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A Golf Society:
Structural anthropology and
ethnographic analysis of the
Penn State Golf Courses

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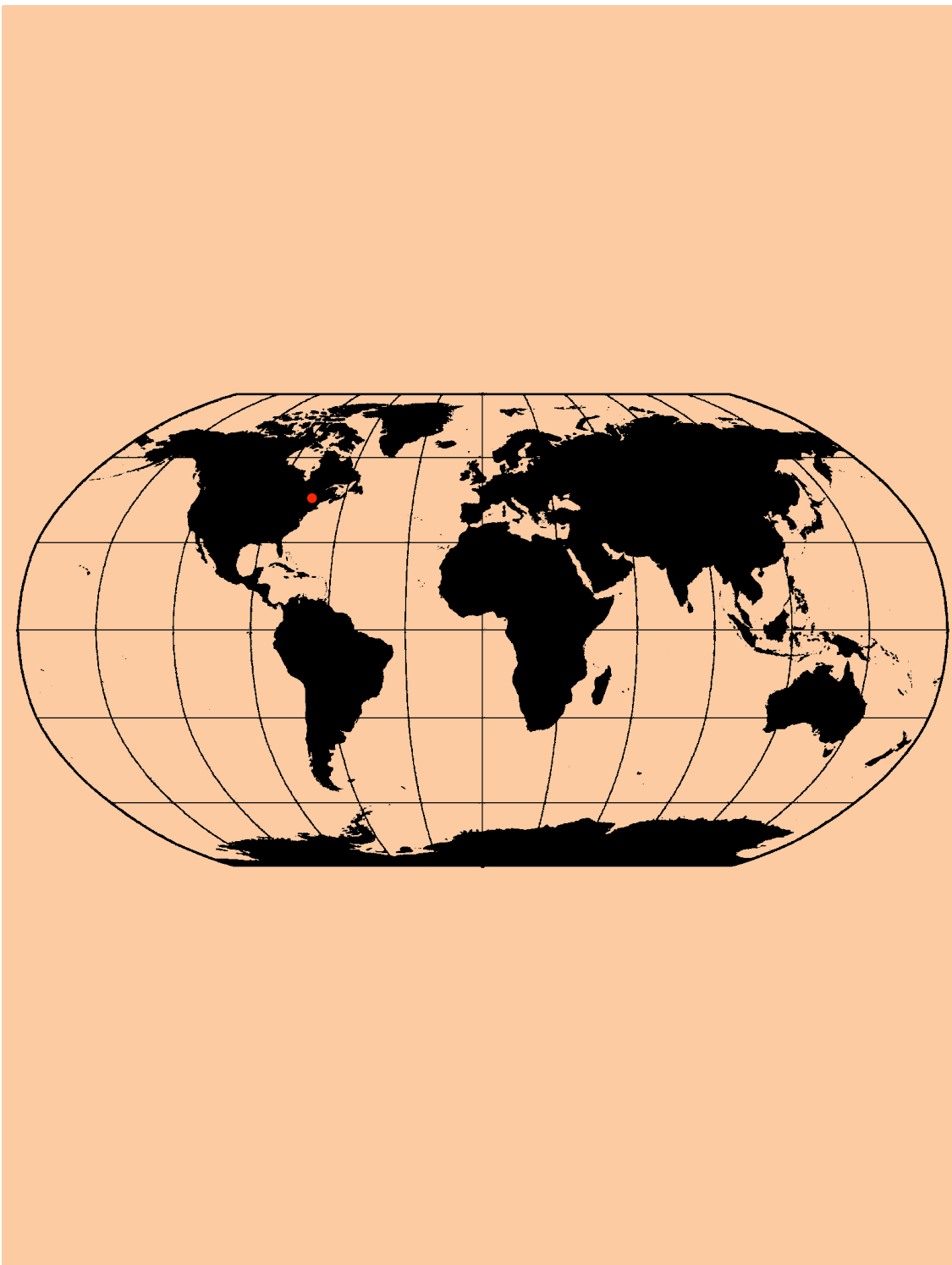
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Abstract

This ethnographic field report is based on the empirical fieldwork that includes first hand experiences, encounters and systematic observations about a particular community and its subculture. The following report is derived from the notes and records documented during the fieldwork conducted in May 2011 at the Penn State University. Being a student of PSU at the University Campus, I lived close to the Penn State Golf Courses and had the opportunity to regularly visit it. The field report focuses on the role of time, space and energy within this particular subculture. It presents the structural analysis of the way of thinking and the way of living of the society by deconstructing its value systems, rituals and the impact of the network. The work includes the necessary comparative analysis of the subcultures with other relevant subcultures in order to bring new understanding on the very nature of the society and the subculture it operates in.





Introduction

It was a Sunday afternoon when I decided to visit my field site to make new observations and this time to take some field notes for my ethnographic study. I am studying the Pennsylvania State University Golf Courses that is in other words a golf society. It was an ideal day to make observations about this particular community, as it was a sunny weather. It is difficult to point out what disturbed me in my observations, but clearly there were many nuances that intrigued and impressed me.

Entrance, Environment and the Clubhouse

The entrance to the golf courses gave me the impression that I was leaving our world to enter a new hedonic world within. It was a majestic feeling, as if I was entering the summerhouse of a tycoon. It was a long road beautified with trees, flowers and fountains. The speed limit sign on this entrance path had an elegant design in terms of size, font and color different from the standard traffic signs with primitive bureaucratic design. So I entered the clubhouse after enjoying the entrance road. The clubhouse is the center of the community where they meet, work in their personal office, sell golf products, consume food and beverages in the small café, watch golf matches etc. Inside the clubhouse, there were photos of memorable events and of the club members who made great achievements related to the field. The shelves on the wall exhibited the cups and medals won by the successful players of community.

The small café had some shortcomings when compared to the all the rest of the environmental or spatial elements. All visual elements related to space had high aesthetic value except this small café. The small café was without tables and chairs and the cashier is a rather attractive young lady who leaves the café around six in the evening.

So as I was observing the members who took a break and came to the café, they bought cups of cappuccino and went to sit where there are chairs and tables right next to the café, the same area where they can watch the golf matches on TV. They started discussing their previous performance during the game. I noticed that they seemed regretting their mistakes during the game play, but there was a smile on their faces that was in a way hiding their feeling of regret and exhibiting the feeling of happiness. The happiness, perhaps, was from learning something new from previous mistakes in performances. Learning from failures is a strong code not only for this specific subculture but also of the American cultural unconscious in general. I naturally reasoned that the café inside this clubhouse would have goods with high pricing even if it is just a sandwich or a cup of coffee, however I asked about the prices and I was surprised to learn that the pricing was not so that high in the café. After I found out about the prices of products related to golf, I once again confirmed that it is not easy to afford such sport.

A Club and Its Loyalists

The fact that golf is clearly one of most expensive sports in the world creates certain types of issues and concerns. Mostly the concerns may be related to the economics of maintenance of the field and the clubhouse. It is the size of the field that is gigantic compare to the fields or stadiums of other sports. So it is almost impossible for the members to watch for the possible unethical behavior of players, as the fields are huge. I saw some of them using walkie-talkies to contact each other in order to solve the issues. Even though many types of sports could exist without a huge loyal community, golf would hardly be able to exist. It is the loyalty of the community that helps this subculture stay alive and thrive.



It could be said that to be able to exist, the sport needs the community in the same way as the community needs the sport. One may observe the ideological and philosophical aspects of this golf society. Golf is, in a way, individualist, as there are no teams, no rush and on the other hand the role of the community with subculture is rather collectivist. The two contrasting ideologies almost belong to each other in this subculture to create existentialist balance for the society. So the role of the community in its subculture is critical. It is true that all sports have a subculture one way or another but in this case the strong sense of belongingness of the individuals with the golf society and the society with the sport makes me see the subculture of golf as distinct from other sports. It is important to see what the members think about the idea of existentialism in their society however I must say, it really intrigued me that a sport could be attached to its society this much.

The Ritual

The ritual of the network may be described as rather exotic. Their ritual is not based on immediate reflexes or sudden reactions as it always is in sports like basketball or football, but it is based on thorough mindful thinking and lateral calculation prior to making the next move. Playing golf is the main ritual of the community and comparing this ritual with many other sports already distinguishes it as a rather rare and uncommon sport. As it is a sport with calm physical activity one would not be very tired or exhausted after playing. Unlike the communities of other sports, I did not see a member of the club walking in the clubhouse with a sweaty polo or a stinky t-shirt thanks to the very calm nature of the sport.

It is a type of community that is often associated with high culture as golf may be described as a rather noble sport in many ways. If compared to other sports, the clothes that the members wear are very elegant and aristocratic. As one may argue the sport is more based on pleasure, aesthetics (in attitude, behavior and environment) and harmony within the community rather than just competition or achievements. The notion of process is not dominated by the notion of result. Both are appreciated.

Value Systems

The very organization of things impresses me about this subculture. As I was listening to the conversations, I heard a great amount of terminology used by the community members when speaking to each other that one may argue it is their own language. The community members were friendly and explained the rules of etiquette, diplomacy and courtesy for both insiders (i.e. new members) and visitors like me. For instance, I brought the set of clubs inside the clubhouse and I was politely warned that when entering the clubhouse, the clubs must be left outside on the club stands. Although, the ethics is not something that could be explained in one day as there are many rules. There is a sense of universalism in this society as there is strong belief in one common truth. I could feel how this one common truth is being protected and appreciated by these people. Their ritual happens in a rather quite, peaceful and relaxing environment where you can listen how the birds sing in this huge green field. One may argue, delight and pleasure are not only the purpose, but almost a standard in this hedonic world. As the French philosopher of the Enlightenment, Voltaire states the significance of a hedonist perspective: "pleasure is the object, duty and the goal of all rational creatures."



It is particularly interesting how the community attempts to combine universalism and hedonism with good taste. For instance, I observed how everyone is actually free to choose what they are wearing as most of the members do not have to wear a uniform, however there was a common fine fashionable style among the members. The style that the members prefer is quite elegant and chic. From the way the people were dressed inside the clubhouse, the way they act and participate in the community, it could be said that the atmosphere is rather noble.

Commentary and Conclusion

As Leonardo Da Vinci says: “the noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding.” As I come from a lineage that had nobles and members of the intelligentsia in it, I understand the fine aristocratic culture of the Golf community and learn the patterns of this subculture that connect with my own lifestyle, values and traditions. In other words, even though I feel as an outsider-visitor who is trying to study this specific society I, at the same time, feel as an insider thanks to the noble ambiance. It was easy for me to make a connection with the members of this ‘tribe’. It wasn’t hard to empathize, sympathize and identify with their way of thinking about matters. Visiting the Penn State Golf Courses and observing the subculture intrigued me and made me think of it as poetry in the sense that, just like poetry, observing this hedonic world makes new things familiar and familiar things new to the observer. When I left the clubhouse I realized it was an experience that makes me think about the very idea of ‘a community’ because I felt that the very fundamental aspects of becoming and staying a community are present in this club.

