

# THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF DOCUMENTS

Ethnography Workshop #1  
DISI/DTC, University of Trento



# OUTLINE

- Introduction
- Issues in the Ethnography of Documents
- A brief History
- Brief discussion of selected readings
- Break
- Exercise
- Report Back
- Summary and Announcement of Next Workshop on Ethnography and Big Data

# INTRODUCTION

- Introduce participants, including us: Kalpana Shankar and David Hakken
- Plan of workshop
- What ethnography is
- But what is a document?:
  - anything intentional, fixed, phenomenological (perceived to be such), maybe indexical (of, or related to, other documents?)
  - close connection to writing, reading, other forms of material linguistic production
  - Varieties of documents
- Documents as the most neglected ethnographic sources—Latour
- Open Access

# ISSUES IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF DOCUMENTS

- What is the Goal of document ethnography: To get to ethnographic “reality” *thru* them, or do they have ethnographic reality of their own, directly?
- How different are documents from any other item of material culture?
- Knowledge itself, or merely a representation thereof? (see early knowledge management)
- Documents as knowledge embodied, or camouflage for “real” patterns of culture, which have a substantial element of the informal
- Relation to information



# HISTORY

- See documentalist view: interesting, but basically concerned with form for automatic indexing, or cataloging, classification schemes, encyclopedia; very science-oriented information. See also semiotic, relate to culture branch, too
- Not seen by ethnographers as particularly relevant to study of peoples without writing, so called simple social formation
- Maybe Eth. Of D begins with study of culture at a distance (US and fighting Japanese in WWII)
- Given great impetus by development of the field of STS, especially its critique of Western views of agency as limited to humans; rather, disperse agency, and documents an obvious candidate for this
- Additional Impetus from digital ethnography: almost all data sources are documents

# THE READINGS

- In General
- A few words about each

# REMAINING

- Exercise (see instructions)
- Report back
  - logistic issues
  - content issues
  - ethical issues
- Summary and discussion of 2nd Workshop: Eth. and Big Data