

Study Session 1

Cultures and Societies in Africa

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Learning Outcomes for study session 1

At the end of the session, you should be able to:

- i. Define culture
- ii. Describe the classical definition of culture
- iii. Enumerate the characteristics of culture
- iv. Identify the major components of culture
- v. Provide major concepts associated with culture
- vi. Illustrate with many examples the variation of culture in the society

1.2 What is Culture?

The word 'culture' is an omnibus term with different meanings. To some, it represents the songs, dances, drama and art that are exhibited by people in communities. To others, culture means the ways of life and living, the ways of doing things – writing notes in the class, drinking water from local clayed pot (Amu), either eating 'amala'- yam flour with our fingers or using cutleries to impress friends; others may see culture as drinking palm wine with calabash cups, greeting one another, shaking hands with each other, wearing clothes, indigenous or foreign.

To everyone who is familiar with the revival of culture, it represents a people's unique and commonly shared ways of doing things. In all societies, some of the ways of doing things such as reproduction and eating are the consequences of man's biological make-up; others are the products of the fact that human beings live in groups. These ways of doing things are also the ways in which as humans we tend to find certain solutions to problems: physical, material and social ones that face our existence. Different human groups arrive at solution to these problems in different ways.

Study Outcomes

At the end of the session, you should be able to:

- (a) Define culture and mention the characteristics of culture
- (b) Describe the components of culture
- (c) Understand and explain the nature, dynamics and pattern of our socio-cultural environment for the purpose of effective and socially-relevant change;
- (d) Refute and redirect some of the assumptions and positions that are biased and pejorative with regards to the previous ways in which some of the most important elements of our history and culture have been explained.
- (e) Understand and differentiate the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural diffusion.

Definitions of Culture

By 'culture' we mean "a trait or characteristics that, although man made, is found in all human societies". Cultural elements found in all human societies are called 'cultural universal' or 'cultural uniformities'. Although some experts disagree as to whether there are any cultural universals. We do know that virtually all human societies possess designs and potential which are specific in nature that can be called culture.

We have royalties, such as those of Ile-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria, in Ancient Egypt and even the more recent monarchies of Europe and Saudi Arabia. It is also important to note that all human societies regulate sexual behaviours in one way or another. You are not allowed by the social regulations to 'jump' on any man or woman without the societally laid rules of doing it. These rules serve as a form of social control. Among the Eskimos and Tivs, wife hospitality is practiced but detested in other climes.

All human societies have a form of greeting but the way and manner of greeting differs from one society to another. Language is also a universal phenomenon because there is perhaps no human society where language is not visible and used, so also, there are social institutions such as the family, government, religion, economy, education and politics.

What then is culture? Culture has been defined in 'Primitive Culture' by Edward B. Tylor (1871) as a 'complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. This is tagged 'classical' definition of culture in anthropological literature.

According to Reading (1978:55), culture is seen as 'the totality of learned behaviour transmitted from one generation to the next'. Mitchell (1979: 45) opines that 'culture, in its broadest definition, refers to that part of the total repertoire of human action (and its products), which is socially as opposed to genetically transmitted'. Kroeber and Kluckhohn argue that 'culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (that is, historically derived and selected ideas and especially their attached values'. From these definitions, it can be inferred that culture is so central to human existence and can be simply referred to as the total way of life of human existence, the way we talk, read, write, greet and exchange pleasantries are all embedded in culture.

Social Institutions: By social institutions, we mean "a set of interrelated norms', regularized, prescribed patterns of action and behaviour" a normative system centered on some types of human activity or some major problems of man in society... (Chinoy, 1967: 29). We should note, however, that only problems and not the solutions are universal. Also, the contents of solutions are highly variable. Thus, the arrangements of most of these institutions among human beings differ from place to place. The commonly shared arrangements help us as groups to solve the problem of our collective existence and this is what is generally known as culture.

Ethnocentrism: Talking about the common elements in culture also brings us to the discussion of Ethnocentrism – that is the act of evaluation by some social scientists in their works who see other peoples as primitives etc. and as possessing cultures and behaviour not as advanced or developed like their own. Ethnocentrism is also important factor in manifestation of collective behaviour that have been termed as 'racism' and 'tribalism'. Ethnocentrism is one of the factors that can fan the embers of communal clashes and ethnic conflicts.

Cultural diffusion: Another important notion that we should note whose manifestations contributed to the similarity in the behaviour of peoples is 'cultural diffusion'. This is the process whereby traits and characteristics that are part of one society are imported into another. Africa has witnessed a lot of this in reggae and rap music, use of Compact Disc MP4, and I-Pads devices LED Flat screen TVs, Digital Voice Recorders among others are all elements of this. These products are made outside the shore of Africa and are imported but the use and sometimes, abuse of these items are common in our communities.

In a nut shell, culture is learned mainly through the socialisation process. Socialization is the process whereby the ways of any group is learnt right from infancy to adulthood.

Characteristics of Culture

What are the major features of culture?

- Culture whether material or non-material is passed from generation to generation through language.
- provides socially acceptable patterns for meeting needs of the people in the society
- is cumulative.
- is meaningful because of its symbolic quality.
- is learned from one person and passed to another.
- is a basic determinant of personality.
- it depends for its existence on the continued functioning of the society but not upon any individual or group.

1.4.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

- i. Who espouses the 'classical' definition of culture?
- ii. Name two major concepts associated with culture
- iii. List three features of culture

1.4.2. In-Text Answers (ITAs)

- i. Edward B. Tylor espoused the classical definition of culture
- ii. Two major concepts associated with culture are: Ethnocentrism and Cultural diffusion
- iii. Culture is learnt. Culture is cumulative and is transmitted from generation to another generation

1.5 Components of Culture

Chinoy (1967: 29) identifies three (3) main groups of the components of culture

- (a) Institutions, the rules of norms which govern human behaviour
- (b) Ideas, knowledge and belief of all variables – moral, theological, philosophical, scientific, technological, among others
- (c) Material products or artifacts which men produce and use in the course of their collective lives.

In looking at these constituents, it becomes clearer that culture is both material and non-material. The material components are concrete things that can be seen, felt or touched such as your android hand-held phone set, benches, bags and lap-tops. On the other hand, non-material elements constitute the abstract aspect of culture such as ideas, customs and values. Can you touch any of these materials? Of course, not.

1.5.1. ITQs

- i. Enumerate two main group components of culture
- ii. Indicate the two constituents of culture

1.5.2 ITAs

- i. Institutions, Ideas, Knowledge and Beliefs
- ii. Material and Non-material

1.6. Culture Patterns

According to Beal & Hojier (1971:107), the term culture pattern refers to a cluster of related ways of behaving found in a given culture. Hogan (2006: 104) avers that culture pattern is the 'predominant value and belief that characterize a culture'.

Culture patterns can be divided into two broad types: Ideal patterns and Behaviour patterns. Ideal patterns refer to the modes of behaviour of a specific people if they conform completely to the standards set up by their culture. Behavioural patterns refer to actual behaviour observed in particular situations.

Culture patterns like culture cannot be directly observed and are studied as abstractions from observed behaviour. They may also be viewed in terms of their functions in the society.

1. 7- National Culture Patterns

- (1) A national pattern culture is the largest functional unit of national societies e.g. Nigerian Culture, Ethiopian Culture, English Culture, American Culture, etc.
- (2) Ethnocentrism is a widespread characteristic of national groups.
- (3) The study of national patterns of culture is complicated by factors such as:
 - (a) Multiple groups within communities: Some nations such as Nigeria, Kenya, Russia and USA are composed of several cultural and sub-cultural groups within their territories.
 - (b) The fact that culture patterns are dynamic; they change with time.

- (c) The fact that the contributions or situation of some dominant classes or sub-groups may dominate the national culture patterns while those of other classes or groups are not visibly represented.

1.7.1. ITQs

- i. Define culture patterns
- ii. Provide one factor that can affect national pattern of culture

1.7.2 ITAs

How would you differentiate between Nigerian culture pattern from that of Asia?

1.8. What is Society?

Society or social formation is not synonymous to boundaries or location. This is a narrow way of defining society. Society includes a set of people in a specific location/boundary, sharing a body of customs, norms, values, reproducing themselves and sharing a language or languages. A society has specific rules and regulations which serve as social control and members who violate the rules are sanctioned.

1.8.1. ITQs

- Identify one or two elements of society

1.8.2. ITAs

- Some elements of society are shared customs, norms, language and boundary.

1.9. Classification of Society

Society can be classified in many ways. Sociologists categorise societies into 'primitive, traditional which denotes societies with simple, undiluted, undifferentiated and almost homogenous customs and social control or 'modern' typified by industrial modern societies. There are also allusions to non-literate and literate societies, segmental and organic societies as French Scholar, Emile Durkheim enthused (See Mitchell, 1979:206-207).

1.9.1. ITQs?

- List two types of human societies

1.9.2. ITAs?

- Two kinds of human societies are segmental and organic forms

1.10. Culture and Society.

From the earlier discussion in this session, it would be seen that culture is central to the existence of human society. It is culture that gives the colour, the shine and life to any human society. No human society can survive without culture.

1.10.1. ITQs?

- What is the relationship between culture and society?

1.10.2. Self-Assessment Question (SAQ)?

- Think of any characteristic or component of culture in your community or society and discuss with a friend of yours who should identify his/her own and share with you also.

1.11. Culture(s) of Africa

1.11.1. Historical Overview

It is important to allude to historical undercurrents of cultures of Africa. This section deals with that social phenomenon. Africa's cultural rebirth has been an integral aspect of post-independence nation-building on the continent, with the recognition for the need to harness the diverse cultural resources of Africa in order to enhance the process of education, and create the needed enabling environment. In recent times, there has been a call for a much greater emphasis on the cultural dimension in all aspects of development. In the past, our parents were adroit in teaching and passing our cultural heritage to the children who imbibe and practise them. The practice has been weakened by forces of industrialisation and globalisation.

During colonialism in Africa, Europeans adopted the attitudes of superiority as a sense of mission. They lived in special areas (Government Reserved Area-GRA) and went to special schools. The French were able to accept Africans as French, if they gave up their African culture and adopted French ways. Knowledge of Portuguese language and culture and abandonment of indigenous ways defined one as civilized in some other parts of Africa. Kenyan social commentator Mwiti Mugambi pragmatically avers that the future of Africa can only be forged from accepting and mending the socio-cultural present. For Mugambi, colonial cultural hangovers, pervasive Western cultural inundation, and aid-giving arm-twisting donors are, he argues, here to stay and no amount of looking into Africa's past will make them go away except we take conscious steps to alter that.

Culture is here defined as the totality of thought and practice by which a people creates itself, celebrates, sustains and develops itself and introduces itself to history and humanity' — *Maulana Karenga*; African Culture and the Ongoing Quest for Excellence

1.11.2. ITQs?

- Describe the historical force of cultural development in Africa

1.11.3. ITAs?

- What aspect of culture have you learnt from your parents?

1.12. Attributes of African Culture(s)

1.12.1. African Arts and Crafts

It is certain that Africa has inherent gorgeous customs and culture in terms of arts and crafts. Some of these manifestations are depicted in *wood-carvings*, mats, *leather and pottery* art works, among others. There are indigenous sculpture makers, painters, and the like.

1.12.2. Folklore and Religion

African folklore and religion form special segments of African culture. The folklore and myth of creation in Africa is common. In Nigeria, it is believed that Ile-Ife is the source of creation and civilisation begins from there. There is the myth of homo sapiens' descentance in Ile-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria.

In another vein, flood myths have been circulating in different parts of Africa. Culture and religion share space and are deeply intertwined in African cultures. In Nigeria, there is an admixture of traditional believers, Christians and Muslims associating with one another most times in peace and occasionally in conflict. In Ethiopia, Christianity and Islam form the core aspects of their culture and these influence their cuisine and customs as well as rituals and rites. Religion serves a number of functions for Nigerians. In indigenous African religion, the concept of the 'Olodumare' among the Yoruba, depicts the Omniscient, Omnipresent and all-powerful God.

1.12.3. Clothing

Africans adorn themselves with different attires. Many indigenous fabrics are hand-woven. There is a tie and dye fabric in Abeokuta, Ogun State, 'Aso Oke' in Iseyin, Oyo State, Nigeria, among others. In Ethiopia, Women's traditional clothes are made from fabric called *shemma* and used to make *habesha qemis*: it is basically cotton cloth, about 90 cm wide, woven in long strips which are then sewn together. Sometimes shiny threads are woven into the fabric for an elegant effect. In southeast Nigeria, indigenous men tend to wear a knee-length shirt with wrapper. In West Africa, many of the indigenous attire is influenced by Islamic traditions. Zulus wear a variety of attire, both traditional for ceremonial or culturally celebratory occasions, and modern westernised clothing for everyday use. Among the Zulu, one can decipher from their attire that the women are married. Traditional male clothing is usually light, consisting of a two-part apron (similar to a loincloth) used to cover the genitals and buttocks.

1.12.4. African Cuisine

Africa is a large continent containing over 50 countries and thus, endowed with rich delicacies in terms of food and drinks. There is also the use of food products like peppers, peanuts and maize introduced by the colonial masters. The African food is a combination of traditional fruits and vegetables, milk and meat products. The African village diet is often vegetable and assorted staple grains and starch products. Exotic game and fish are gathered from Africa's vast area. There is Argungun Festival in Kebbi State, Nigeria where fishing is communally harvested. Indigenous cooking in most of Africa is characterised by use of starch as a focus, accompanied

by stew containing meat or vegetables, or both. Cassava, cocoyam, potato and yams are the main root vegetables. Africans also use steamed greens with hot spices. Dishes of steamed or boiled green vegetables, peas, beans and cereals, starchy cassava, yams and sweet potatoes are widely consumed. In each African locality, there are numerous wild fruits and vegetables which are used as food. Pawpaw, Banana, oranges, watermelon and tangerine are very common edible fruits for the people.

The non-Muslim population of Africa tend to consume alcohol beverages. People from Ethiopia lay claim to first regular cultivation of coffee and they have a sort of coffee ceremony, like Japanese Tea Ceremony.

1.12.5. Languages

There are many languages in Africa (written and unwritten). The main ethno-linguistic divisions are Afro-asiatic (North Africa, Chad, Horn of Africa), Niger-Congo (mostly Bantu) in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, Nilo-Saharan in parts of the Sahara and the Sahel and parts of Eastern Africa, and Khoisan. The continent of Africa speaks hundreds of languages, and if dialects spoken by various ethnic groups are also included, the number is much higher. These languages and dialects do not have the same importance: some are spoken by only few hundred persons, others are spoken by millions. Among the most prominent languages spoken are Arabic, Swahili, Yoruba and Hausa. Very few countries of Africa use any single language and for this reason several official languages coexist, African and European. Some Africans may also speak different languages such as Swahili, English, French, Spanish, Bambara, Sotho, and many more. We shall dwell more on this in the section on language.

1.12.6. ITQs?

- i. Describe some prominent arts and crafts in Africa
- ii. What are the commonest fruits and vegetables in your community?
- iii. List three main languages in Africa

1.12.7. ITAs?

- i. Prominent arts and crafts include Bronze, sculpture and silver
- ii. Commonest fruits are Pawpaw, Watermelon and Banana
- iii. Swahili, Hausa and Yoruba are three main languages in Africa

1.13. Culture Areas of Africa

1.13.1. Fundamental Assumptions of the Concept

The concept of culture areas as championed by Herskovits (1924) is an attempt to group together people whose indigenous ways of life are similar to a great degree. It is the high degree of similarity that makes them appear unique. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1968, culled from Encyclopædia.com retrieved February 28,

2012), Culture areas are geographical territories in which characteristic culture patterns are recognizable through repeated associations of specific traits and are usually, through one or more modes of subsistence related to the particular environment.

As one formulation within the general school of historical particularism that has developed in anthropology in the United States, the concept of culture area reflects the theoretical position that each culture, on whatever level it may be analysed, must be examined with regard to its own history and in regard to the general principles of independent invention, culture borrowing, and cultural integration. Although many factors at the base of any recognizable culture area are ecological in nature, the culture-area concept is one that conforms to the doctrine of limited possibilities rather than to a simple geographic determinism.

Viewed in this light and assessed according to the size and character of the geographic units and the degree of complexity of cultural similarities within and differences between the units, the culture-area concept takes shape as a classificatory device of marked utility in describing the cultural regions of the world. Since "culture" and "area" are both generalised terms, their use in combination gives no real clue as to the precise meaning, which must be specified. When contrasting one culture area with another, the level of abstraction must be the same.

In its original formulation, the culture-area concept applied primarily to the ethnographic present and occupied an important place in the natural-history phase of anthropology that was concerned with the orderly description of the cultures of the world. The geographic distribution of culture traits within such areas served as indirect evidence for the reconstruction of cultural histories. The formulations for each of the major continents were used for convenience in the ordering of ethnographic descriptions but were otherwise ignored or discarded as being too limited in time, too static in concept, and too generally conceived to be of much use to the developing trends of concern with inter-personal and social dynamics.

The steady expansion of archaeological research, which furnishes direct evidence for the construction of the historical chronicle in local terms, reduced the role of indirect evidence equipped by contemporary data in the reconstruction of culture history. Although the culture-area concept went into temporary eclipse as a tool for theoretical research, it was still retained for the arrangement of museum collections, for which it was originally devised and for the presentation of descriptive data at the classroom level (e.g., Herskovits 1955; Keesing 1958).

Fundamental Assumptions of the Concept

Culture Area has some assumptions which are as follows:

- (1) That is there are culture centres in culture areas. That is, there is a locus within the culture area with the greatest concentration of culture traits which helps to differentiate the area generally from others. In certain cases, there could be more than one culture centre in a culture area. However, culture centres tend to be found in urban centres and other points of cultural diffusion and adaptation.

- (2) Culture traits from culture centres tend to diffuse evenly from the centres to the periphery of the culture areas. It is possible to criticise this assumption of Herskovits that assumes an automatic diffusion of culture.
- (3) As there are culture centres of most concentration of traits, there are also peripheries of least concentration of traits. The limitations of this assumption are that the so-called points of least concentration of traits and the peripheries could also be vulnerable to several other culture traits from other culture centres.
- (4) Since culture has an ecological basis, areas of similar culture will tend to have similar environment conditions.
- (5) The fifth assumption within the conception deals with the age-area concept which is an attempt to give time dimension to culture traits that are distributed over natural or geographical area. Here, the oldest traits will have dominance over particular areas.

Using all the above stated elements, Herskovits attempted characterization of culture areas which are briefly outlined below:

1. **Eastern Sudan Area:** This consists of mainly nomadic people who are usually represented by the Kababish people. Livestock are camels, goats. The religion is mainly Islam and social organization is made up of strong pattern with Sheikh as head of group controlling their movements. Milk of camel is a principal means of sustenance and camel is used as marriage gift.
2. **Western Sudan:** This is a marginal area and the dominant religions are Islam and Animism (worship of idols). It possesses great kingdom some of which reach the coast. Benin, Hausa, Fulbe, Borno and Yoruba were some of the Empires. Political organizations are stable and dynastic. Economic life is complex with a dual economy composed of herding and agriculture emphasis depending on different societies. Markets exist including trading centres such as Kano and Timbuktu. Linguistic situation is chaotic-several languages. Art forms complex and advanced-terra cottas.
3. **The Desert Region:** It is referred to as the Oasis culture. The conception of the Oasis here is not just that of the easy access to water. Oasis dwellers are sedentary. Camels and horses are principal domestic animals. There are also sheep, goats etc. Inhabitants are Tuarages and Barbers. Descent is patrilineal and male authority is patriarchal.

The Egyptian area is part of the Desert area but for the Nile Baltes incursion. Land of ancient civilization highly elaborate artistic work and it is the land of the salpinx and pyramids.

There are other areas included in this classification-that is, the Madagascan area with 4 sub-areas within it namely, the Central Plateau Region, East coast, West coast and Extreme south. These are the major characteristics of Herskovits' (1924) Culture areas of Africa. They represent a broad classification emphasizing the traditional nature of the areas. Today, social change deriving from various influences such as impact of colonization and modernization has affected the essentially traditional nature of the cultures of these areas. Readers are encouraged to

pursue further reading from the original text. Sources include International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences.

1.13.2. ITQs?

- i. List two fundamental assumptions of culture areas
- ii. Provide with illustrations two culture areas as provided by Herskovits

1.13.3. ITAs?

Ia. Culture traits from culture centres tend to diffuse evenly from the centres to the periphery of the culture areas. It is possible to criticize this assumption of Herskovits which assumes an automatic diffusion of culture.

Ib. As there are culture centres of most concentration of traits, there are also peripheries of least concentration of traits. The limitations of this assumption are that the so-called points of least concentration of traits and the peripheries could also be vulnerable to several other culture traits from other culture centres.

- a. **Eastern Sudan Area:** This consists of mainly nomadic people, represented mainly by the Kababish people. Livestock are camels, goats. Religion mainly Islam, social organization- strongly patterned with Sheikh as head of group controlling their movements.
- b. **Western Sudan:** This is a marginal area. Dominant religions are Islam and Animism (worship of idols). It possesses great kingdom some of which reach the coast. Benin, Hausa, Fulbe, Borno and Yoruba were some of the Empires. Political organizations are stable and dynastic. Economic life is complex with a dual economy composed of herding and agriculture emphasis depending on different societies.

Summary of Study Session 1

The study session is the first of the ten sessions in the module. This study session is intended to equip students with the knowledge and skill to appreciate the rich diversity as well as the similarities in the African socio-cultural, socio-economic, geographic and political landscape. In addition, attributes of African Culture such as cuisine, folklore, myths and religion, clothing and its varied production are explored.

The focus is on the African peoples, their cultures, norms, practices, customs, environment, institutions, the history and evolution of these social features and their impacts on the African image, African identity and the African question in contemporary times. The session begins with clarification of basic concepts such as culture, enumerated and illustrated components of culture and discussed characteristics of culture. The session moved on to look at what a society is and the sociological typologies of human societies. It considered the nexus and interface of culture and society, mentioned the attributes of African culture such as arts and crafts, folklore and religion, clothing and cuisine, among others. It considers culture areas of Africa and the exposition of Herskovits on the fundamental assumptions of culture areas. There are in-text questions and in-text answers and activities at the end of each sub-section.

SAQs?

- i. How would you define culture?
- ii. Mention two features of culture
- iii. What are the two major components of culture?
- iv. Who is the proponent of cultural area?
- v. Enumerate three attributes of African Culture

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