

The Mesopotamian *Mīs Pī* Ceremony & Clifford Geertz's *Thick Description*. Principles for Studying the Cultural Webs of the Deceased

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Abstract: The work of ethnographer and cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz is characterized by “Thick Description,” the practice of developing rich understandings of culture via narrowly defined phenomenon rather than surveys. Thick Description bridges the gap between the culture under investigation and the ethnographer’s audience by tracing the “symbolic web of meaning” that a culture spins in order to understand and express its experience. But can ethnographic method be applied ethically and effectively in the study of the deceased?

This article argues that Thick Description is appropriate for working with ancient cultures because it connects objects and texts to their larger cultural environment in the absence of living members. Here, I present a case study of the ancient Mesopotamian *Mīs Pī* (Washing, Purification of the Mouth) ceremony, using Thick Description to unpack elements of the ritual in a way that speaks to the inner-lives of the community for whom the ritual was essential.

The life’s work of ethnographer and cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) is characterized by a mode of analysis called *Thick Description*, which presents complex, contextualized descriptions of narrowly defined objects of empirical study that are written in such a way as to evoke deep insight into the lived realities of the culture at hand.¹ First and perhaps most effectively put forth in his seminal essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (1973), Geertz’s understanding of the analytic process is one that continues to pique the interest and intellect of scholars worldwide and across disciplines, as evidenced by the numerous books and countless articles dedicated to clarifying, debating, furthering, and otherwise honoring his contributions to the study of humankind.² Yet, the flexibility that makes *Thick*

Description an attractive and applicable interpretive approach is also what makes it difficult to define. The specific analogies that Geertz uses to present *Thick Description*, however, serve as helpful guides for understanding both the task and the result of interpreting culture; the question remains whether such an interpretive approach, conceived during Geertz’s ethnographic fieldwork in Indonesia, may be applied effectively and ethically to cultures long deceased.

This article argues that Geertz’s concept of *Thick Description* is particularly well suited for those working with ancient cultures because it enables one to analyze objects, including texts, in a way that speaks to the dispositions and worldviews of the individuals and cultures that produced those objects, even in the absence of living members of that culture. The example I use to illustrate my argument is the ancient Mesopotamian ceremony referred to by modern scholars as the *Mīs Pī*, “Washing of the Mouth” or “Purification of the Mouth,” a 2-day ritual for the induction of idols, for which there is little

¹ Geertz borrows the term *thick description* from philosopher Gilbert Ryle, who discusses the notion in two essays, “Thinking and Reflecting” and “The Thinking of Thoughts—What is ‘Le Pensuer’ Doing?,” both available in Ryle 2016.

² E.g., Inglis 2000; Shweder – Good (eds.) 2005.

extant information outside of a few ritual and incantation texts dating to the 8th-5th centuries BCE.³ The framework provided by *Thick Description* not only allows me to make informed suggestions as to the nature, meaning, and public function of this ritual as expressed through the available texts, it also enables me to do so in a way that furthers scholarly discussion of topics beyond the ritual, such as the values, paradoxes, inner-lives, and daily workings of the community for whom the ritual was an effective part of their identity – and all within the limitations of the available historical resources. Here, I focus specifically on the relationship between ritual and nature as expressed through the use of reeds and reed implements in the *Mīs Pī*, a case study that may at first seem too obscure to tell us anything substantial about ancient Mesopotamian religion, but through the lens of *Thick Description* is able to suggest much about the ‘grand realities’ of the Mesopotamian experience.

The task of this article, then, is to present the basic principles that yield *Thick Description*, and to use the extended example of the *Mīs Pī* as an illustration as to how those principles shape the analytic process. To perform a complete *Thick Description* of any object of study would take several volumes and still only scratch the surface of what is possible to say, which is precisely one of Geertz's major claims.⁴ With that in mind, I discuss the *Mīs Pī* with an eye for how the principles of *Thick Description* might inform my areas of research and approach to the object of study, as well as how I understand what precisely that object may be. This approach allows me to go into more depth on the analytic process, while also anchoring the discussion in a concrete example. In order to fulfill this task, I first define and illustrate the nuanced relationship between culture, humankind, *Thick Description*, and the object of study, as Geertz presents it, then I describe the kind of analysis that

Thick Description yields: an analysis of the relationship between culture, action, disposition, and worldview, and it is here where I most fully develop my example of the *Mīs Pī*. Taken together, these two sections demonstrate and underscore that *Thick Description* is not a *method* of interpretation, but the end result of the hermeneutical task performed well. This implies that *Thick Description* may be applied to any number of interpretive situations and is therefore not limited to anthropological or ethnographic fieldwork.

Since almost every scholar to engage Geertz's work has a slightly different understanding of how he defines terms relevant to the discussion at hand, definitions which Geertz expands, contracts, and otherwise alters throughout the course of his fifty-year career, I focus instead on the most illustrative analogy of Geertz's original essay – the spider web. It is through this analogy that Geertz most clearly and succinctly states both his definition of culture and his understanding of what *really* constitutes one's object of study. Yet, Geertz does not elaborate on the analogy of the spider web. As with much of his writing, he leaves the interpretation to his reader.

Relating *Thick Description* & Objects of Study

At the end of his introduction to “Thick Description,” Geertz launches his discussion of the analytic enterprise using the analogy of a spider web. This single sentence encapsulates Geertz's project in its entirety, and so it is here that I anchor my analysis. ‘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 interpretive one in search of meaning.’⁵ With this statement, Geertz puts forth three definitions – of culture, of humankind's relationship to culture, and the goal of analyzing culture – that are essential to understanding how he per-

³ All of these extant materials are collected, transliterated, and translated in Walker – Dick 2001.

⁴ Geertz 1973, 22.

⁵ Geertz 1973, 5.

ceives both the act of interpretation and its intended result.

Geertz's definition of culture as 'webs of significance' spun by humankind is often quoted, but rarely expounded to its full implications. If we separate the definition and the analogy, Geertz is stating that culture is an observable and organic whole, which one immediately recognizes as being comprised of related and varying public elements that intersect in specific and most often intentional ways, and that have their origin in a common source – humankind. On Geertz's definition, the relationship between humankind and culture is akin to the proverbial dilemma (or cycle, depending on perspective) of the chicken and the egg, with humankind acting simultaneously as both the producer and the product of culture. Like a spider, individuals and collectives are in a constant rhythm of designing, building, acting upon, manipulating, damaging, maintaining, and reconstructing the cultures within which they find themselves. Like a web, culture is complex and in constant flux, in part because of the spider's choices and in part because of its own fragile nature, which often prompts the spider to respond to a troubled area.

Thick Description, then, requires tolerance toward ambiguity and incompleteness because it works with the assumption that culture is endless in its complexity, flexible enough to move with the breeze of history, defined enough to break or collapse under the strain on environmental shifts, and an altogether sticky business for everyone but the web's grand architect.⁶ Hence, we find ourselves suspended in it, whether or not that is our intention. In this way, culture is a primary force, driving individuals and collectives to act and respond in ways specific to and influenced by the cultural environment in which they live.⁷ Paradoxically, humankind is also responsible for the culture(s) it creates. When humans act or respond, they either

reify the *status quo* or challenge it, fortifying culture as it is or modifying it, even if slightly.

In discussing the relationship between the spider and the web, between humankind and culture, the distinction between spider and web is key. Geertz is not interested in humans *per se* but in their cultures, i.e., he seeks to further understand the mechanisms by which individuals and communities construct meaning; he does *not* seek to excavate the private thoughts that inspire or result from those mechanisms. This is an important distinction in Geertz's framework because culture as a 'web of significance' is inherently public, while the contours of the individual psyche are most often out of view (even to the individual).⁸ Therefore, success is not gauged by the scholar's ability to get into someone else's head – which is impossible, even with the privilege of fieldwork – but is gauged by the scholar's ability to comprehend and communicate public significance.⁹ Coming back to the analogy of the web, Geertz's aim in analyzing webs of culture is to examine their tendrils as they both converge and diverge, looking in both directions of the bilateral stretch from center to periphery and back again, thus providing the reader with "bodied stuff on which to feed" as it sits upon its own cultural web.¹⁰

Applied to the study of the ancient world, the metaphor of the spider and its web is another way of stating that, while time and space prohibit face-to-face encounters with ancient persons, what we *can* study through the texts and artifacts that remain are the public, symbolic networks to which those texts and artifacts testify, if only through our act of interpretation. Such symbolic webs are comprised of various threads, such as geography, environment, power, hierarchy, belief, politics, religion, morality, gender, and domestic life, threads that we may analyze to the extent allowed by the archaeological and written

⁶ Abolafia et al. 2014, 351; cf. Silverman 1990, 133.

⁷ Silverman 1990, 126.

⁸ Geertz 1973, 12.

⁹ Silverman 1990, 126–127.

¹⁰ Geertz 1973, 23.

records. Following Geertz, it is important to emphasize that *Thick Description* is not a form of system or concept mapping that aims to distill an entire culture into a single, densely configured snapshot.¹¹ Quite the opposite. Instead, *Thick Description* focuses on just a single node in a complex web, yet is written in such a way that the reader is fully aware that the author is writing about what Geertz calls 'grand realities,' not just the minutiae of another place.¹² That is, studying the use of reeds in the *Mīs Pî* is not an end in itself, but is an entry point into learning about topics of greater consequence, in this case, the relationship between ritual and nature in Mesopotamian culture.

Applied to the study of the *Mīs Pî* in particular, *Thick Description* may take any number of forms based on the interests of the scholar and the parameters of the ritual. For example, in *Moses among the Idols: Mediators of the Divine in the Ancient Near East*, I analyze the *Mīs Pî* as a specific point on the web of ancient Mesopotamian culture where theology, religion, and ritual intersect with status and various forms of power, both earthly and divine.¹³ For the sake of illustration, here I perform my analysis of the *Mīs Pî* with a different, less complex, convergence in mind, and that is the relationship between ancient Mesopotamian ritual and the natural environment. While the *Mīs Pî* is best known for what it illuminates about the induction of idols and their associated theology, it also has much to suggest about the relation between ritual and nature because the enactment of the *Mīs Pî* is largely dependent on the availability of a sizeable list of natural or naturally derived resources, including specific animal products, plant species, precious metals, gemstones, and fermented drink.¹⁴

The *Mīs Pî* requires dozens of different ingredients, such as syrup, ghee, and wine, for the constant purification of the idol because, at its core, the *Mīs Pî* is a purification rite. Its officiant is concerned with not only the purity of the materials and workshop in which the idol is crafted, but also with maintaining that purity as he moves the idol from place to place, acts upon it, and eventually transports it into its cella. In both the ritual and incantation texts, one local ingredient stands above the rest as most praiseworthy and efficacious: as discussed in more detail in the next section, reeds and structures made of reed have great symbolic import for the *Mīs Pî* as they tie together cultural concepts of creation, purity, birth, protection, and the primordial waters known as the *Apsû*. However, the modern reader of the *Mīs Pî* is most likely to pass by this symbolism because modern cultural webs generally do not connect complex religious meaning and marshy plants, and so we are not attuned to see the intersection of those two threads. Yet, *Thick Description* encourages the scholar to pay close attention to what is pertinent to the object of study, not only to what is pertinent to the scholar, and so our purview expands into new and unexpected areas, taking our research along with it.

The fact that the relationship between ancient Mesopotamian religion and nature is one of many objects of study that one may investigate via the *Mīs Pî* highlights another aspect of *Thick Description*: the choice of both the object of study and the means of studying that object is up to the discretion of the scholar. Because the goal of *Thick Description* is to move conversations and understandings forward, with no single prize of ultimate Truth waiting at the finish line, the scholar is free to construct their analysis with their own interests in mind – provided that they select both the object of study and the specific hermeneutic approach in dialogue with the realities offered by the data. For example, one cannot study the intersection of American hip-hop music and ancient Mesopotamian ritual because

¹¹ Micheelsen 2002, 9. Geertz 1973, 11–12.

¹² Geertz 1973, 12. 23. Abolafia et al. 2014, 350–351.

¹³ Balogh 2018.

¹⁴ E.g., Walker - Dick 2001, 77–82.

those two strands of culture reside in completely separate webs, but one can study the intersection of liturgical incantation and ritual, as both of those strands are woven throughout the culture under investigation. That is to say, even though *Thick Description* is performed and written by an outsider, it is always rooted in the language, actions, and ways of knowing evidenced by the locals, an aspect I discuss in more depth below.¹⁵

The relativism of this interpretive approach leads many to criticize Geertz's work as being overly narrow in scope, but for those working to reconstruct the cultures of civilizations past, such a targeted approach is perhaps ideal.¹⁶ For example, my work on the *Mīs Pī* does not offer any universal lessons about the inner-workings of the species *homo sapiens*, nor is it intended to do so. What *Thick Description* does assist with is the quest to 'uncover metaphors, produce conceptual linkages, and describe other tools that may be applicable in other [cultural] contexts, even if not fully transferrable,' and in so doing to illuminate a portion of the web of significance that the ancient Mesopotamians spun.¹⁷ To this, I would add that the intellectual influence of *Thick Description* does not end with the exposition of a particular culture, but also furthers the readers' capacity to understand and gain applicable insight into 'the consultable record of what mankind has said' about the big questions of life, and thus challenges the reader to think outside of one's own cultural context, if only for a time.¹⁸

Whether or not the scholars' findings also imply something about our species at large or even the readers' own situation is dependent upon the extent to which the dispositions, worldviews, circumstances, and cultural environment of the reader compare and contrast with that of the cul-

ture under investigation.¹⁹ Because Geertz's writing holds the tension between the particulars of a culture and what those particulars have to suggest about the grand themes that many cultures share, his thick descriptions force the reader to think cross-culturally, as though peering through a hole only to find a mirror on the other side. This is one of the major reasons why Geertz is often credited with challenging ethnocentrism and racism within the academy and beyond.²⁰

Counter to those who find him too relativistic, Geertz expresses unease at the potential for an interpreter to sway too far into either relativism or universalism, and encourages a moderate approach marked by balance between the two extremes. In "Thick Description" and other essays, Geertz cautions against what he calls the Jonesville-is-America (or America-is-Jonesville) fallacy wherein one '[finds] the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever summed up and simplified in the so-called 'typical' small towns and villages.'²¹ That is to say, a case study alone cannot give an apt picture of the object of study in its entirety, let alone anything beyond the object of study. As Geertz famously states, '[that] is an idea which only someone too long in the bush could possibly entertain,' and besides that, 'anthropologists don't study villages; they study *in* villages.'²² This leads us to the second portion of the discussion, and that is the kind of analysis that *Thick Description* yields. Using *Thick Description*, the scholar must negotiate between the approach's resistance to Universalist claims, and its need to speak to the 'grand realities' of human experience. In order to do so, we return to and further

¹⁵ Abolafia et al. 2014, 350–51.

¹⁶ Abolafia et al. 2014, 350–51.

¹⁷ Abolafia et al., 351.

¹⁸ Geertz 1973, 30.

¹⁹ There is much to be said about *Thick Description* and comparison, but that is beyond the scope of this article. Comparative religion scholars influenced by Geertz include Wendy Doniger and Jonathan Z. Smith, just to name a few.

²⁰ Silverman 1990, 148.

²¹ Geertz 1973, 22. cf. Geertz 2002, 42–67.

²² Geertz 1973, 22.

both the analogy of the spider and the example of the role of reeds in the *Mīs Pī*.

Relating Culture, Action, Disposition & Worldview

While the true object of analysis is not the spider but the web, *Thick Description* holds the potential to illuminate the inner-workings of the spider's interior and exterior worlds. In *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, Wendy Doniger furthers the spider and web analogy in a way that contributes to our understanding of the relationship between studying a specific culture and studying the humans that both comprise and construct that culture: where the web is present yet the spider is out of view, the spider may still be known – but only through its work.²³ On Doniger's interpretation, the spider weaves its web from the thread of its own experience, implying that culture is a meaning-laden expression of all things known, undergone, thought, and believed by the humans that establish, maintain, and transform it.²⁴ Along with Geertz, Doniger and others hold that meaning is not tacked onto or lain over human action and response, but is instead an integral part of the fabric that the spider creates and then spins accordingly.²⁵ Yes, the goal of *Thick Description* is to analyze culture, but culture is neither impersonal nor uninhabited. A spider lurks nearby, just out of view (although those performing fieldwork may perhaps have a better chance of catching a glimpse).

This nuance to Geertz's analogy recognizes the paradox of separation and inseparability in the human-culture relationship, and encourages us to think deeply about the spider, as we are prompted by its web. In conversation with Geertz's work, Jason Springs argues that, for Geertz, neither thought, nor intention, nor belief are primarily mental or private acts, but are in

fact social and therefore public.²⁶ Individual subjectivity and emotion are certainly rooted in these aspects of life, but appear later.²⁷ Whether through fieldwork, close text study, or archaeology, studying a person's or society's actions and responses to the surrounding cultural environment (i.e., how the spider responds to the web) using Geertz's mode of analysis reveals the dispositions of the spiders involved.²⁸ As Springs so aptly expounds:

*Dispositions are not subjective feelings ... but rather "tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronesses" which prompt various actions and responses with the surrounding environment and circumstances. Of course, such dispositions do not form out of nothing, nor are they static and impervious to change and critical reflection. Yet they presuppose (however tacitly) some sense of what the world is like and how things around the actor "simply are" – a sense of the world into which one finds oneself thrown, socialized, and which one finds oneself trusting.*²⁹

Working backward through the implications of Springs' analysis for practicing *Thick Description*, people's actions and responses within their surrounding environment reveal the dispositions that prompt their actions and responses in the first place. These dispositions – which are not emotions, mental traits, or psychological forces – do not emerge *ex nihilo*, but are rooted in a worldview that includes a particular understanding of one's place in the world.³⁰ For Geertz and his followers, all of these facets of the human experience are publicly available for study. The task of the scholar is to design studies in such a way as to bring actions, dispositions, and worldviews to light and into conversation, always connecting back to the actions that

²³ Doniger 2011, 67–71.

²⁴ Doniger 2011, 67–71.

²⁵ Geertz 1973, 20. cf. Micheelsen 2002, 6. Doniger 2011, 67–71. Biersack 1989, 74. Springs 2008, 957.

²⁶ Springs 2008, 959–960.

²⁷ Springs 2008, 959.

²⁸ Springs 2008, 960.

²⁹ Springs 2008, 960. Quoting Geertz 1973a, 95–96.

³⁰ Springs 2008, 960.

prompted the scholar's line of inquiry in the first place.

To give a practical example of how this framework looks when applied to an ancient culture, I now arrive at my analysis of the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pī* ritual and the role of reeds therein. In line with the principles of *Thick Description* discussed thus far, the goal of this particular analysis of the *Mīs Pī*, “Washing of the Mouth” or “Purification of the Mouth,” is to examine the actions and responses dictated by the *Mīs Pī* in a way that illuminates the dispositions of the religious officiants who constructed and enacted the ritual, and in so doing to prompt insight into their sense of what the world is like and how they and their compatriots fit into the grand scheme of things. With the end goal of producing insight into the relationship between nature and ritual in ancient Mesopotamian thought, I draw upon passages from the *Mīs Pī* that prescribe certain actions (ritual) and responses (incantations) relating to reeds, then analyze the dispositions – ‘tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronesses’ – that inform these prescriptions and, by extension, the resulting actions and responses. This process begins with interdisciplinary research in areas such as theology, history, natural history, geography, idol studies, literature, and mythology, as all of these threads of ancient Mesopotamian culture bear on the use of reeds in the *Mīs Pī*. Moving through my research, I observe (among other things) that the officiant's use of the symbolically charged reed results in his recreation of the primordial scene in which the gods were born, and this scene then elicits a positive divine decision concerning the idol being inducted into the divine community. Taking all of these matters into consideration, I then offer an interpretation as to what these actions, responses, and dispositions have to suggest about how ancient Mesopotamian religious officiants understood the relationship between humankind, nature, ritual, their own office, and the divine.

At their most practical level of cultural significance, reeds were the primary building material along the rivers of Mesopotamia from deep antiquity until the mid-20th century CE, and were commonly used for residential and ship building due to their water-tight properties, strength, and availability.³¹ They grow in the damp ground or standing waters along riverbanks and can reach anywhere from 2–6 meters in height, visually connecting water, land, and sky on a vertical axis. On a horizontal axis, they act as a distinctive boundary between rivers and arable land. Geographically, the *Apsû* is synonymous with the Euphrates; symbolically and mythologically, it is synonymous with the abode of the Creator deity, Ea, and the place from which all life – including divine life – emerged long ago.³² It is, perhaps, because of these physical, symbolic, and mythological properties that the *Mīs Pī* portrays reeds as playing a dual symbolic role: as an *axis mundi*, uniting heaven, earth, and the primordial waters called the *Apsû*, on one hand, and, on the other hand, as a “cosmic threshold” dividing the sacred *Apsû* from all that is common.³³

On the vertical plane, reeds unite heaven, earth, and *Apsû*. The incantation “Reed Which Comes from the Pure *Apsû*” poetically describes reeds as “carefully tended in the pure house of the *Apsû*” and also “reed of the gods . . . whose destiny Enki [Ea] fixed” (Nineveh Recension [NR] 15; Incantation Text [IT] 1/2 A: 21–25). In addition to their direct relation to the *Apsû*, reeds are the means by which the generative waters of the *Apsû* are accessed by the other gods, acting as a sort of drinking straw connecting the *Apsû* and the heavens (IT 1/2 A:26). Since they are rooted in a “pure pool” or “pure place” and act as conduits of the primordial, creative, freshwater, the

³¹ Finkel 2014, 133–155; Collon 2005, fig. 807.

³² This mythology is drawn from the opening section of the ancient Mesopotamian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, and is reflected in many Mesopotamian texts and artifacts.

³³ Berlejung 1997, 50–51; Walker and Dick 2001, 52n36.

Mīs Pî describes reeds as especially pure and particularly potent for purifying both gods and humans (IT 1/2 B: 27–49).³⁴ In fact, their power to purify is so great that an idol whose mouth has been washed using reeds is said to be “pure like heaven” and even visibly “bright like the center of heaven” (IT 1/2 B: 27–49). The idea that reeds are rooted in the *Apsû*, have the power to affect the purity of earthly beings and materials, and quench the gods in the heavenly realm, speaks to their role as an *axis mundi*, a point at which heaven, earth, and the subterranean come together in power.

On the horizontal plane, reeds grow in the space between the “pure *Apsû*” and civilized life, acting symbolically as a cosmic threshold between two realms. Unlike the idol seated in its cella in the midst of the city, reeds dwell on the periphery. One cannot draw near the abode of Ea without first making one’s way through their thicket, a major challenge which divides the most sacred *Apsû* and whoever approaches. This ability to literally and symbolically divide between sacred and common also characterizes reed items made for ritual use. Throughout the *Mīs Pî*, the priest is required to build and use various items made of reed (*qanû*), namely, reed-bundles (*uri(g)gallu*), reed-huts (*šutukku*), and reed-mats (*burû*). In the incantation “Reed Which Comes from the *Apsû*,” the plant itself is called “little *buginnu*” a small water-tight vessel or trough used to carry liquid (IT 1/2 A: 22).³⁵ In the *Mīs Pî*, reeds carry the pure, life-giving water of the *Apsû* and these primordial waters cannot escape due to the exterior’s water-tight properties. Therefore, when reeds are bundled together, they have the power to enclose and insulate sacred space.³⁶ No sacredness can escape and nothing common or impure may enter. The officiant assembles many reed-bundles (*uri(g)gallu*) to make reed-huts, one for each deity he sum-

mons to the *Mīs Pî*.³⁷ He does this once in the countryside, after which he recites two incantations, “Reed Which Comes from the *Apsû*” and “Reed Whose Heart Is Pure and Good,” and once again in the orchard at the riverbank (NR 5–16, 71; cf. Babylonian Recension [BR] 6–7, 12). It is the sacredness of the spaces he creates that enables these gods to reside therein, in close proximity to the priest and the idol whom he presents for induction.

As for the idol undergoing the *Mīs Pî*, it, too, receives the benefit of the “pure and good” reed. Not only are various types of reed listed among the ingredients applied to the idol for its purification, but it is also set upon a reed-mat among the reed-huts of the other gods (NR 71, 95–96; BR 6–7, 12; IT 1/2 B: 27–38). This mat insulates the idol from the ground, thus protecting it from any impurities it may contract.³⁸ The journey from the house of the craftsmen, to the orchard, to the river, to the cella, is a hazardous journey, fraught with danger of contamination and any ill-will a god or person might bear against that deity.³⁹ The reed mat offers protection from the elements and powers, which could gravely affect the idol’s pure status and the efficacy of its induction from one mode of being into the next. This protective aspect and the connection between reed vessels and safe passage are highlighted in Mesopotamian birth incantations, which draw a parallel between troubled fetuses in amniotic fluid and reed-vessels filled with precious goods that the gods steer in a turbulent sea.⁴⁰ In fact, some of these incantations appeal to Ea [Enki], the Creator, for the safe passage of the child, a motif that is also present in the *Mīs Pî* in relation to the induction of the idol.⁴¹

³⁴ Berlejung 1997, 52.

³⁵ Chicago Assyrian Dictionary volume B, 306–307.

³⁶ Chicago Assyrian Dictionary volume U/W, 223–225; Walker and Dick 2001, 53n41.

³⁷ Collon 2005, fig. 803.

³⁸ Berlejung 1997, 55n46; Walker and Dick 2000, 58n74.

³⁹ Berlejung 1997, 67–68.

⁴⁰ Finkel 2014, 135; Böck 2009, 272–274; Stol 2000, 10–11, 62–63; Cunningham 1997, 107–108.

⁴¹ Farber 1984, 311–316.

Whether the transition is a human birth or an idol's induction, the source of safe passage is the same. It is the Creator deity who has the power to render that life's destiny as favorable and it is the officiant who has the ability to entreat that deity toward a favorable decision. In the case of the *Mīs Pî*, the use of reeds to create protective, sacred spaces, and to connect heaven, earth, and *Apsû* empowers and enables the officiant to ritually recreate the ancient moment in which the gods were born out of the primordial waters, thus prompting the gods to accept the idol as part of the divine community. By bringing the past into the present and enabling the gods to dwell in the midst of the ceremony, the priest enacts the successful transition of the idol from the house of the craftsmen into the community of the gods.

To take a step back from the minutiae of analysis and reflect on the expressed goal of this particular *Thick Description*, my analysis of the use of reeds in the *Mīs Pî* suggests that ancient Mesopotamian religious officiants understood the relationship between humankind, nature, ritual, and the divine as one of cooperation across space, time, and realm, a cooperation that is built into the very fabric of creation and extends into the primordial past, yet on its own this cooperation is inert. It is the responsibility of the officiant to activate that cooperation and to bring it into the present moment through the actions and responses dictated by the *Mīs Pî*. In engaging properly with reeds (and many other items provided by nature) and with the correct web of symbolism in operation, the officiant is able to perform the ritual in a way that prompts a specific series of divine actions, all of which have serious implications for the functioning of the idol and, by extension, all of society. This analysis suggests that these particular officiants viewed themselves as mediators between cosmic order and civilized life, as it was their literal job to draw these two worlds – divine and human – into proper, positive relation through the ordained use of the natural materials that the gods

both provided and imbued with meaning. This insight into the ancient Mesopotamian sense of what the world is like is the end goal of *Thick Description*, although it may continue to prompt the reader to additional insight depending on their own personal and cultural webs.

As demonstrated in my analysis of the role reeds in the *Mīs Pî*, *Thick Description* requires the scholar to be in constant dialogue with the available primary sources, and to ensure that all suggestions and conclusions are grounded in what the spiders and their webs say about themselves.⁴² Since meaning is never an after-thought of action but is an essential component of its fabrication, no action is meaningless.⁴³ In *Thick Description*, nothing is taken as a meaningless reflex, but everything is taken as a consciously employed communicative device inherently laden with meaning, from how an ancient Mesopotamian officiant is instructed to use a specific plant product to the theological incantations he is prompted to recite.⁴⁴ Therefore, the scholar is *not* free to import meaning from one's own context, but is tasked with comprehending and communicating the meaning expressed by the culture under investigation, albeit in one's own language.⁴⁵ In this way, the scholar serves as a mediator between the reader of *Thick Description* and the process of meaning-making as it happens in another place and time.

This brings me to a topic that has been an undercurrent of this discussion up to this point, and that is the relationship between scholar, reader, and native. One of Geertz's most quoted insights speaks directly to this triangular relationship: 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.'⁴⁶ In its broader context, Geertz uses this phrasing to

⁴² Geertz 1973, 25. Doniger 2011, 66–67.

⁴³ Geertz 1973, 20. cf. Micheelsen 2002, 6. Doniger 2011, 67–71. Biersack 1989, 74. Springs 2008, 957.

⁴⁴ Biersack 1989, 74.

⁴⁵ Micheelsen 2002, 10.

⁴⁶ Geertz 1973, 9.

make a point about how much energy, research, and analysis goes into even the most elemental descriptions of other cultures. What most scholars pick up on, and rightly so, is the distinction Geertz makes between the two perspectives operative in his writing. Geertz could have stated that 'our data' is comprised of 'people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' but instead offers a helpful complication. At best, a scholar's descriptions are second-hand – re-descriptions of a native's descriptions – and sometimes they are third- or even fourth-hand.⁴⁷ This connects back to my earlier statement that the success of *Thick Description* is not gauged by the scholar's ability to get into someone's head, but by the ability to comprehend and communicate public significance. That is, the goal of *Thick Description* is not to describe as the native would describe, but to describe as the scholar would describe, holding both the native and the reader in mind.

The trick is to be mindful – which is not the same as skeptical – of the fact that the interpreter is now working from a redescription of the event rather than the event itself, a redescription that mediates between the scholar and irretrievable time, and without which neither the scholar nor their audience have knowledge of the occasion at all. In this scenario, many scholars are akin to one of Geertz's informants, who in 1968 tells him about an event that happened in 1912, and which Geertz then writes down in his notebook and shares verbatim in the article "Thick Description."⁴⁸ In researching past cultures, scholars must often rely on other scholars' presentations of ancient texts, artifacts, and civilizations – 1968 versions of 1912 events – and from there present and interpret what are considered to be the facts by scholarly consensus. A native's point of view would certainly sound different than my own, but since the ancient Mesopotamians left behind no extant treatises or ex-

planatory works relating to the *Mīs Pī*, reeds, or the status of nature, my own inherited, educated, and moderated view is all that I have.⁴⁹ Even if I did have access to native thoughts, I would have to translate and interpret them for myself and for my modern audience. What we then might offer is not the native's view – for that is beyond the bounds of the possible – or even a constructed native's view, but rather our own educated view, one that considers as much as may be considered about the object of study at hand, as well as the physical or textual object through which we study that greater cultural object.

Geertz's notion of re-description honors the particularity of the native view by deeply acknowledging a person's inability to accurately represent another, and seeking to do so only to the extent that the other is available for public study. Geertz is interested in public significance, and leaves the interpretation of private emotions, mental traits, and psychological forces to the empathetic reader or perhaps a scholar from another field. Furthermore, Geertz questions the assumption that a "native view" is even possible to achieve, let alone the most desirable outcome of a scholarly enterprise. When asked if an ethnographer should show their analysis to the natives, he is quoted with an enthusiastic 'In general, no!' and goes on to explain why using his work on the Balinese cockfight as a reference point: '. . . the cockfight is based on an illusion, so they do not want to understand it. If they did, it would not work. Sometimes people have a natural resistance to understand what they are doing.'⁵⁰ Geertz learned this when he went back to the community to talk about what they were doing and found that they are interested neither in social science, nor in alternative interpretations, nor in exercises in hermeneutics because, 'They already know what it means to them. What I want to do is tell somebody, who does not already know what the cockfight means,

⁴⁷ Geertz 1973, 9. 15.

⁴⁸ Geertz 1973, 7–9.

⁴⁹ Geertz 1973, 15–16, Biersack 1989, 76.

⁵⁰ Micheelsen 2002, 10.

what it means.⁵¹ This practical position in relation to the native is liberating for the scholar of ancient cultures because it honors and describes the role of the scholar as one who translates and interprets culture, rather than one who records or transmits. To return to the analogy of the spider and its web, both the spider and the scholar are equally interested in the web, but their interests are different based on their positions vis-à-vis the web. In general, spiders are not aware of the chemical composition of their web, yet because of the work of scientists, this knowledge is now part of the consultable record of the natural sciences and is accessible to interested parties. On the other hand, spiders have an entirely different body of knowledge about their webs, a knowledge that only a spider and its fellow-citizens may fully access in their own terms.

Thick Description begins with observing action, interprets action in a way that speaks to disposition, and then analyzes both action and disposition in a way that speaks to the actors' sense of the world – all with the goal of expanding the audience's purview of what it is to be human. For Geertz, this takes the form of educating the audience about other cultures' processes of meaning-making. The force of *Thick Description* is not in the raw data, but in the prose version of that data.⁵² What we describe is not raw social discourse, but a small part that leads to understanding.⁵³ The goal is not to present the raw data or the native's view, but to present a mediated view, the scholar's view, in a way that brings into conversation the 'grand realities' of both the native's web and the reader's web. The payoff for the reader is not only in exposure to the data, but in the established fact that examining the patterns of others often works to highlight our own.

For example, I could come up with a chart of natural resources involved in the *Mīs Pī* that shows which actions are prescribed for those resources, but instead I actively choose to leave it to the reader to suspect whether I have indeed constructed such a chart. If I am performing *Thick Description* well, you will not even notice that such a chart is missing, let alone care, because focusing narrowly on a particular facet of the ritual, such as the use of reeds, produces more insight, both in quantity and in quality, than any large-scale survey. In the framework of *Thick Description*, such a chart would actually be counterproductive, even harmful, to the interpretive enterprise because it reduces the complexity of the nature-ritual relationship and constrains it to fit into the literal straight and narrow. After all, "It is not worth it, as Thoreau said, to go 'round the world to count the cats of Zanzibar."⁵⁴ It is not enough to observe or research. One must also interpret and present in a way that is meaningful to all involved, which means that we must also avoid getting tangled in a web or thicket of our own scholarly making.⁵⁵

***Thick Description* as Challenge & Possibility**

It is suitable to think of *Thick Description* as a set of principles, a conceptual framework, an interpretive approach, the result of a hermeneutical task performed well, a loosely defined genre of academic writing that reads more like an essay than a report, or a combination of the above.⁵⁶ One thing that Geertz is clear about: *Thick Description* is neither a theory, nor a method, nor is it based on one.⁵⁷ In an interview with Arun Micheelsen, Geertz states, 'I do not think that a particular interpretation has to be based on a general theory of meaning – whatever that may be. . . I do not think meanings are out there to theorize about. One tries to look at

⁵¹ Micheelsen 2002, 10.

⁵² Silverman 1990, 138. One of the implied aspects of *Thick Description* is its emphasis on skilled writing. When Geertz's writings first began to garner attention, he was heavily critiqued for choice of the essay genre.

⁵³ Geertz 1973, 20.

⁵⁴ Geertz 1973, 16.

⁵⁵ Geertz 1973, 9.

⁵⁶ E.g., Freeman 2014. Tilley 1990, 57. 61. Silverman 1990.

⁵⁷ Abolafia et al. 2014, 348. cf. Trencher 2002, 223. Freeman 2014, 829.

behavior, what people say, and to make sense of it – that is my theoretical approach to meaning.⁵⁸ Geertz further explains that the reason he resists overarching theories is because his work is entirely dependent on empirical study, and thus deeply connected to an actual community. With this, Geertz hints at a danger that Micheelsen summarizes well when he states, ‘one should be careful in formulating any theory at all ... [as] theory in itself can spawn its own imaginary systems.’⁵⁹ In other words, if the scholar begins with a theory or method and only then engages the actual data (i.e., reads culture-*x* through the lens of theory-*y* or method-*z*), the scholar limits their own ability to see the object of study as it actually exists in its own cultural context, and is likely to skew their interpretation to fit their preconceived notions rather than let their notions be shaped by the object of study and its native culture.

Because our mode of analysis needs to be able to go where the object of study leads, rather than the other way around, each occasion calls for a different mode of analysis.⁶⁰ Analyses, like cultures, are context-specific and most often require an interdisciplinary, toolbox approach.⁶¹ This is why Geertz's work often takes the form of a ‘blurred genre,’ and *Thick Description* remains an elusive term. For Geertz, as for the spider, the ‘web of significance’ that is culture is the primary force that dictates his scholarly actions, responses, and ways of making meaning; as culture shifts, so too must our mode of analytic thinking. For Geertz, there is no possible way to know anything about a web, let alone a spider, without examining the web itself. Webs are not theoretical but real, as are the communities that

construct and inhabit them, and scholarly ethics ought to reflect that reality.⁶²

Although this flexibility makes *Thick Description* difficult to define, it also makes it applicable to a wide variety of interpretive situations across any number of academic fields. From a literary studies perspective, Stephen Greenblatt adds that *Thick Description* does not only everything mentioned thus far, but also enables us to bring into conversation the obscure and the popular over subjects more grand than our redescrptions of either combined.⁶³ As a scholar of ancient Near Eastern religion, with a current focus on the relationship between nature and humankind, I analyze the *Mīs Pī* – an obscure and rarely studied ritual – in a way that brings it into dialogue with some of the more popular texts one might consider when studying the theme of nature and humankind, such as *Enuma Elish* and *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In so doing, I not only give significance to the *Mīs Pī* as a ritual worthy of modern study on its own accord, but also force my reader, academic or otherwise, to pan back ever so slightly and to make way for the answers that this and other rituals contribute ‘the consultable record of what [humankind] has said’ about life's big questions.⁶⁴

In order to affect this kind of expansion of thought, scholars must reconstruct their objects of study based on what their sources dictate, working in concert with the challenges inherent in navigating the ever-changing web of both the other culture and one's own. Only then we are able to move into the terrain of the ‘so-what?’, to move past the raw data and reconstruction stage, and venture into the ‘grand realities’ that manifest across space and time. Of course, those studying ancient civilizations cannot follow up with the communities involved in our study, but as Geertz reminds us, the ability to do so is nei-

⁵⁸ Micheelsen 2002, 6.

⁵⁹ Micheelsen 2002, 14.

⁶⁰ Abolafia et al. 2014, 348. cf. Silverman 123–129.

⁶¹ E.g., Balogh - Mangum 2017, 15–18.

⁶² Geertz's resistance to imposing overarching theory is another way in which his work challenges ethnocentrism and racism. cf. Silverman 1990, 148.

⁶³ Greenblatt 1997, 20.

⁶⁴ Geertz 1973, 30.

ther necessary nor useful. In our task to perform social discourse across space and time, the most pertinent conversation we must have, if we are to understand what we and our compatriots are up to, is with ourselves – as scholars, as humans, and as spiders suspended in webs of significance we ourselves have spun.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The value of Clifford Geertz's *Thick Description* for working with ancient cultures lies in its propensity to expand the possibilities of what interpreters can accomplish in the face of limited material. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Geertz to the study of ancient worlds is his perspective on the native's view, which liberates scholars from questions of legitimacy when confronted with the impossibility of direct access to that native. This shift away from the aim of representing natives as natives might represent themselves, to the aim of communicating one culture's mode of meaning-making as it might be understood by another, brings with it a new set of questions, responsibilities, and required skill sets. Because *Thick Description* is malleable and widely applicable, each scholar who adopts it must then think through their object of study with Geertz's principles in mind and develop their own set of criteria and approaches for the project at hand, knowing that these are likely to change over time as the data directs. However, the approach must always stem from and return to the language, actions, and knowledge of the culture under investigation, because it is through that web of significance alone that we may speak to the 'grand realities' of the lives of spiders. As mediators between past webs and present webs, far webs and near webs, scholars have great privilege and responsibility that can be used for good or for ill – or simply to further understanding.

⁶⁵ Geertz 1973, 5. Silverman 1990, 136.

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