

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 7  
**Thinking about culture: Adaptation, meaning, and system**  
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- Quiz
- Middleton 47-53, 56-66 (Ch 3: Lived Difference)
  - p. 47, nice way of putting it: people are shaped by their cultures: by living in their own "neighborhood"
    - when we see different behavior in another neighborhood, we naturally try to understand it based on what we know
    - but the *assumptions we learned in our neighborhood may be irrelevant in a different neighborhood*
- 3 ways to approach (or explain) other cultures:
  - **1. culture as adaptation**
    - culture is like a biological adaptation
      - in biology, an adaptation is a feature or behavior that helps an organism survive and reproduce
        - like an owl's big eyes and sharp beak help it to hunt at night, thus survive, thus reproduce
      - in social science, an adaptation is a way of getting by in the given circumstances
        - like making bows and arrows help humans to hunt, thus survive, thus reproduce
        - other cultural adaptations:
          - farming
          - social methods for living in large settlements
          - warfare, etc.
      - "adaptive" means "fits the environment" or "produces success"
        - NOT "flexible", "changes with the circumstances", etc.
    - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach explains
      - how it might be an effective way of dealing with the given circumstances
        - looks at culture in terms of perceived needs and problems
        - makes sense of culture as a way of dealing with the situation that the people face
    - examples: seeing urban poor subcultures as understandable in terms of people sensibly dealing with problems they face
      - street-corner men have good reasons to turn down work
      - "disorganized families" are really adaptations to sporadic work, frequent jail time, and very scarce resources
        - they create a sharing support network with reciprocal obligations
  - **2. culture as meaning**
    - culture is a set of meanings assigned to things, and responses appropriate to those meanings
    - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach explains
      - how it makes sense in terms of the culture's system of meanings
        - Looks at interpretations of events and things; beliefs, values, attitudes
        - if we understand the meanings, the reactions to the meanings will make sense

- example: plowing a field
  - you can only understand how American and Peruvian farmers behave at plowing time by understanding the network of meanings that plowing is embedded in
  - In the US
    - plowing is an "improvement" of the land
    - at one time it conferred ownership
    - it is seen as converting land from unproductive wasteland to productive, useful farmland
    - Thus plowing is a straightforward good thing
    - It is a secular (practical, businesslike, not religious) activity with no particular supernatural connotations
    - Farmers just do it as a practical task, and feel a sense of accomplishment about it
  - In highland Peru
    - The earth and the landscape are home to powerful gods or spirits
      - Some even say that features of the landscape *are* these deities
    - These spirits or deities are powerful and personal, and can bring specific kinds of success or misfortune to those who have pleased or displeased them
    - Plowing is a physical violation of the earth, and thus of Pachamama, the spirit of the earth
    - Thus plowing is not just a secular matter, but one with serious supernatural and practical implications
    - so farmers must appease Pachamama with apologies and offerings before plowing
  - Knowing this, you can understand why
    - American farmers plow their fields with no particular ceremony
    - while traditional Peruvian highland farmers make offerings beforehand
- example: the same beliefs apply to digging for archaeological reasons
  - so even some young, urban archaeologists in Peru insist on making an offering to Pachamama before starting excavations
  - and if you don't, they may see misfortunes like injuries, or even just not finding good data, as resulting from disregarding the offering
  - you can only understand why they think and act this way by understanding the meanings they attribute to plowing, the earth, offerings, etc.
- **3. culture as a system** (of interrelated parts)
  - culture is a system of institutions, roles, and relationships that are all interconnected
    - any one aspect of the culture is affected by many others
    - economics interact w. politics, religion, migration, etc.
  - each aspect has gotten to its current state through a history of development and change
    - which helps to explain how it is now
  - a change in one thing affects many others
- So, to explain something about a culture, this approach looks for
  - How a variety of different institutions and pressures are interconnected and affect it

- Or sometimes just one institution, belief, etc. that one might not initially think was related
- Highlighting a connection that was not obvious
- expanding the known system in which it is embedded
- Often including a historical viewpoint
  - X change in Q area led to Y change in the area we are looking at...
  - And how, and why
- example: say we want to explain why there are so many pay-by-the-hour internet shops ("Cabinas Internet") in even small Peruvian towns
  - because most people are too poor to afford their own computers and internet access
  - yet Peru has a decent public education system, such that even poor kids in small towns are reasonably literate
    - so Peru has a big demand for such stores
  - Peru had many government-owned businesses
    - and it had long been customary for politicians to reward even low-level supporters with jobs in these companies
    - so most were bloated with employees who did little or nothing
  - during the late 90's, there was a conservative swing in US economic policies
  - the US and the world bank offered strong economic incentives for governments to privatize national industries
  - in part because of the US and World Bank's pressure, the Peruvian government decided to privatize the national telephone company, airline, natural gas company, various mines, etc.
  - to make them more attractive to buyers, they laid off a lot of the excess employees
  - the law required the government to give them balloon payments when they lost their jobs
  - so there were suddenly lots of unemployed people with sizable chunks of money
  - cheap computers were just reaching international markets, and the internet was just picking up steam
  - many invested in setting up these internet places
  - this is a systemic explanation in that it emphasizes the interaction between many different areas
    - Peru's economic picture
    - Peru's educational system
    - US politics
    - technological innovations
    - the social phenomenon of the internet
    - Peru's tradition of political patronage
    - Peru's labor laws, etc.
- example: say we want to understand why women and men have relatively equal status in some societies, while women have lower status in others (Middleton p. 62)
  - We need to consider:
    - the mode of subsistence (hunting, farming, factory work, professional work...), and thus family arrangements, and thus gender roles

- the economy and labor market
- amount and nature of warfare
- relative income contributed by each gender
- degree of segregation between public and domestic spheres of activity
- degree of sociocultural complexity
- we will look more at gender roles and these influences on them later in this course
- example: ethnic groups and boundaries seem to be about group identity, but often arise in response to seemingly unrelated changes in other aspects of life (Middleton p 64-65)
- ethnicity is often about power, wealth, and competition, more than the "essence" of who people are
  - a recently coined term: "idinterest groups": combines senses of ethnic, religious, or other identity with economic or political interest
  - probably most ethnic groups are more realistically seen as "idinterest" groups
- ethnic boundaries often harden in times of hardship and competition, loosen in good times
  - that is, ethnic groupings and identity can be explained in part by looking at economics
    - this is a culture-as-system kind of explanation
  - example: anti-immigrant feelings, laws, etc. often rise when unemployment rises, as in reunified Germany, or here recently
- ethnicity is negotiated, historical, dynamic; NOT essential, self-evident, unchanging, obvious
  - this is a culture-as-system view of ethnicity
- Monaghan and Just 2000 Ch 2: Bee Larvae and Onion Soup: Culture
  - (the first few readings from this book are online, in case there are delays in getting the book. The later ones are not online. So, buy it!)
  - This chapter discusses various concepts of culture
  - And a hodgepodge of key figures, with minimal info about each
    - you should recognize the names and their main ideas
    - and it is good for you to think about these ideas
    - but for this class, don't worry about getting a deep understanding of all these theories
- Franz Boas
  - founder of American anthropology
  - environment's effect on culture
  - "cultural glasses"
- how "integrated" is culture?
  - that is, is there an underlying, unifying logic to each culture?
  - yes, there is an underlying logic to every culture:
    - Karl Marx: the mode of production (technology and social relations of subsistence) largely shapes all the rest
    - Sigmund Freud: the structure of the human unconscious largely shapes all the rest
    - Ruth Benedict: some general theme largely shapes all the rest

- each culture follows a general psychological type or theme, like "Dionysian" or "paranoid schizophrenic"
- more on this in the next readings and class
- Clifford Geertz: a culture is a "fabric of meaning and belief" that fits together logically
  - we can "read" those meanings, a culture's categories and relationships of them, from cultural "texts"
  - such as the Balinese cockfight
  - more on this in the next readings and class
- Ward Goodenough and others: a culture is like a grammar
  - it is a set of consistent rules that allow people to interact successfully
- Roy Rappaport, Marvin Harris, and others: a culture is a self-regulating system
  - with feedbacks that tend to keep it in equilibrium with the environment
  - more on this in the next readings and class
- Émile Durkheim: the categories and structure of social organization are the model for all the rest
- Claude Lévi-Strauss: culture accumulates bits and pieces over time, but they are selectively adopted and assembled according the culture's existing logic
  - French anthropologist
  - every culture's logic or structure of classifying things boils down to universal human tendency to see the world in terms of binary oppositions
    - male : female
    - life : death
    - nature : culture
    - etc.
- Michel Foucault: culture is a coherent set of categories and relationships, or structures
  - French anthropologist
  - these categories and structures of culture help authorities' ability to oppress others
  - authorities adjust categories and structure to serve their purposes
  - resisters best tactic is to reject these categories and structures
- no, there is no organizing logic to cultures:
  - Robert Lowie: a culture is just an arbitrary accumulation of bits and pieces determined by the vagaries of history
- does culture exist outside of or beyond individuals (as a "superorganic")?
  - Alfred Kroeber: culture as superorganic
    - coral reef metaphor
      - formed gradually by the actions of many individuals
      - existed before current individuals were born
      - structures their lives
      - will continue long after them
    - culture is superorganic in that it follows patterns of change and organization that are beyond any individual
- Monaghan and Just: still, all agreed that culture is
  - Arbitrary

- Learned
- Thus a useful concept with which to oppose ethnocentrism
  - (ideas and practices are arbitrary; ours are not necessary best)
- and racism
  - (most differences are learned, not inborn and unchangeable)