because cultural meaning is intrinsically contextual, open-ended, and public [1, p. 33-41].

Ricoeur’s and Kohut’s psychoanalytic terms help foreground an instrumental notion of “system,” that is, a means for responding to the intellectual and existential challenges posed to participant/observers by fieldwork. Fully objectified or not, ideas about systems help the work of creating connections between first person experience and narratives of experience. If Geertz did not find systems good to do, then, he did find them good to think for diagnosing and interpreting other’s doings [1, p. 33-41].

At the end of “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, Geertz asks a question of social semantics about examining culture as some texts [4]. He accents “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” [3, p. 452]. As Geertz concludes, “Societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them” [3, p. 453].

By that he meant that many scholars think of human life as consisting of composite levels. levels consist of the biological, psychological, social and cultural. He argued that stratigraphic thinking assumes that if you peel of the various levels, like onion skins, you will end up with the next, more basic level beneath. us peeling of the cultural level reveals the structural and functional level. Peeling of that level reveals the psychological level [2, p. 178].

According to Ann Swidler, students of culture also do well to take the notion of “deep play” (a theoretical idea) more seriously. In “Deep Play”, Geertz is not exploring the meaning of the Balinese cockfight. He is also asking what make some cultural performances, some cultural experiences deeper, more intense, more gripping than others. This is the beginning of an analysis of why some rituals, texts, or symbols generate more meaning than others do. Geertz explores how tension, uncertainly about the outcome, balanced opponents, and the ability to symbolize significant social tension make some cockfight deeper, more exciting, and more satisfying than other. Moreover, he recognizes that multiple kinds of realities can abide side by side. He also occasionally addresses great clashes of meaning, when people’s cultural assumptions don’t mesh, and when culture itself is a source of sometimes violent conflict. If cultural coherence is itself variable, Geert’s work a starting point for studying this variation [8, p. 83-84].

Geertz emphasized that humans have never existed without culture and, therefore, any attempts to explain them without culture or, in a more common version, as biological creatures with a cultural veneer, is meaningless [2, p. 180].

Clifford Geertz was at the forefront of his times when he wrote that “human culture is an ingredient not supplementary to human thought” [3, p. 77], and “no such thing as a human nature independent of culture” [3, p. 49].

Geertz’s “culture” concept itself became the target of sustained anthropological skepticism, but one of the clearest messages of the chapters collected in volume “Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences” is that Geertz’s “culture” concept has weathered these critical storms to provide a strong common platform for diverse sorts of social inquiry [5, p. 205]. As Matthew Norton clarified talking about “the Geertz effect”, “the storms have not abated, but the fact that “culture” continues to offer a useful and productive platform for common strife over contentious and important issues in the human sciences indicates the durability of the concept” [5, p. 205].

*Conclusion.* So, Clifford Geertz created his own paradigms. Some of his most influential essays were included in his book “The Interpretation of Cultures”. The contents inside Geertz’s compiled book of articles brought about both positive and negative criticisms. But these critical reviews did not reduce the significance of his legacy into understanding of culture concept.

Thus, the concept of culture as component of main idea and special approach was provided by Clifford Geertz. Investigation by “thick descriptions” in culture sphere, proposed by scholar can be useful in contemporary studies, and shed light on the various meaning of understanding of culture.

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Ірина Гутковська

### Концепція культури у витлумаченні Кліффорда Гірца

*У статті проаналізовано концепцію культури, обґрунтовану К. Гірцем та проінтерпретовану вченими. Доведено, що теоретичний внесок Гірца починаються з визначення поняття культури. Автор зауважує, що вивчення культури може бути інтерпретаційним в пошуках сенсу, він привертає увагу читача до розуміння культурних форм та культурних систем, наданих К. Гірцем. Він кваліфікує культуру як історично передану схему значень, втілених в символах, систему успадкованих концепцій, виражених в символічних формах.*

*Значна увага приділяється аналізу “насичених описів” культури. Тому, згідно з К. Гірцем, вивчення культури може зосереджуватися на одному лише символі або ритуалі, наприклад, на півнячих боях, і “насичено” описувати його в контексті всіх інших символів, соціальних механізмів та концепцій, в термінах яких він має “сенси”. Відзначено, що К. Гірц розглядає культуру як ансамбль текстів і підкреслено важливість запропонованої К. Гірцем нової парадигми вивчення культури.*

**Ключові слова:** культура, культурна система, етос, символ, інтерпретативний підхід, К. Гірц, ”насичений опис”.

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