

**A Social Representation of Ancient Farming and Gardening  
Practices at Wupatki National Monument: A Theoretical Proposal**

by

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In this paper I present the foundations of symbolic and interpretive anthropology as first presented by Clifford Geertz, Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan. I also show how archaeological theory quickly grasped onto these ideas through the works of Susan Kus and Ian Hodder. In addition, Roy Rapoport, a professor in architecture and urban planning, parallels some of these symbolic and interpretive approaches in his architectural research. I incorporate all of these theoretical perspectives in an examination of agricultural strategies at Wupatki National Monument.

A majority of the work addressing agricultural strategies in the American southwest focus on the "resource potential of the ecological context, volume of material and energy conversion, and organizational production with respect to surplus production" (Kus 1983:280). Further exploration is required to understand the everchanging social context of these agricultural strategies. It is necessary to reach beyond these *normative* variables. Although these agricultural processes might be technological in nature, the technology is a result of human action or social context. The failure or success of the agricultural strategies, on which the settlement system may depend, are due to social reasons "as much as or more than they are technological or environmental" (Horn 1993:49). By focusing on the technological variables, "they ignore that the control, organization, and transformation of matter, energy, and information are not only effected but also 'understood' in a given context of human perception and conception" (Kus 1983:280). It is this social

context that I wish to explore using the above combined theoretical perspectives. This can effectively happen by studying the spatial relationships, as well as the symbolic meaning or nonverbal environmental cues of agricultural field houses. In reviewing past research, David Wilcox (1978) provides an accepted definition of an agricultural field house.

Field houses are components in subsistence-settlement systems (Streuver 1968). They are architectural facilities built on sites adjacent to or on fields or gardens; they are inhabited on a temporary basis during the growing season. While they may be used for storage, this is not a necessary criterion in the definition (Wilcox 1978:26).

Due to their direct association with gardens and fields, a study of the *relevant relations* associated with field houses could potentially set a stage for these technological strategies. Therefore, the technology becomes a product of human action. Ultimately, this research has two goals: (1) to better understand the social relations of agricultural production, and (2) to develop a model for understanding the social context of agricultural strategies at Wupatki. This paper elaborates on the theoretical framework I will use to approach the data.

The early sixties saw a theoretical revolution in anthropology. Out of this period Levi-Strauss' structural anthropology emerged, as did symbolic and interpretive approaches to the study of culture/society. Symbolic anthropology was one of the sixties' revisionist approaches to the study of culture. "The symbol is sometimes said to be the essence of human culture because it is the essence of linguistic communication" (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:xxi). Ortner suggested there were two major

variants of symbolic anthropology: the *Geertzians* and the *Turnerians*. A major distinction between the two approaches lay in their background influences. Max Weber was Clifford Geertz's primary influence. His concerns focused "mainly with the operations of 'culture'" (Ortner 1984:128). Turner, influenced mainly by Emile Durkheim, reconsidered "the operations of 'society'" (Ortner 1984:129). Geertz's symbolic approach easily lends itself to an analysis directed toward understanding how the built environment shapes and reshapes the social context within which agricultural strategies occurred. Before I apply this approach to the archaeological record, I briefly review the principal ideas pertinent to symbolic, interpretive and contextual approaches in anthropology.

Clifford Geertz said to understand *science* it was necessary to understand what scientists do. He felt that to "understand how anthropologists gain knowledge you have to understand 'what doing ethnography is'" (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:532). The purpose of the ethnographer was to obtain a thick description of cultural phenomenon. Individuals socially constructed symbolic meaning structures, only for interpretation by the ethnographer. He equated anthropological (ethnographical) analysis and written interpretation with artistic expression, thereby threatening "the objective status of anthropological knowledge" (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:540).

Geertz effectively utilizes the interpretative or hermeneutic approach in his analyses. Hermeneutics is the science and methodology of interpretation, especially of

scriptural text. Historically, humans use four methods to acquire knowledge: authority, rationalism, intuition and the scientific method. Before this interpretive turn in anthropology, the scientific method was the means used to acquire knowledge. To understand took on numerous meanings: "to comprehend the language, sounds, form or symbols of; to accept as an agreed fact; to grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by, etc." (Morris 1976:1397). This revisionist period for anthropologists questioned the scientific method of knowledge acquisition. Rather, the revisionists felt authority and dialectical rationalism established the attainment of knowledge. Moreover, anthropologists began to use hermeneutics and dialectics to study contemporary societies, as well as prehistoric societies. In doing so, the linguistic analogy replaced its organic counterpart. To understand social structure it was necessary for the anthropologist to translate a foreign text created by the anthropologist.

Clifford Geertz was groundbreaking in advocating this approach. He recognized interpretive approaches resisted generalized theory-building. Yet, he integrated theory with interpretive science by suggesting the following:

Such a view of how theory functions in an interpretive science suggests that the distinction, relative in any case, that appears in the experimental or observational sciences between "description" and "explanation" appears here as one, even more relative, between "inscription" ("thick description") and "specification" ("diagnosis") -- **between setting down the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such. Our double task is to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts, the "said" of social discourse, and to construct a**

system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are, will stand out against the other determinants of human behavior. In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself -- that is, about the role of culture in human life -- can be expressed" (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:549 [emphasis mine]).

Because the actors constantly create and recreate culture, the only way to understand the meaning structures were through interpretation and not explanation. Geertz's symbolic approach attempted to address how symbols shaped "the ways social actors see, feel, and think about the world, or, in other words, how symbols operate as vehicles of 'culture'" (Ortner 1984:129).

Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan saw the introduction of the interpretive approach as a response to a human science crisis. This crisis occurred because social anthropologists never shared a common paradigm. They were always in the "pre-paradigmatic" phase of Kuhnian (1962) scientific philosophy. Rabinow and Sullivan saw the human world as an open system. "It cannot be shielded from external interference and studied in a vacuum or a scientifically controlled environment" (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979:6). In the following the quotation, they encompassed Geertz's ideas with their own to formulate an innovative definition of culture:

Culture, **the shared meanings, practices, and symbols** that constitute the human world, does not present itself neutrally or with one voice. It is always multivocal and overdetermined, and both the observer and the observed are always enmeshed in it; that is our situation. There is no privileged position, no absolute perspective, no final recounting (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979:6 [emphasis mine]).

In their criticisms of the positivist *closed* approach to the study of cultures, they rejected analytic reason and supported dialectical reason through human discourse. To achieve a good

interpretation it was necessary to initiate a process of dialectic guessing and validation, as well as to understand your own anthropological biases and historical background. One of the goals of the interpretive anthropologist was to try to understand the web of *meaning* constituting human existence (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979:6). They elaborated on their definition of *meaning* in the following quote:

Meanings or norms are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves; practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, or mutual action. These meanings are intersubjective; they are not reducible to individual subjective psychological states, beliefs, or propositions. They are neither subjective nor objective but what lies behind both (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979:7).

Rabinow, Sullivan and Geertz's theoretical stances easily transferred to the study of prehistoric material culture, adding a flavor to the reconstruction of ancient lifeways. Ian Hodder (1986) paved the foundation for contextual archaeology in his book, Reading the Past. Context has always been a primary concern in archaeology. Archaeologists dug sites by using a provenience system. This system established the precise location of all the material remains exposed. The archaeologists interpreted what they found based on the context of the artifacts and their association with other materials. Hodder took the term context one step further. Contextual archaeology constructed frameworks of symbolic meaning through inference. These frameworks resulted due to social actions that ultimately produced the material archaeological record. In the following quote he boldly defined two types of meaning that determined the archaeologist's reconstruction of social context.

Two main types of meaning studied by archaeologists are the structured system of functional inter-relationships, and the structured content of ideas and symbols. Thus, in seeking the first type of meaning, we can ask about the human and physical environment, the depositional processes, the organization of labour, the size of settlement, the exchanges of matter, energy and information. We give the object meaning by seeing how it functions in relation to these other factors and processes and in relation to economic and social structures...**Archaeologists need to make abstractions from the symbolic functions of the objects they excavate in order to identify the meaning content behind them, and this involves examining how the ideas denoted by material symbols themselves play a part in structuring society** (Hodder 1986:121 [emphasis mine]).

Therefore the social context became the totality of the relevant environment, where *relevant* referred to a significant relationship to the object. This relationship was necessary for discerning the object's meaning (Hodder 1986:139).

To go back to Geertz's original ideas, parallels between these two theoretical perspectives arise. Both approaches attempted to obtain a thick description of cultural phenomenon by determining the symbolic meaning structures. Similar to structuralism and symbolic anthropology, the symbolic archaeologist attempted to read the text or the record left by the ancient inhabitants. Hodder suggested there were underlying rules explaining how *Homo sapiens sapiens* always gave meaning to things (Hodder 1986:123). The reading and understanding of isolated material objects did not occur because they required viewing within their 'text.' The problem lay in the interpretation of the text. Where the interpretation of written language necessitated a precise piecing together of complex thought patterns, material culture symbolic interpretation was simpler to achieve. This simplicity was due to the ambiguity of the material culture symbolic counterparts. Therefore, Hodder



made the distinction between language and material culture by not directly correlating material culture with language. Rather, material culture more so related to "action and practice in the world" (Hodder 1986:123). Hodder believed there were universal patterns of meaning followed by the "social actors" who understood the meanings.

Let me provide an example of how to conceptualize the latter ideas. Initially, when we meet someone who follows a different set of meanings it is hard for us to effectively communicate and understand why they do what they do. Yet, when we hang around with that person for some time we begin to recognize patterns of repetition in their behavior. It is through the repetitions that we begin to understand, and, in a sense, enter into their world of meaning. In doing so, we incorporate their meaning structures with our own, as they incorporate ours into theirs. This, in turn, increases our ability to verbally and to non-verbally communicate with this person.

Geertz recognized the "structures that inform our subjects' acts, the 'said' of social discourse" (Bohannon and Glazer 1988:549). The structural fabric consisted of symbols. This is where I turn to Roy Rapoport's (1990) work, The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach and incorporate all of these theoretical approaches to better understand the social context of agricultural field houses at Wupatki.

Field houses were a product of numerous gradually emerging architectural innovations. Under what conditions they appeared

has been the focus of numerous studies (Haury 1956; Bradley 1959; Wilcox 1978; Pruecel 1990; Kohler 1992). Whatever the reasons were that caused their existence, they became permanent architectural features of the landscape. In the past, the definition and interpretation of the presence of field houses did not necessarily take into account its dual meaning or interconnectedness to its social context. By viewing the field house not only a functional product, but also a symbolic cue to the social actors of the ancient Wupatki farmers, we can better understand the farmers' ancestral way of life.

Rapoport agreed that symbols were central to all environments, including the built environment. Yet, he made some extremely important observations relating to the problems associated with symbolic analysis. Initially, he suggested that "symbols in a given culture were fixed, known and shared by the public and designers" (Rapoport 1990:45). But in actuality symbols were probably never fixed. Their meanings were *multivocal*, having a *one to many* correspondence, thus susceptible to many meanings (Rapoport 1990:46). Rapoport questioned whether symbolism was even a useful category, "given that all human communication, and in some views much of human behavior generally, is symbolic" (Rapoport 1990:46). Geertz argued symbol systems essentially defined culture. In addition, he defined symbols as "any object, act, event, quality or relation which serves as a vehicle for conception" (Geertz 1966:5). Rapoport found Geertz's definition of symbols intangible and abstract with reference to the built environment. Therefore, he chose to avoid

the term symbolism and focused on the analysis of *environmental cues*, both behavioral and cultural, and their *meanings*. "If culture is, indeed, a system of symbols and meanings that form important determinants of action and social action as a meaningful activity of human beings, this implies a commonality of understanding, that is, common codes of communication" (Schneider 1976; reprinted Rapoport 1990:48). Although verbal, vocal and nonverbal communication methods all worked together to get a message across, Rapoport argued non-verbal communication was the loudest or most immediately recognized (Rapoport 1990:49).

There has always seemed to be an awareness that nonverbal communication could be studied either structurally, looking for the underlying system or set of rules somewhat analogous to language, or by stressing pragmatics, looking for relationships between particular nonverbal cues and the situation, the ongoing behavior, and so on (Duncan 1969; reprinted Rapoport 1990:50).

Thus, he felt the nonverbal communication analogy was more appropriate than the textual analogy. Moreover, to read the ambiguous environmental cues necessitated a high level of redundancy in patterning.

With respect to field houses, what are the relevant dimensions making up this context, and how can there be an exploration of redundancy in the built environment? The answer to these questions lies in the analysis of architectural settlement spatial data. By examining the spatial relations of the field houses and their associated fields, other field houses, larger habitation locals and the environment, we can recognize redundancies in the spatial patterning.

In Susan Kus's article, "The Social Representation of Space: Dimensioning the Cosmological and the Quotidian," she critically evaluated "spatial analysis" in archaeology. She emphatically stated that space was "a social category defined alternatively within different social and historical contexts" (Kus 1983:278). The ordering of space went through numerous processes of perception and conception. Thus, the final pattern played "a critical role in the self-definition of society and the meaning it assigns to the order of nature" (Kus 1983:278). She bridged ecological approaches by including the *objective* indices of the social form as important to the understanding of operations of social formations and their changing forms. However, she defined these indices by placing them within their social context. To explore the social context it was necessary to understand that society was not an actor or system. Rather, it was individuals participating in social action. "If human activity is by definition symbolic, then social organization cannot exist separate from its representation" (Agué 1975:xix). By uniting the material situation (order of activity) with the idea (order of representation), we give meaning to the experience. Thus, space was a meaning dimension necessary to social experience.

With such a perspective, we might be better able to pose questions on the formation of social categories with the hope of understanding social activity, material production, and social institution's as aspects of social creation within a meaningful context. This is a context that includes not only the limitations of the structure of the physical universe and the operational logic of systems, but also the creative, productive and organization potential of the social representation (Kus 1983:284-285).

It is these ideas I wish to explore with my research on field houses. I will focus on the spatial distribution of the field houses with respect to each other, their associated fields, non-field house site types, larger habitation sites and the local environment. What is the meaning of the location of the field house/field system within its cultural context? Most importantly, what was the social context?

Southwestern agricultural strategies have often been referred to as egalitarian. Do the spatial patterns insinuate the existence of a higher organizer above the household? In addition, is there an axis *mundi* or notion of a center? "A central location has often served as a key element of orientation with respect to locating ordering forces and mapping the established social order" (Kus 1983:291). The clustering of field houses may provide clues into the nature of social relations among the neighboring farmers. These clues might reveal that the neighboring farmers were part of a single lineage or an extended family unit.

In Glenn Stone's (1991) ethnoarchaeological research in Nigeria it was apparent that specific environmental variables (water, soil, etc.) were extremely important at the beginning of the development of the agricultural settlement pattern and then as the social structure changed different variables pertaining to location changed as well (Stone 1991). Can we see any evidence in a change of social relations through time and across space? Do we see a shift in settlement patterns opting for a different configuration of field houses? Does there appear to be a

different idea system regarding the placement of field houses through time? Does one location outdo another location because different variables shift in importance?

Furthermore, by examining the symbolic nature of the field houses we may be able to understand ancient Wupatki land ownership rights. Were these structures symbols of land ownership (Kohler 1992)? The amount of artifacts associated with them is minimal, suggesting extremely limited visitation. Did they just build them to mark their fields and occasionally use them for shade? Were these structures products of shifting cultivation during periods of environmental stress (Wilcox 1978)? If they were we might find a variety of environmental and cultural exploitation strategies being employed simultaneously? Or were these fields products of ancient southwestern urbanization (Haury 1956)? Do they only appear with the establishment of larger centers?

In conclusion, some of these questions could be answered by utilizing these approaches. By incorporating paleoenvironmental data, paleoethnobotanical data, geographic position, ceramic and lithic analysis, social spatial location and current indigenous perspectives, I could develop a model of land use strategies, agricultural technological strategies, as well as social organization. Through these multiple lines of evidence I can work towards understanding the social relations of production, along with attempting to understand the social context of agricultural strategies at Wupatki.

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