

HUM 473 Festivals: Culture in the Making
A COPLAC Distance Mentoring Seminar
Dr. Whitney Snow and Dr. Catherine Kroll
Spring 2016

An Ethnographic Study of a Local Festival & A Website Displaying Your Research

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.

--Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)

Brief prospectus of project (as blog entry) due: Th, Feb. 18

Submit interview questions for IRB: no later than Tu, Feb. 23

Contracts due via Google Docs: Th, Mar. 3

Share field notes in class: Tu, Mar. 22 and Th, Mar. 24 (adjustable, based on choice of festival)

Polished, edited drafts of projects due: Th, April 21

Final projects due: Th, May 5

Points: 50

Overall description of project: “Ethno” refers to a human culture, while “graphy” signifies a written text. For this project, select a festival that you would like to learn about and write about. Ideally, you will choose a festival that is fairly new to you so you can approach it as someone who has lots of questions about it. In addition to your actual observations of the festival, find three or more cultural informants to interview (these individuals may be festival organizers, festival attendees, or others closely connected to the festival). Consult your local university library and regional historical societies for archival materials related to your chosen festival. Keep a research journal and blog weekly about your findings. As you work, be aware of how your ideas about the festival are developing, deepening, and causing you to see it from multiple perspectives. Your written analysis of the cultural significance of the festival, as well as excerpts from your interviews, will form the basis of your website created in WordPress, a popular content management system (CMS).

Why *do* ethnography? Anthropologists, sociologists and other qualitative researchers seek to understand cultural events as well as groups of people that are often ignored, marginalized, or misunderstood. They endeavor to see the inner workings of these groups with fresh eyes in order to validate their realities; thus, they look at the group's values, social practices, and motivations. This project on festivals will enhance crucial skills that all researchers and writers need to have: the close observation of details; open, honest reflection; probing analysis; and writing that is focused, cogent, and articulate.

The key objective of this project is to research and analyze a local festival—its patterns, rituals, participants' behavior, values, status hierarchy among individuals, gestures, body

language, clothing, vernacular speech, and so on—in order to understand the festival’s cultural and historical significance. Approach your study of the festival with an open, inquiring mind so that you will enhance your powers of observation and ability to empathize with those who may hold values different from your own. *Note: while it is preferable to select a festival that will take place during the Spring 2016 semester so you can make audio or video recordings, it is not a requirement of the project. If you elect to research a festival that occurs outside of the spring time frame or that is no longer held, you are still responsible for conducting a minimum of three interviews with individuals closely associated with the festival and leaning more heavily on archival and library research, as you will not have the benefit of acting as a participant-observer or recording at the festival this spring.*

How does one *do* ethnography? As we have seen in our reading of Geertz’s “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” ethnographers look for paradoxes and patterns; they consider their work a journey into undiscovered territory. They write detailed fieldnotes about what they are observing and keep reflecting on what they are seeing until patterns start to emerge: until they see the hidden story that perhaps not even the participants are fully aware of. Ethnographers keep asking analytical questions until they feel they have arrived at a rich understanding of the cultural event or group. You want to look for “what doesn’t add up,” what seems paradoxical, odd, or contradictory. Keep asking questions about your subject (“What does it MEAN?” “Why are people acting this way?” “What’s behind this?” “Why do people care about this?”) until you feel you understand the festival fully. These questions, while apparently simple, will likely lead you to profound understandings.

Checklist of Specific Areas to Study

(Some of the following areas of investigation may be more relevant than others to your project.)

- Budget your time so that you can conduct a minimum of three interviews in a relaxed setting and also spend a generous amount of time at the festival (if your festival takes place during the spring).
- Listen to the language and observe the gestures (body language) and appearance of the participants and the people whom you are interviewing.
- Observe relationships, status hierarchies, rivalries, and affiliations between people. How does power operate? Who appears to hold power and who actually holds it?
- Watch for patterns or repetition in activities, language, and rituals.
- What is the “real” content of what you are observing at the festival? Just as Geertz saw meaning far beyond the mere outward activity of the cockfights, so should you, too, ask “what is this group or activity really about?”
- What is the value system of those associated with the festival and its participants? What is meaningful and important to them and why? How do you know this?
- What role does the festival play in the local area’s bid to attract tourism?
- Does the festival commemorate an important historical event, agricultural product, or another element unique to the local area?

- What is not seen or perhaps deliberately hidden and why? What is tacitly understood, but not talked about? Can you infer festival participants' (and organizers') values? What is it to be part of the "inner circle"?
- What feels new, foreign, unfamiliar, or unclear to you?
- You may wish to use subheadings to structure your observations, interviews, and writing.
- Take lots of detailed notes both during and after the interview and observations.

Interviews

In accordance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy, you will need to submit your interview questions to your college or university's IRB for review. Be sure to allow ten days to two weeks' turn-around time to receive your campus's IRB approval.

Prepare a written release form for each interviewee to sign before the interview. We will post sample forms on the Festivals course website for you to use.

Before the interview:

- Decide how you will record the interview: video? portable digital recording device? GarageBand or Audacity? iPhone voice memo? All of these methods will allow you to import the interviews directly into your computer.
- Bear in mind that your questions need to be respectful, tactful, and non-intrusive. Your cultural informants are doing you a great favor by being willing to devote time to the interview, and you must return the courtesy by ensuring that your questions do not make them uncomfortable.
- Write out your interview questions ahead of time, but be prepared to let your cultural informant steer the way in the interview.

During the interview:

- If you sense that an interviewee is feeling uncomfortable, anxious, or just plain annoyed, move on to other questions that are not likely to provoke these feelings. Often, you will learn the most by allowing your interviewees simply to speak about what they find important. Let him or her lead the way. Above all, your interview should be guided by the highest ethical awareness and respect for the individual.

After the interview:

- Transcribe your interviews so you have a text version to work with. This is the first step in your formal analysis of each interview and will be useful for many reasons: the transcript will ensure that you quote your interviewee accurately; you will have a written record of the interview that you can show your interviewee, if he or she would like to read it; based on the transcript, you may find that you wish to ask your interviewee some follow-up questions.

Questions to consider in your analysis:

- What does this festival "say" about the local culture and its history, as well as about our larger American culture?

- What does it “say” about the needs, values, or qualities of human nature?
- Look for connections between the various aspects of your analysis: as Geertz says, “connect—and connect—and connect.”
- Is there a central event, ritual, or other crowning experience in the festival of notable symbolic significance? (Here you are thinking along metonymic lines just as Geertz did when he singled out the cockfight as the starting point from which to “read” Balinese culture.)
- Try to brainstorm a metaphor to describe and analyze what you are seeing.

Drafting Your Analysis

The format of ethnographic writing is flexible, but be sure to use the kind of close analysis, attention to detail, and probing questions that Geertz does in “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” As you analyze your notes, allow a pattern of meaning emerge: the “what it is.” **Watch out for this pitfall:** Be sure to not only describe features of your chosen festival, but also analyze it, draw conclusions about it, and answer the “so what?” question. Your goal is to communicate vividly for someone who does not have your insider’s knowledge.

Sharing Your Work

If at all possible, share a draft of your website with the festival participants whom you interviewed. Give them an opportunity to correct any inaccuracies and to flesh out what might be missing in your initial draft. Incorporate festival participants’ responses into the final version of your project if you find them insightful and relevant.

Evaluation

Final projects will be evaluated on:

- 1) The thoroughness of your observation (see the checklist above), extent of research, level of detail in your writing and evidence of your analysis of possible meanings behind what you have observed. Don’t be afraid to speculate on what you have discovered; creativity and risk-taking are part of engaging, provocative analysis.
- 2) The design and functionality of your WordPress website displaying your research. (More details about this as we move further into the semester.)

Richard G. Mitchell, Jr.’s questions to guide ethnographic research may also be helpful for your analysis:

- What is the setting of the action? When and how does action take place?
- What is going on? What is the overall activity being studied, the relatively long-term behavior about which participants organize themselves? What specific acts comprise this activity?
- How are members stratified? Who is ostensibly in charge? Does being in charge vary by activity? How is membership achieved and maintained?
- What do actors pay attention to? What is important, preoccupying, critical?
- What do they pointedly ignore that other persons might pay attention to?

- What symbols do actors invoke to understand their worlds, the participants and processes within them, and the objects and events they encounter? What names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, settings, equipment?
- What practices, skills and methods of operation do actors employ?
- Which theories, motives, excuses, justifications or other explanations do actors use in accounting for their participation? How do they explain to each other, not to outside investigators, what they do and why they do it?
- What goals do actors seek? When, from their perspective, is an act well or poorly done? How do they judge action—by what standards, developed and applied by whom? What are the group's tacit understandings?
- What rewards do various actors gain from their participation?
(Mitchell 1991 qtd. in *Handbook of Ethnography*, Sage Publications, 2001)