The key terms and concepts covered in this chapter, in the order in which they appear:

culture
cultural universals
symbols
ethnocentrism
cultural relativism
cultural hybridization
indigenization

CULTURE HAS LONG BEEN the central concept in anthropology. At its most basic, **culture** is understood to refer to learned sets of ideas and behaviors that are acquired by people as members of society. Anthropologists have used the concept of culture in a variety of ways over the years, however, and contemporary anthropologists continue to disagree about how it should be defined. Major debates about the culture concept, however, can be connected to particular intellectual and social struggles in which anthropologists have been involved historically.

2.1 Culture Against Racism: The Early Twentieth Century

Culture gained power as an anthropological concept in the early decades of the discipline, around the turn of the twentieth century, in a social and scholarly context in which all important differences between human groups were attributed to differences in the *biology* of the groups, summarized in the concept of *race*. Biological race was thought to be an infallible index for everything else distinctive to a particular human group. Many early physical anthropologists hoped that if they could succeed in accurately identifying the "races of Man," they would be able to specify which languages and customs originated with, belonged to, or were otherwise appropriate for which races. Unfortunately, this search for a scientific definition of race took place in a historical context in which ruling groups in the societies from which the anthropologists came were already convinced of the reality of race and so used race-based distinctions to justify their own domination of darker-skinned peoples around the globe.

In this context, the culture concept was a crucial innovation designed to counteract the racism implicit in nineteenth-century physical anthropology and, more broadly, in nineteenth-century social

thought. At the turn of the twentieth century, under the influence of Franz Boas (1858–1942), anthropologists were collecting evidence to show that the diverse beliefs and practices that distinguished different groups of human beings from one another were due to differences in *social learning,* not differences in racial biology. For example, immigrants in the United States were assigned by physical anthropologists to a variety of different "races." Yet Boas and his colleagues were able to show that American-born children of immigrants regularly spoke fluent English, wore the clothing, ate the food, and otherwise adopted ways of life common in the United States. Boas even showed that the head shapes of the children of immigrants differed from the head shapes of their parents, apparently under the influence of nutritional changes.

The so-called races of Man were, in actuality, a single *human* race (or as we would say today, populations of a single human species). As a consequence, all were equipped with the same "panhuman rationality" and were equally capable of creating new cultural traits or adopting cultural traits from others. Another way to emphasize the equal humanity of all human groups was to demonstrate that each of them possessed the same kinds of institutions, or **cultural universals,** designed to achieve the same overall goals for the group's members. This was the path taken by Polish-British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), who argued that all human beings everywhere face the same problems of survival or, as he put it, experience the same basic human needs. The members of each society use culture to devise ways of meeting these needs—for food or clothing or shelter or education or reproduction. Different societies meet these needs in different ways, however, and it is the ethnographer's job to catalogue the variety.

Boasians chose a different line of attack, arguing that race, language, and culture were independent phenomena. To show this was to show that the concept of biological race corresponded to no material reality and, thus, explained nothing about variation across human groups. That is, a person's physical attributes—skin color, hair texture, nose shape, stature, or the like—in no way compelled that person to speak or behave in any particular way. Indeed, the rapidity with which people of all "races" could forget old languages

and customs and adopt new ones demonstrated the superiority of the culture concept in explaining variation across human groups. Since the capacities to create and learn culture belong to the entire human species, nothing prevents any subgroup from learning languages or beliefs or practices originally developed by some other subgroup.

Boas and his students devoted much effort to documenting an enormous amount of cultural borrowing across social, linguistic, and "racial" boundaries. This work aimed to demolish the concept of biological race for good, and yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century the concept of "race" has not disappeared. Indeed, the concept of culture explains how this can happen: people can invent *cultural* categories based on superficial physical features of human beings, call those categories "races," and then use these categories as building blocks for their social institutions, *even if such categories correspond to no biological reality*. An ongoing challenge within anthropology has been how to deny the reality of race as a biological concept without ignoring the continuing vigor of race as a cultural construction in societies like that of the United States.

Work by Boas and his students suggested strongly that the boundaries between various human groups are fuzzy and fluid and that firm distinctions are difficult to identify, let alone enforce. At the same time, it was apparent that different social groups often lived lives that were quite distinct from those of their neighbors, for several reasons. First, people did, initially at least, learn their native language and the bulk of their culture from those among whom they grew up. Second, social groups often deliberately emphasized unique cultural attributes in order to set themselves apart from their neighbors. Third, many of the groups ethnographers studied had been incorporated into a colonial empire (as in Africa) or within the boundaries of a larger nation-state (as in the United States). In such situations, the sorting of peoples into named societies, each associated with its own way of life, was strongly encouraged by the ruling elites.

2.2 The Evolution of Culture

Anthropologists in the early twentieth century worked within a Darwinian framework and were aware of the discoveries about biological heredity being made by the new science of genetics.

Rather than explaining cultural variation in genetic terms, however, they sought to show the adaptive evolutionary advantages that culture provided for the human species. This theme has been emphasized in recent years by anthropologists known as *cultural inheritance theorists,* who seek to show how the capacity for human culture could have arisen by natural selection. Compared even to our nearest primate relatives, we human beings seem to be born remarkably free of specific "survival instincts," or biological programming designed to secure food, shelter, and mates for us automatically. Instead, as Malinowski suggested, every human group apparently can invent (and modify) its own particular sets of learned cultural traditions in order to solve these problems. Thus, human beings must learn everything necessary to survive and thrive from older, experienced members of their group. In Darwinian terms, they adapt to their environments by learning the culture of those among whom they live.

Such a form of Darwinian adaptation is highly unusual, however. How could it have arisen, and what would be the selective advantage for a species that relied on learned traditions, rather than innate biological programming, for survival? The anthropological answer goes something like this. Human beings are unusually intelligent (witness our large and complex brain). We and our ancestors ranged widely across many different kinds of natural environments, rather than being highly adapted to the resources of a narrow ecological niche, as, for example, are bamboo-eating giant pandas or eucalyptus-leaf-eating koalas. Natural selection for cultural learning in such an intelligent, wide-ranging species might have been favored because it allowed for a much more rapid adaptation to new environmental conditions than does natural selection operating on genes.

For example, human beings were not obliged to wait until natural selection provided them with thick fur before they could survive in cold climates. Instead, they could rely on their cultural capacity to learn to control fire, make warm clothing from skins, invent ways of using cold-adapted plants and animals for food, and so forth. Under such conditions, natural selection would also have favored those human ancestors who learned especially easily

from those around them and who were curious and creative in devising cultural solutions for new adaptive problems. Research into human prehistory strongly supports this view of human beings as a species of "weedy generalists," equipped by natural selection with a set of adaptive traits, including a dependence on culture, that has made it possible to survive and thrive in virtually any environment the earth has to offer.

2.3 Culture and Symbolism

Human beings, of course, are not the only animals in the world that learn. Several decades of research, for example, have shown that chimpanzees have invented simple practices of various kinds that other members of their groups acquire through learning, such as fishing for termites with twigs, making leaf sponges to soak up water to drink, cracking nuts open with rocks, and assuming distinctive postures for grooming one another. If culture is defined as practices that are acquired from and shared with other members of one's social group, that mediate one's adaptation to the environment, and that get passed on from generation to generation by means of social learning, then these ape practices certainly can be called culture. At the same time, missing from these forms of ape culture is a key element that is integral to human culture. Unlike the learned behavior of other primates such as chimpanzees, human culture clearly depends on our use of **symbols.**

A symbol is something that stands for something else: "X symbolizes Y." What makes symbols distinct from other forms of representation is that there is *no necessary link* between the symbol (X) and that which it stands for (Y). Put another way, the relationship between a symbol and that which it stands for is conventional and arbitrary. The object you are reading right now is called a "book" because generations of English speakers have agreed to call it that. It could just as easily be called "libro" or "gludge." Apes such as chimpanzees and bonobos do seem to have some rudimentary symbolic capacities, although just how much remains controversial. Nevertheless, these apes do not depend on symbolism to anything like the degree that human beings do. Thus, although learning is not unique to human beings and some learning of shared traditional

practices can be found in nonhuman animals, only with human beings do we find a species whose survival depends on its reliance on learned, shared traditions that are *symbolically encoded.*

To depend on symbolic culture is to depend on learning for survival, but it is also much more. Symbols stand for objects, events, and processes in the wider world. But because their link to these phenomena is purely by convention, that which the symbol stands for can never be specified once and for all. The "same" phenomena may be symbolized differently in different societies, or phenomena that are distinguished as "different" in one society may be grouped together as instances of the "same" thing in another. This slippage between symbols and what they stand for makes possible complex human cultural systems, and it enables their remodeling or dismantling under novel conditions. Such slippage also means, however, that effort is constantly required to keep symbolic systems *systemic*—that is, orderly and coherent. Furthermore, nothing guarantees that existing cultural systems will not change over time, due either to internally generated developments or to exposure to new phenomena introduced from outside.

2.4 Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Still, despite these factors, ethnographers were impressed early on by the high degree of cultural coherence and predictability they regularly encountered while doing field research in non-Western cultures. This was important, because it undermined the racist stereotypes about tribal or non-Western peoples widespread in the early decades of the discipline. In particular, such peoples were regularly portrayed as irrational "savages" or "barbarians" leading lives that were, in the words of seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "nasty, brutish, and short." Such portrayals of tribal peoples by Western observers were based on the universal human tendency to view one's own way of life as natural and as naturally better than other, different ways of life. Anthropologists call this attitude **ethnocentrism**—that is, using the practices of your own "people" as a yardstick to measure how well the customs of other, different peoples measure up. Inevitably,

the ways in which "they" differ from "us" (no matter who "they" and "us" happen to be) are understood, ethnocentrically, in terms of *what they lack*.

Ethnocentric Europeans and North Americans believed that to be "civilized" and "cultured" meant to follow an orderly way of life graced by refinement and harmony. But early anthropologists found that they could use the culture concept to counter these ethnocentric beliefs. They could show that *all* peoples were equally "cultured," because every group's social practices were characterized by order, harmony, and refinement. The particular set of customs one followed depended on the group one was born into, from whose members one learned those customs. Another group's customs might differ from our customs, but each group equally had its own orderly, refined sets of customs. Thus, the child of an aristocratic European family, if brought up among people who hunted and gathered for a living, would learn the language and culture of hunters and gatherers just as easily as one of their children, adopted by the aristocrats, would learn the language and culture proper to aristocratic Europeans. To emphasize that every society (not merely Western European society) had its own integrated culture was a way of emphasizing that each society was human in its own way—indeed, that all human societies were *equally human*.

The term *culture* came to refer to a coherent set of beliefs and customs belonging to a distinct society. Such a view seemed to entail, at the very least, that those who were outsiders to someone else's culture ought to refrain from assuming that difference automatically meant inferiority. A culture could not be fully appreciated, anthropologists argued, until its various beliefs and practices were seen from the point of view of those who lived their lives according to those beliefs and practices. Ethnographic fieldwork introduced anthropologists to peoples about whom they previously lacked firsthand knowledge. By living side by side with people with an unfamiliar set of beliefs and practices for an extended period of time and learning the local language, anthropologists might hope to get a sense of what the world looked like from their hosts' point of view. This perspective on other cultures developed into the position called **cultural relativism,** whereby anthropologists were urged to

interpret specific beliefs and practices in the context of the culture to which they belonged. More broadly, anthropologists urged others not to make snap judgments about the value of other peoples' customs but to consider first the role those customs fulfilled within the culture in which they were found. Cultural relativism gave anthropologists (and the members of the societies they studied) ideological ammunition to use against missionaries or colonialists who felt no compunction whatsoever about moving into "primitive" societies and destroying indigenous customs that were not to their liking.

In this sense, cultural anthropologists in the first half of the twentieth century believed that the ethnographic evidence they collected in societies throughout the world supported their claims of equal capacity and equal dignity for all human beings. Knowledge of the orderly, predictable customs and practices characteristic of tribal peoples became well known in Western circles, largely thanks to the work of anthropologists like Margaret Mead (1901–78) in the United States and Malinowski in Britain, who communicated anthropological findings through popular media to a wide audience outside university circles.

Still, not everyone was persuaded by their views. Indeed, new stereotypes about "primitive peoples" emerged that took account of anthropological evidence. It no longer seemed plausible to claim that "savages" and "barbarians" were wild, unruly, and irrational. And so ethnocentric Europeans and North Americans began to argue that "they" were different from "us" because of "their" slavish obedience to tradition, their mindless and uncritical repetition of traditions they'd inherited from their ancestors. People in "modern" Western societies with "scientific" cultures, by contrast, were portrayed as both able and willing to question the validity and rationality of traditional practices and to replace outmoded customs with better-adapted innovations. To view culture as a prison house of custom from which non-Western and tribal peoples were powerless to escape on their own, however, was to take the anthropological concept of culture and apply it in ways that the anthropologists who first developed it had never intended.

2.5 The Boundaries of Culture?

After World War II, European imperial power declined, former colonies were transformed into independent states, and the Civil Rights movement in the United States began to gather momentum. In the context of so many social, cultural, and political changes, and so many challenges to previous authority, the anthropological portrait of a world made up of particular mutually exclusive societies, each with its own, internally consistent culture, increasingly came under scrutiny, both within and outside anthropology.

Some anthropologists had always raised questions about just how sharply bounded, just how internally integrated, any particular culture might be. Boas and his students, as noted previously, had documented much borrowing of cultural objects and practices by one supposedly distinct society from another, suggesting that boundaries between cultural traditions might be rather porous. But if society A borrowed a custom from society B, could that custom ever be made into an "authentic" part of the culture of society A? And if it could be integrated, did that mean that the culture of society A was no longer "authentic"? And who would decide? Furthermore, even if a provisional correspondence could be established between a particular society and a particular set of cultural beliefs and practices, was it plausible to claim that every member of that society shared *every* aspect of its culture—the same beliefs, the same values, the same practices, the same points of view? What if members of the society in question disagreed, say, about how to perform a ritual? Could only one of the parties be correct, and must the others necessarily be wrong? And, again, who would decide?

Ethnographers often sought research settings that seemed to approximate this ideal of cultural uniformity—for example, remote villages or culturally distinct urban neighborhoods. Often they had to acknowledge that this setting was only one part of a larger sociocultural system, even if that larger system was not the focus of their research. This was particularly visible, and problematic, in the case of ethnographic work carried out during the colonial period: the wider imperial setting would be acknowledged briefly, but little or no reference to that setting would be made in the rest of the ethnography.

In recent years, many anthropologists have begun to question the validity of speaking as if a large and complex society could possess a single, uniform "culture." It has also become obvious that even within relatively small homogenous societies, members may disagree with one another about what "their culture" actually is. Anthropologists have become increasingly sensitive to the political issues involved in drawing boundaries around a society or a culture or in taking the views of one subgroup of a larger society as representative of "the culture" as a whole. This is why contemporary anthropologists always acknowledge that social and cultural boundaries are not eternally fixed and why they explicitly question, rather than assume they already know, what any particular set of boundaries means.

2.6 The Concept of Culture in a Global World: Problems and Practices

This has led to rethinking of the way ethnography should be pursued in a world in which local conditions are never isolated from global forces. One solution is to undertake *multisited fieldwork:* doing research not only in a particular local setting (a small village, say) but also in a series of other settings (such as political or corporate centers, whether in the same country or abroad). For example, fieldwork might begin in an urban neighborhood in the United States among a group of immigrants from elsewhere. But it might extend into the urban and national bureaucratic settings in which decisions affecting the immigrant group are made, and it might even continue in the communities abroad from which the immigrants originally came. The advantages and disadvantages of multisited ethnography are still being debated, but the fact that such a research strategy exists testifies to anthropologists' awareness of the often wide-ranging network of complex forces in which any particular local community is enmeshed.

Similarly, contemporary ethnographies are often quite explicit about exactly which members of a group have provided cultural

information about a particular issue. Thus, anthropologists are careful to distinguish the opinions of, say, older men from those of women or of younger men, because they have learned that these subgroups regularly have differential access to social power and different interests to defend and so have different interpretations to offer about the cultural institutions and practices in which they are involved.

With this new awareness has come the realization that a concept of culture that emphasizes uniformity of belief and practice is not only not always liberating but can also be used as a way of enforcing inequality. This is clearest when one subgroup within a larger society insists on its version of the tradition as the only correct version and tries to force other subgroups to profess allegiance to that version or else risk persecution. Such practices are perhaps most obvious in those societies that were once colonies but have since become independent states. A common experience in such new states was the discovery that very little, apart from joint opposition to the colonizing power, united the peoples who were citizens of these new states. The ruling groups who had inherited the reins of government following the departure of the colonizer all felt very strongly the need to build some kind of national unity based on a shared "national culture." But the elements of such a national culture could be difficult to find when the only historical experience shared by all the new citizens was the tradition of colonial domination. Sometimes appeal could be made to precolonial customs—religious, economic, or political practices, for example—that were distinct from those that had been introduced by the colonial power. If such practices had once been widely shared, or at least widely recognized, by the bulk of the population, they might become resources on which to build a new national identity. If, however, such practices belonged only to a tiny proportion of the new citizenry—perhaps a powerful tribal group that had come to dominate postcolonial politics, for example—the practices might well be resisted by other groups. Having expelled one colonial power, they would see no advantage in being recolonized by one of their neighbors.

Paradoxically, however, elements of colonial culture often played an important role in the construction of the new national

culture. This included not only the bureaucratic apparatus of governmental administration inherited from the colonial past and the new ways of doing business or educating the young introduced during the colonial period but also the language in which all these activities would be carried out. Anthropologists studying the production of national culture have been influenced by the writings of political scientist Benedict Anderson, who argued that nation-states are "imagined communities," most of whose members never see one another face-to-face but who nonetheless experience a sense of fellow feeling for one another. In Anderson's view, much of that fellow feeling in new nation-states develops out of their members' shared experiences of colonial institutions and practices.

Once again, language is a good example. If the peoples who were administered within a single colony came from dozens or hundreds of different ethnic groups, speaking numerous mutually unintelligible languages, any shared sense of belonging to the same nation would likely be very slight. However, once children from all those different groups began to attend colonial schools and learn the colonizer's language, they did have things in common. Moreover, they could then speak with and learn about one another in a way that would not have been possible had they not all learned to speak, say, French in French colonial schools. Again and again, the new nation-states chose the language of their former colonizer as the new national language of government, business, and education. Not only was this "efficient" in that it allowed an important element of continuity in changing circumstances, but it also meant that the official language of the state did not favor any particular indigenous language group over the others.

The culture concept thus can be reformulated to describe an emerging national culture, and attempts can be made to relate that national culture to the local cultures of different groups incorporated within the nation-state. What anthropologists did not expect, however, and what led to their most serious questioning of the traditional culture concept, were cases in which national regimes in various countries did not recognize the existence within their borders of such differentiated and partially overlapping cultures. Thus, if outsiders objected to the way a particular regime was

treating its own citizens, spokespersons for the regime might respond that such treatment was "part of their culture" and, as such, beyond the critique of outsiders whose cultures were different. Most notoriously, under apartheid in South Africa, it was official government policy to endorse the notion that each people had its own unique culture. The apartheid regime assigned indigenous African peoples to "homelands" in rural areas far from mines and farms and factories, on the dubious grounds that Africans properly belonged in rural areas, farming the way their ancestors had done, and were not suited to work in, let alone run, modern commercial or industrial institutions in South Africa, because these institutions were part of "European culture."

2.7 Culture: Contemporary Discussion and Debate

What has been the outcome of all this discussion and debate about the culture concept? Some anthropologists assert that the concept of culture has been forever tainted by the older usage that assigned every society its own unique, internally harmonious set of beliefs and practices. Because this use of the concept reflects an outmoded understanding of how societies and cultures relate to one another, they argue, and has permitted culture to be falsely understood as a prison house of custom from which people could never escape, the term should be discarded entirely. They believe that it bears too many traces of the colonial circumstances under which it was developed and to which it proved so useful an intellectual tool in dividing and dominating colonized peoples.

But abandoning the one-society-one-culture model does not mean that the concept of culture needs to be discarded. Many of the anthropologists who reject that model prefer to think of culture as the sum total of all the customs and practices humans have ever produced. They point out that, with the increasing speed and density of communication and travel, nobody anywhere on the face of the earth is isolated from the major flows of information and activity present in our contemporary world. Fast food, rock music, and computers have a worldwide appeal. Because we are a species that

needs to learn how to survive and are willing to learn new things from others, people everywhere now seem to be involved in stitching together their own patchwork of beliefs and practices from both local traditions and the wide range of global culture locally available. In situations like this, many contemporary anthropologists argue that what counts as anyone's culture is "up for grabs."

And yet those processes that turn culture into something individuals put together on their own are frequently countered by another process in which groups defend a uniform and closed view of their own culture in the face of potential inundation by global culture. Thus, much like some early anthropologists, contemporary activists in movements of ethnic solidarity defend a monolithic, internally harmonious view of their own culture against "outside" forces claiming to know what is best for them. Such a defense, however, is not without its own paradoxes. For example, in order to present the image of a united front, ethnic activists must downplay the same kinds of internal divisions and disagreements that anthropologists have been criticized for ignoring in traditional ethnographies that emphasize cultural uniformity. Activists may be fully aware of this paradox but still believe that it is justified for political reasons.

At the same time, some individuals defend their right to pick and choose from global culture the customs they want to follow and resist attempts by other members of groups to which they belong to police their beliefs and behavior. More than that, they may challenge those who criticize them for incorporating borrowed cultural practices alongside those they have inherited, asserting that theirs is a living cultural tradition and all living cultural traditions will sometimes change in this way. Put another way, **cultural hybridization**—the mixing and reconfiguring of elements from different cultural traditions—is acknowledged and even celebrated those who creatively recombine local cultural features with features from elsewhere regularly insist that the end result need not be "Westernization" or "Americanization" of their own cultures; rather, they speak of the "Africanization" or "Botswanization" or "Ju/'hoansization"—that is, the **indigenization**—of cultural features that may have originated in the West or in America but have been

adopted by local people for local purposes. Because these outside cultural elements are chosen by insiders rather than imposed by outsiders, they are seen to enrich, rather than to destroy or replace, the cultural traditions into which they are being integrated. Prior to the end of the twentieth century, for example, literacy may not have been part of the cultural heritage of southern African foragers like the Ju/'hoansi. But many contemporary Ju/'hoansi who have learned to read and write and transcribe their own language view these as positive changes that strengthen their ongoing, developing cultural tradition. Picking up on these developments, some anthropologists are paying renewed attention to the kinds of cultural borrowing highlighted by the Boasians a century ago, but with a twist. In the contemporary context, anthropologists take for granted that all living cultural traditions are dynamic and open to change. As a result, they draw attention to the deliberation and choice exercised by members of these societies who selectively adopt elements of other cultures, not as a way of rejecting their own tradition for an alien alternative, but in order to reaffirm and strengthen their own evolving cultural identity.

2.8 Culture: A Contemporary Consensus

If there is a contemporary anthropological consensus about the nature of culture, it would seem to involve at least the four following propositions. First, nobody questions that culture is learned, not genetically programmed. Second, many anthropologists would argue that the kind of culture that is learned (and the way it is learned) is never innocent but is always shaped by power relations of some kind. Third, power relations and cultural forms that are global in scope have penetrated local communities and local cultures; the ultimate consequences for anybody's culture are still to be assessed. But fourth, it is incorrect to assume that the penetration of local communities by global culture dooms all local cultural traditions to extinction. On the contrary, local societies can and do indigenize cultural elements that arrive from elsewhere, regularly subverting their homogenizing or "Westernizing" potential and putting them to work in ways that preserve and enhance local goals and interests.

For Further Reading

IDEAS OF CULTURE

Bohannan 1995; Fox and King 2002; Gamst and Norbeck 1976

CONTEMPORARY CRITIQUES

Anderson 1983; Clifford 1988; Hannerz 1996; Marcus and Fischer 1986

THE CONCEPT OF RACE

Contemporary Issues Forum 1998

APE CULTURE

Savage-Rumbaugh et al. 1986