



Culture and Cultural Ecology



Concept of culture

Culture as a way of life

- Behaviors, beliefs, meanings
- Material, mental, and social products
- Characteristics
 - Shared and integrated/ Linked
 - Learned (not “human nature”)
 - Symbolic and relative
 - Adaptive and dynamic

○ Ethnocentrism vs. cultural relativism, critical cultural relativism

Ethnocentrism in social science and anthropology—as well as in colloquial English discourse—means to apply one's own culture or ethnicity as a frame of reference to judge other cultures, practices, behaviors, beliefs, and people, instead of using the standards of the particular culture involved

Cultural relativism is the idea that cultures are based on shared beliefs, behaviors, and other characteristics. It also states that cultural values and beliefs should be understood in relation to their cultural context, and not judged by outside norms and values.

Culture

- Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (E. B. Tylor 1871)

Clifford Geertz (1957)

- Culture is the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their feelings and make their judgements” (Clifford Geertz. ‘Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example’ *American Anthropologist* 59:32-54).




Cont.

Culture of a people can be understood as *the system of shared ideas and meanings, explicit and implicit, which a people use to interpret the world and which serve to pattern their behavior.*

Cultural Ecology

- Ecology → cultural ecology
 - Humans in interaction with their environment
- Adaptive strategies → culture as dynamic process
 - environmental setting
 - technology (tools, techniques, knowledge)
 - worldview
 - external forces and institutions




Adaptation, be it biological or cultural, represents a **better fit** to specific, local environments, not an inevitable stage in a ladder of progress...wheels, like wings, fins, and brains, are exquisite devices for certain purposes, not signs of intrinsic superiority." (Stephen Jay Gould, 1983)

Cultural ecology is the study of human adaptations to social and physical environments

An anthropologist is a person engaged in the practice of anthropology. Anthropology is the study of aspects of humans within past and present societies. Social anthropology, cultural anthropology and philosophical anthropology study the norms and values of societies.

Key Issues

- Carrying capacity = upper limit on production and population in a given environment
- Sustainability, stress
- Cultural basis of conflict
- Resources as factors in conflict



Since cultural ecology directs our attention to those aspects of the culture most related to making a living, anthropologists need to understand economic systems. We need a framework that allows us to compare all economic systems without being ethnocentric.

All societies

- Produce the things they need
- Exchange things with each other and people of other societies
- Consume things


Cultural ecology and economics

The way people use their culture to adapt to their particular environments

Often associated with subsistence strategies

- Land use, land tenure, kinship, residence are emic, parts of cultural codes—ideologies—that are important for how people produce things

emic: relating to or denoting an approach to the study or description of a particular language or culture in terms of its internal elements and their functioning rather than in terms of any existing external scheme

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- With a given technology in a given environment, people have to do some things a certain way or not at all. That explains cultural similarities.
 - People face different problems in different environments and with different technologies and that explains cultural differences.

Subsistence: the action or fact of maintaining or supporting oneself, especially at a minimal level.

e.g.: "the minimum income needed for subsistence"

SUBSISTENCE STRATEGIES

- Foraging (Hunter/Gatherer)
- Horticultural Horticulture is the science and art of growing plants, including fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs, nuts, and ornamental plants
- Pastoral
- Agricultural Horticulture is the practice of growing fruit, flowers, and vegetables, while Agriculture is growing crops for farming, food, and keeping animals

FORAGING

- very small groups (less than 100 people) organized in **bands**
- size limited by food supply in an area
- men were primarily hunters, while women and children gathered berries, nuts, roots
- **egalitarian** - if there was a chief, or “head man”, he was primarily an elder consulted for advice and influence
- frequent movement meant few material goods, and minimal social stratification / [Classification](#)
- pedestrian, equestrian, and aquatic (aquatic have the most permanent settlements)

HORTICULTURAL

- Distinct from agriculture in that there is no domestication
- Mostly seen in rainforests
- Fairly **egalitarian**, with a “**big man**”
Egalitarian: believing in or based on the principle that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.
- permanent villages can sometimes be erected
- requires lots of land, as crops must be rotated each year due to farming practices
- as a result, only small groups can be supported (under 200 people) in **tribes**
- crops are not heavily tended - no irrigation, fertilizers, little weeding

PASTORAL

- Range from pure pastoral nomadism to transhumance
- Typically in arid or mountainous regions where crops will not thrive
- Movement takes advantage of water sources and grazing land
- **Hierarchy** based on ownership, patriarchal **tribes**
- Some surplus of food and more reliable food source, resulting in some division of labor and trade for other goods.
- Besides dairy products and meat, animals also provided hair, leather, fertilizer, and transportation.
- Some warfare over pasturelands.
- Israel before settling in Canaan, approximately 1200 B.C. , was pastoral.

AGRICULTURAL

- Indicates domestication, irrigation, and usually fertilizers
- Domestication was an early practice of genetic modification through selective breeding of plants and animals, resulting in crops that produced the largest supply of good food, but required human intervention to continue.
- Invention of the plow and the use of animals to prepare fields was crucial
- Benefits - food surplus allows for division of labor and leisure time, allowing arts and sciences to develop
- [Sedentism is the practice of living in one place for a long time](#)
- Downfalls - sedentism tends to result in increased warfare and disease; much more labor intensive

INDUSTRIAL/POST-INDUSTRIAL

- England was the first industrial society, beginning in the 1800s
- Still rely on agriculture for food production, but their economic production relies primarily on machines
- You will learn about the Industrial Revolution in detail in Modern Omnibus

ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

- Two good definitions:
- The provision of goods and services to meet biological and social needs and wants
- A system of production, distribution, and consumption of resources
 - --- **Reciprocity** - sharing; giving items of fairly equal value in exchange for other items, either immediately or at a later time
 - --- **Redistribution** - all goods, food given to central leadership who apportion it amongst all members of the group
 - --- **Market exchange** - competitive buying and selling of commodities based on supply and demand; employs some type of currency


Thus...

- An increase in size of the society results in increase in structure, which in turn produces differences in power and roles of the members.
- Different members or groups of members also start to play different, specialized roles.

And as a result...

There is a movement from a military to an industrial society.

- At the beginning, society is characterized by the *compulsory cooperation* of its members – the military society.
- The industrial society is characterized by the *voluntary cooperation* of its members.
- The highest order is called the *Ethical State*, where common resources may be used to perfect the human character.
- The structural parts of society (ex. families, work) function interdependently to help society function. Therefore, social structures work together to preserve society.

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- As discussed, ecology is the study of the interaction between living things and their environment.
 - Cultural ecologists record other traditional and local knowledge that is of value to the wider world.
 - Cultural ecology is generally included within the discipline of anthropology, the study of human beings.