



COGNITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

In the beginning of mid 1950's scholars constructed a new methodology 'Cognitive' or 'Ethnoscience' or 'New ethnography', which emerged as a critic to the then existing traditional ethnography, questioning basically the methods of it. These scholars argued on the basis that there is no one method which is followed by anthropologists and everyone studied and wrote in his or her own way. As a result, ethnographies varied in their information and could not be compared. In order to make it more scientific and the descriptions in these ethnographies more accurate they argued for some new methodology, which is outlined with emic perspective.

Cognitive anthropology focuses on the cultural understanding, which is encased in words, narrative, and material culture, and is grasped and shared with others. **Cognitive anthropology is the study of the relation between society and human thought (Andrade).** The scholars of cognitive anthropology studies social groups' cognition about the objects and phenomena which built their world, ranging from physical to abstract things. This field of anthropology details with the culture and human perceptions. It aims to understand how people understand their surrounding artefacts and environment.

Cognitive anthropology addresses the ways in which people conceive of and think about events and objects in the world. It provides a link between human thought processes and the physical and ideational aspects of culture (Andrade). This subfield of anthropology is rooted in Boasian cultural relativism, influenced by anthropological linguistics, and closely aligned with psychological investigations of cognitive processes. It arose as a separate area of study in the 1950s, as ethnographers sought to discover "**the native's point of view,**" adopting an emic approach to anthropology the new field was alternatively referred to as Ethnosemantics, Ethnoscience, Ethnolinguistics, and New Ethnography.

Cognitive anthropologists regard anthropology as a formal science. They maintain that culture is composed of logical rules that are based on ideas that can be accessed in the mind. Cognitive anthropology emphasizes the rules of behaviour, not behaviour itself. It does not claim that it can predict human behaviour but delineates what is socially and culturally expected or appropriate in given situations, circumstances, and contexts. It is not concerned with describing events in order to explain or discover processes of change. Furthermore, this approach declares that every culture embodies its own unique organizational system for understanding things, events, and behaviour. Some scholars contend that it is necessary to develop several theories of cultures before striving toward the creation of a grand theory of Culture. In other words, researchers insist that studies should be aimed at understanding particular cultures in forming theoretical explanations. Once this has been achieved, then valid and reliable cross-cultural comparisons become possible, enabling a general theory of all Culture.

Cognitive studies in modern anthropology **can be traced back to Franz Boas.** Boas, who first turned to anthropology during his research on the Eskimo and their perception of the color of ice and water, realized that different peoples had different conceptions of the world around them. He was so affected that he began to focus his life's work on understanding the relation between the human mind and the environment. Boas encouraged investigations of tribal categories of sense and perception, such as color, topics that would be critical in the later development of cognitive anthropology.

Some of the methodological rigor and theoretical grounding of cognitive anthropology grew out of linguistic anthropology. **The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**, in particular, was an important precursor to the field. In the 1930s, linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf formulated the view that the structures of language and culture create classificatory categories that shape meaning and world views.

In many ways, cognitive anthropology was a reaction against the traditional methods of ethnography practiced prior to the late 1950s. As more and more scholars entered the field, it was found that the ethnographies of places revisited did not always match the ethnographies of a previous generation. The best-known examples of this were the divergent accounts of the Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis of the Mexican village of Tepoztlan published in 1930 and 1951 respectively. Ethnographic validity became a central issue in cultural anthropology.



The problem of validity was first tackled through the use of linguistics. The discovery of the phoneme, the smallest unit of a meaningful sound, gave anthropologists the opportunity to understand and record cultures in the native language. This was thought to be a way of getting around the analyst's imposition of his own cultural bias on a society.

During the 1960s and 1970s a theoretical adjustment and methodological shift occurred within cognitive anthropology. Linguistic analyses continued to provide methods for understanding and accessing the cognitive categories of indigenous people.

Schema theory had become the primary means of understanding the psychological aspect of culture. Schemas are entirely abstract entities and unconsciously enacted by individuals. They are models of the world that organize experience and the understandings shared by members of a group or society. Bartlett first developed the notion of a schema in the 1930s. He proposed that remembering is guided by a mental structure, a schema, "an active organization of past reactions, or of past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operational in any well-adapted organic response.

These notions are not necessarily culturally universal. In Japanese, the term *kaku* is usually translated into English as writing. However, whereas in English, nearly everyone would consider writing to imply that language is being traced onto a surface, the term *kaku* in Japanese can mean language, doodles, pictures, or anything else that is traced onto a surface. Therefore, schemas are culturally specific, and the need for an emic view is still a primary force in any ethnographic research.

Harold Conklin (b. 1926) conducted extensive research in Southeast Asia, producing one of the largest ethnographic collections for the Philippines. His interest in linguistics and ecology and commitment to ethnoscience led to pioneering investigations of indigenous systems of tropical forest agriculture. He also made important contributions to the study of kinship terminology including "Lexicographical Treatment of Folk Taxonomies".

Conklin's earliest, most influential research were pioneering contributions to the then nascent field of **ethnobotany**. In his dissertation on the **Hanunóo** (1954), he reported that they distinguished 1,625 types of plants in their lands, of which 93 percent were culturally significant. These figures changed forever our understanding of the diversity and value of the tropical rainforest and also our appreciation of the knowledge of the native forest dwellers.

Another pioneering ethnoscientific work was his paper on Hanunóo color categories (1995). Conklin's investigation of color perception in "Hanunóo Color Categories" (1955) is characteristic of the sort of study produced by the early ethnoscientific approach. In this article, Conklin demonstrates that Hanunóo color terms do not segment the color spectrum in the same manner as western color terms. Conklin found that the complex Hanunóo system of color classification could be reduced to just four terms associated with **lightness and darkness, wetness and dryness**. He argued from this case for the need to distinguish between human universals of sensory reception and the cultural particulars of perceptual categorization, a principle that underpinned his work throughout his career.

Conklin identified basing the classification of colours among Hanunoo were

- (ma) biru, linked to the relatively darker shade of colour i.e., blackness.
- (ma) lagti, linked to lighter shades of colours, like white.
- (ma) rara, marking redness or shades of red colour.
- (ma) latuy, appearance of green

CRITICISM:

According to Keesing (1972:307) the so-called “new ethnography” was unable to move beyond the analysis of artificially simplified and often trivial semantic domains. Ethnoscience tended to study such things as color categories and folk taxonomies, without being able to elucidate their relevance to understanding culture as a whole.

Cognitive anthropology deals with abstract theories regarding the nature of the mind. While there have been a plethora of methods for accessing culture contained in the mind, questions remain about whether results in fact reflect how individuals organize and perceive society, or whether they are merely manufactured by investigators, having no foundation in their subjects’ reality.

Another criticism is that universal agreement **on how to find culture in the mind** has yet to emerge.