

# Symbolic & Interpretive Theories

*(Victor Turner • David M. Schneider • Clifford Geertz)*

## Why Symbols Matter in Anthropology

**Human beings live in webs of meaning.** Unlike other species, our survival and cooperation depend less on instinct and more on shared understandings. A flag is not just a piece of cloth—it represents loyalty, identity, and sacrifice. A wedding ring is not just metal—it symbolizes love, continuity, and social recognition. A funeral is not merely disposal of the dead—it expresses grief, solidarity, and beliefs about life and death.

Anthropology recognizes that **symbols—words, images, gestures, objects, and performances—carry layers of meaning** that exceed their material form. They provide the glue that holds societies together, and also the tools through which people challenge, reinterpret, or resist authority. By studying symbols, anthropologists uncover the hidden codes through which communities make sense of the world.

**Symbolic and interpretive anthropology** grew in the mid-20th century as a reaction against earlier approaches that treated culture as rigid structures, functions, or evolutionary stages. Instead, scholars argued that to understand culture, one must interpret the meanings people themselves attach to practices. This interpretive turn shifted anthropology toward seeing culture as a **system of symbols** that people actively use to construct reality.

Three major thinkers shaped this approach:

1. **Victor Turner** – He explored how rituals are not mechanical repetitions but dynamic dramas. In his analysis of Ndembu rituals, he highlighted concepts like **liminality** (a state of being “betwixt and between”), **communitas** (moments of intense social bonding), and **social dramas** (conflicts and their ritual resolution). For Turner, rituals are **symbolic performances that reveal and reshape social relations**.

2. **David M. Schneider** – He challenged the idea that kinship was a universal biological structure. Instead, he argued that **kinship is a symbolic system**, defined differently in each culture. What counts as “family” in one society may not in another. By doing this, he showed how **symbols of relatedness** (blood, marriage, descent) are cultural categories rather than natural facts.
3. **Clifford Geertz** – He gave anthropology the influential idea of “**thick description**”. To understand a wink, one must know whether it is flirtation, parody, conspiracy, or joke. Culture, Geertz argued, is a “**web of significance**” that people themselves have spun, and the role of anthropology is to interpret these webs. Through ethnographies of religion, art, and politics, he showed how symbolic meanings guide behavior and give shape to institutions.

Together, these thinkers shifted anthropology from studying “what people do” to **why those acts matter symbolically**. They highlighted how rituals, kinship systems, and cultural practices are not just functional arrangements but **meaning-making processes** through which societies define themselves.

## **Intellectual Backdrop: From Structures to Meanings**

For much of the early 20th century, **anthropology was dominated by structural and functional explanations**. Thinkers like **Bronisław Malinowski** and **A.R. Radcliffe-Brown** sought to show how every custom or institution contributed to the survival of society. Rituals, kinship systems, myths, and taboos were understood as **structures or functions** that maintained social order, regulated reproduction, or ensured cooperation. Culture, in this tradition, was something like a machine—each part serving a clear function in the whole.

However, by the mid-20th century, a new generation of scholars began to see the **limits of purely structural or functional explanations**. For example:

- A marriage ritual could not be fully understood only by its role in ensuring alliance or descent—it also **expressed love, loyalty, fertility, and identity**.
- A political rally was not just about mobilizing numbers—it was a **performance of power, ideology, and belonging**.
- A myth was not only a charter for social order—it was a **story that conveyed moral lessons and existential meanings**.

This shift marked a **move from structures to meanings**. Symbolic and interpretive anthropologists argued that culture is not a mechanical system of rules but a **living text of symbols, performances, and interpretations**.

Instead of asking:

- *“What function does a ritual serve?”* (functionalism), they asked:
- *“What does this ritual mean to participants, and how does that meaning work in practice?”*

This reframing opened anthropology to new intellectual influences:

### 1. **Ethnography as Interpretation**

The fieldwork method was reimagined not just as collecting data but as **interpreting lived meanings**. The anthropologist’s role was akin to that of a translator or literary critic, seeking to render cultural “texts” intelligible without flattening their complexity.

### 2. **Semiotics (the study of signs and symbols)**

Drawing inspiration from linguistics and semiotics, anthropologists began to see culture as a **system of signs**, where each gesture, object, or phrase derives meaning through its relation to others. For instance, a crown is not powerful by itself; it is meaningful because of shared ideas of kingship, sovereignty, and tradition.

### 3. **Hermeneutics (the interpretation of texts and performances)**

Borrowing from philosophy, especially hermeneutics, anthropologists treated rituals, myths, and practices as **texts to be read**. Just as a poem requires interpretation, so too does a Balinese cockfight or a Ndembu initiation ritual. The task was not only to describe what happened but to uncover the **layers of significance** embedded within.

In this intellectual climate, symbolic and interpretive anthropology emerged as a **“humanistic turn”** within the discipline. It did not deny that societies had structures or functions, but it emphasized that **those structures were meaningful only because people invested them with symbols**.

This move profoundly shaped anthropology, making it more attentive to **performance, narrative, symbolism, and the subjective experience of cultural actors**. It encouraged anthropologists to think less like engineers of social systems and more like interpreters of **dramas, stories, and meanings** that animate human life.

## Victor Turner: Ritual, Liminality, and Communitas

Victor Turner, a British anthropologist, is among the most influential figures in **symbolic and interpretive anthropology**. His work shifted attention from viewing rituals as mere social functions to seeing them as **symbolic dramas** through which people negotiate identity, hierarchy, conflict, and community. Turner's concepts of the **ritual process, liminality, communitas, and social dramas** have become foundational not only in anthropology but also in sociology, political science, performance studies, and even cultural psychology.

### 3.1 The Ritual Process

Turner expanded on the earlier framework of **Arnold van Gennep**, who described rites of passage as having three stages: **separation** → **liminality** → **reincorporation**. Turner argued that this threefold pattern was not only common in tribal societies but also persisted across modern institutions, festivals, and political movements.

- **Separation:** The individual or group is detached from normal life. For instance, initiates are removed from their families before a puberty rite, or new recruits enter a training camp.
- **Liminality:** The central, “in-between” phase. Here participants exist in a suspended state—neither in their old role nor fully in the new one. Turner famously called this the stage of being “**betwixt and between.**” Hierarchies are often leveled, norms inverted, and creativity unleashed.
- **Reincorporation:** The individual is reintegrated into society, but now with a transformed status—child to adult, layperson to priest, novice to elder.

What fascinated Turner most was **liminality**, because it destabilizes ordinary life. In this phase, participants encounter **anti-structure**—spaces where rules can be broken, authority questioned, and alternative identities explored. The liminal

moment holds a kind of **creative chaos**: it is unsettling but also potentially transformative.

## 3.2 Communitas

From this focus on liminality emerged Turner's most influential idea: **communitas**.

- Communitas is the **deep, egalitarian sense of togetherness** that arises in liminal contexts. In pilgrimages, initiation camps, or mass gatherings, participants experience bonds that cut across normal social divisions like class, rank, or ethnicity.
- It contrasts with **structure**, the everyday organization of hierarchy and role. Turner argued that societies oscillate between structure (order, rules, hierarchy) and communitas (spontaneity, equality, solidarity).

Examples include:

- Pilgrims walking side by side, regardless of wealth or background.
- Protesters in a mass rally feeling united by shared chants and symbols.
- Music festivals or sporting events where strangers embrace as if they were kin.

Turner saw communitas as a **renewing force**, periodically reinvigorating social life when structures become too rigid. Yet, he also warned that communitas is often temporary. Eventually, structures reassert themselves, institutionalizing what began as spontaneous solidarity.

## 3.3 Social Dramas

Turner also applied his symbolic lens to conflict, developing the concept of **social dramas**. These are public processes through which social tensions are expressed, negotiated, and resolved. Turner mapped them as unfolding in four stages:

1. **Breach** – a violation of accepted norms or relationships (e.g., an insult, betrayal, or political scandal).
2. **Crisis** – the breach escalates and becomes visible, dividing the community.

3. **Redressive Action** – mechanisms of repair are mobilized: rituals, courts, apologies, truth commissions, peace ceremonies.
4. **Reintegration or Schism** – either the group heals and returns to normal life, or the rupture becomes permanent, leading to fission or long-term conflict.

Here the key insight is that rituals and symbolic performances are **not merely decorative** but do the real work of mending, transforming, or dramatizing social relationships. For instance, a state apology to marginalized groups is not just political theater but a **symbolic act of redress** that can reshape collective memory.

### 3.4 Why Turner Remains Relevant

Turner's ideas are not confined to small-scale tribal societies; they illuminate aspects of modern global culture as well:

- **Sports, concerts, and festivals:** These events often create liminal spaces where people temporarily suspend daily routines and experience intense togetherness. Football fans chanting in unison or festival-goers dancing through the night embody *communitas*.
- **Political rallies and protests:** Ritualized chants, symbols, and performances generate solidarity, mobilize emotions, and blur distinctions among strangers. The collective singing of protest songs or the symbolic occupation of public squares echoes Turner's ritual process.
- **Fan communities:** Modern subcultures, such as music or gaming fandoms, cultivate ritual-like gatherings, costumes, and performances. These reinforce identity and belonging much as tribal rituals once did.
- **Digital liminality:** Online spaces—forums, social media “movements,” virtual festivals—create temporary anti-structures where people experiment with identity, gender, or political beliefs, echoing Turner's insights in new contexts.

### Criticisms of Turner

While Turner's work remains foundational, it has also drawn several critiques:

1. **Romanticizing Communitas**  
Critics argue that Turner idealized *communitas* as purely egalitarian. In

reality, even in liminal spaces, subtle forms of power, exclusion, and hierarchy often persist. For example, pilgrimages may unite participants, but gender, caste, or economic inequalities still shape access and roles.

## 2. **Overemphasis on Ritual Unity**

Turner sometimes overlooked how rituals may reinforce domination rather than dissolve it. For instance, initiation rites may entrench patriarchal authority instead of liberating individuals.

## 3. **Neglect of Agency and Resistance**

His model focuses on ritual as collective drama but pays less attention to how individuals interpret, resist, or subvert the meanings imposed by ritual leaders. Later anthropologists emphasized **polysemy**—the idea that symbols can carry multiple, even conflicting meanings.

## 4. **Relevance to Complex Societies**

Some argue that Turner's tribal case studies cannot be seamlessly mapped onto industrial or postmodern societies, where rituals are more fragmented, commodified, or media-driven. For instance, the liminality of a football match is not equivalent to the liminality of an initiation ritual.

## 5. **Abstract Dualism of Structure vs. Anti-Structure**

Turner's framework sometimes falls into a binary (structure vs. *communitas*) that oversimplifies the fluid and layered ways in which societies organize meaning.

Despite these criticisms, Turner's concepts of **liminality**, **communitas**, and **social drama** remain enduring analytical tools, widely applied beyond anthropology in performance studies, conflict resolution, and political analysis.

# 4) **David M. Schneider: Kinship as a Symbol System**

## 4.1) **The Critique**

For much of anthropology's history, **kinship was seen as the bedrock of society**. Classic theorists like **Lewis Henry Morgan**, **Malinowski**, and **Radcliffe-Brown** treated kinship as a universal domain grounded in **biology (blood ties, procreation, descent)**. Whether through descent groups in Africa or lineages in

Asia, anthropologists assumed that kinship was a “natural” fact, with culture simply building social rules upon it.

Schneider broke radically from this view. He argued that **kinship is not a biological given but a cultural construction**, a system of **symbols and meanings** through which societies define who counts as kin. Biology itself does not dictate kinship—rather, people attach symbolic significance to substances (blood, semen, milk) or practices (co-residence, food sharing, ritual obligations).

In his critique, Schneider showed that earlier anthropologists **projected Western assumptions** onto other cultures, assuming that “blood ties” were universally central. By doing so, they ignored how different societies may organize belonging in ways that have little to do with biological reproduction.

## 4.2) “American Kinship” as an Example

Schneider’s classic study of **American kinship** revealed that U.S. society links kinship to a symbolic code centered on **blood and law**:

- **Blood (biogenetic substance):** The idea that family is based on shared biological substance, creating bonds of “natural” solidarity.
- **Law (legal contract):** Marriage, adoption, and inheritance symbolize social recognition of ties beyond blood.

These two domains—biology and legality—intertwine to shape the American idea of family as a private, enduring unit. For example, adoption is often framed in terms of “making someone legally one’s own,” while genetic testing reinforces the assumption that biological ties are “real.”

But Schneider contrasted this with other societies where kinship is not rooted in biology:

- In some Middle Eastern societies, **shared milk** creates bonds of relatedness equal to blood.
- In parts of Africa, **land, cattle, or shared labor** may be central to defining kinship.

- In Polynesian contexts, **spirit, mana, or ritual feeding** may symbolize kin ties.

The lesson: **we cannot universalize Western categories of kinship**. What counts as family is deeply cultural, embedded in local symbols and values.

### 4.3) Why Schneider Matters Now

Schneider's insights remain crucial for contemporary debates:

- **Assisted Reproduction and Surrogacy:** With technologies like IVF, sperm donation, and surrogacy, societies must decide whether genetics, gestation, or intention defines parenthood. For example, is a surrogate mother the “real” mother because she gave birth, or is parenthood defined by genetic contribution—or by legal contract? These debates highlight that kinship is about **symbolic recognition**, not just biology.
- **Adoption and Foster Care:** The legitimacy of adoptive ties often depends on whether a society symbolically equates legal parenthood with biological parenthood. Some cultures valorize adoptive bonds as fully equivalent, while others still privilege “blood” ties.
- **Queer Families and Chosen Kin:** Many LGBTQ+ communities have developed systems of **chosen kinship**, where friendship and solidarity take on the roles traditionally assigned to blood relatives. This challenges the idea that kinship must always be rooted in descent or procreation.
- **Archaeological and Historical Caution:** When archaeologists find graves of adults and children buried together, we cannot assume they were “nuclear families” in the modern sense. Kinship in ancient societies may have been defined by **ritual obligations, spiritual bonds, or collective work**, rather than by genetics. Schneider's approach warns us against reading the past through modern cultural lenses.

### Criticisms of Schneider

While Schneider's work was groundbreaking, it also attracted criticisms:

1. **Too Radical a Rejection of Biology:** Some argue that he **underestimated the importance of biological facts**. Even if societies interpret kinship differently, the biological realities of reproduction, inheritance, and caregiving still shape cultural practices.
2. **Overemphasis on Symbols:** Critics suggest Schneider **reduced kinship entirely to culture**, neglecting how material factors—like demography, ecology, or economics—also influence family forms.
3. **Neglect of Power and Inequality:** His symbolic focus left less room for analyzing how kinship systems relate to **gender hierarchies, patriarchy, or class**. For instance, who counts as kin may not just be a matter of shared symbols but also of **who has the power to define legitimacy**.
4. **American-Centric Bias:** While Schneider criticized others for ethnocentrism, some argue that his **focus on American kinship** limited the generalizability of his insights. He provided fewer systematic comparative studies to balance his critique.

## 5) Clifford Geertz: Thick Description

Few figures in twentieth-century anthropology reshaped the discipline as profoundly as **Clifford Geertz**. Where earlier anthropologists sought universal laws of kinship, economy, or ritual, Geertz urged scholars to think differently: **culture, he argued, is not machinery or structure but a fabric of meaning**. People live within what he memorably called “**webs of significance**” that they themselves have spun, and the anthropologist’s task is not to unravel them scientifically like a puzzle, but to **interpret them as if reading a text**.

This shift—from anthropology as a quasi-natural science to anthropology as an interpretive, semiotic discipline—was revolutionary. It positioned anthropologists not as detached observers cataloguing customs, but as translators of meaning, much like literary critics or historians.

### 5.1 Culture as Text

Geertz’s famous notion of “**thick description**” captures his interpretive approach. To describe a wink simply as the contraction of eyelids is a “**thin description**.” But a **thick description** asks: was the wink flirtatious? Was it mocking? Was it part of a

shared joke or an insult disguised as play? The anthropologist must situate the act in **layers of context, intention, and cultural understanding**.

Thus, for Geertz, **culture is a text**—a set of publicly shared symbols that can be “read.” A funeral, a wedding, a political rally, or even a football match is a kind of script written by society about itself. Symbols provide coherence to human life by making emotions, institutions, and moral codes appear meaningful and connected.

This approach made anthropology feel less like physics (seeking universal laws) and more like literature, history, or philosophy—disciplines concerned with **interpretation, nuance, and subjectivity**.

## 5.2 The Balinese Cockfight: Deep Play

Geertz’s most celebrated ethnographic essay, “**Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight**” (1972), illustrates his method. On the surface, a cockfight is gambling and entertainment. But Geertz’s thick description revealed multiple layers of meaning:

- **Masculinity and Honor:** The cock symbolizes male identity, potency, and pride. To bet on one’s cock is to wager not only money but one’s reputation.
- **Social Hierarchy:** The rivalries in the cockfight mirror kinship ties, factional struggles, and status competitions within Balinese society.
- **Drama of Self-Reflection:** The cockfight is a **performance of society to itself**—a ritual where Balinese men dramatize their own anxieties, rivalries, and honor codes.

Geertz called this “**deep play**” because the stakes, in terms of prestige, far outweighed the financial rewards. The cockfight was not irrational pastime but a **text of cultural meaning**, a story the Balinese told themselves about who they were.

## 5.3 Religion as a System of Symbols

Geertz extended this interpretive framework to the study of **religion**. His influential definition described religion as:

“A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations... by formulating conceptions of a general

order of existence, and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.”

Here, the focus is not on the truth or falsity of beliefs, but on how **symbols generate conviction and emotion**.

- A **temple** is more than architecture—it is a microcosm of the universe.
- A **ritual chant** is not mere sound—it embodies authority, tradition, and cosmic order.
- A **sacred story** is not just narrative—it provides moral orientation and frames suffering, hope, and destiny.

For Geertz, symbols are the glue that bind experience to worldview. Religion endures not only because of doctrine, but because its **rituals create moods and motivations** that feel deeply real.

## 5.4 Why Geertz Still Matters

Geertz’s legacy is enormous, not only within anthropology but across social sciences and humanities. His interpretive approach helps us analyze phenomena as diverse as:

- **Political rituals:** Presidential inaugurations, Independence Day parades, or mass protests can be read as symbolic performances that dramatize citizenship, power, and collective identity.
- **Media spectacles:** The Olympics, the Oscars, or a World Cup final are not merely entertainment but **ritualized dramas of nationhood, prestige, and belonging**.
- **Museums and monuments:** These are curated symbolic landscapes, telling selective stories about history, trauma, and identity, shaping how nations imagine their past and future.
- **Digital culture:** Memes, hashtags, viral videos, and profile picture rituals after global tragedies act as symbolic acts of solidarity and meaning-making in virtual space.

In all these cases, Geertz's method of **reading culture as text** remains strikingly relevant.

## 5.5 Criticisms and Limitations

Yet Geertz's vision of anthropology was not without critics. His work sparked fierce debates, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, when anthropology turned toward reflexivity, politics, and postcolonial critique.

1. **Subjectivity and Relativism:** Critics argue that Geertz's interpretations risk being too **literary and impressionistic**. Without clear criteria, how can we know if a thick description is accurate, or simply the anthropologist's personal reading?
2. **Neglect of Power and Materiality:** Geertz focused so much on symbols that he often downplayed the role of **economics, politics, and power relations**. Marxist and postcolonial anthropologists contend that cockfights or rituals cannot be understood without considering land tenure, class, or colonial domination.
3. **Static Picture of Culture:** By treating culture as a "text," Geertz sometimes presented it as **stable and consensual**. But in reality, symbols are **contested, reinterpreted, and fought over**—they can be used for domination or resistance.
4. **Limited Attention to Agency:** Geertz emphasized shared meanings but often neglected how **different groups interpret the same ritual differently**. Women, lower classes, or marginalized ethnic groups might not share the same meanings that elites project.