3.8: Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology

The theoretical school of Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology assumes that culture does not exist beyond individuals. Rather, culture lies in individuals’ interpretations of events and things around them. With a reference to socially established signs and symbols, people shape the patterns of their behaviors and give meanings to their experiences. Therefore, the goal of Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology is to analyze how people give meanings to their reality and how this reality is expressed by their cultural symbols. The major accomplishment of symbolic anthropology has been to turn anthropology towards issues of culture and interpretation rather than grand theories.

Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology emerged in the 1960s when Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and David Schneider were at the University of Chicago and is still influential today. Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology does not follow the model of physical sciences, which focus on empirical material phenomena, but is literary-based. This does not mean that Symbolic and Interpretive anthropologists do not conduct fieldwork, but instead refers to the practice of drawing on non-anthropological literature as a primary source of data. The Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropologists view culture as a mental phenomenon and reject the idea that culture can be modeled like mathematics or logic. When they study symbolic action in cultures, they use a variety of analytical tools from psychology, history, and literature. This method has been criticized for a lack of objective method. In other words, this method seems to allow analysts to see meaning wherever and however they wish. In spite of this criticism, Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology has forced anthropologists to become aware of cultural texts they interpret and of ethnographic texts they create. In order to work as intercultural translators, anthropologists need to be aware of their own cultural biases as well as other cultures they research.

There are two schools of thought within Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropology. The British school was interested in how societies maintained cohesion and is illustrated by the work of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas. The American school is exemplified by Clifford Geertz and Sherry Ortner and was focused on “how ideas shaped individuals subjectivities and actions” (Johnson 2013: 842). An important contribution of Symbolic and Interpretive anthropologists, specifically Clifford Geertz, is “thick description,” which encourages rich descriptions and explanations of behaviors with an end goal of understanding their cultural significance. Geertz borrowed this concept from Gilbert Ryle, an Oxford
philosopher. The classic example of thick description is the difference between a wink and a blink. A blink is an involuntary twitch (thin description) while a wink is a conspiratorial signal to another person (thick description). The physical movements are identical, but the meaning is different.

References