

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 18
Constructing Identity: Self, group, and rites of passage
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- Identity is a cultural construct
 - as we started to look at last time
 - identity usually involves gender
 - the meaning of which may depend on control of valued resources in public circumstances, if Friedl is right
 - identity usually involves social race (in many societies)
 - the meaning of a given social race category may depend on
 - history
 - in our case, the history of slavery, discriminatory laws, civil rights reform, etc.
 - where people live
 - real or imagined economic differences, etc.
 - possibly influenced by linguistic or cognitive processes like
 - avoiding cognitive dissonance
 - or habits of thought involving marked and unmarked categories
 - as we discussed earlier
 - identity usually involves ethnicity
 - identity often involves birth or descent
 - as in the Indian caste system, where people are (were) born into certain groups with specified roles
- Even the concept of personhood (what a person in general is) is culturally constructed, differs from one culture to the next
 - Nuyoo Mixtec personhood includes a “coessential animal” born at the same moment
 - Explains talents, interests, luck, dreams, status and role in life
 - Just as well as “id, ego, and superego”...
 - 16th century Mixtec personhood involved membership in a group that is determined by one's date of birth (Monaghan & Just p. 135-136)
 - One belongs to one of twenty types, based on day of birth
 - All of which are necessary for a complete society
 - Identity is in terms of social relations
 - This is actually always true, even in the US
 - Just emphasized more or less in different cultures
- Dou Donggo personhood, also, is determined in part by social relations (M&J pp. 71-74)
 - membership in a criss-crossing set of social groups
 - kin groups, residential groups, etc.
 - Elder to La Ninde: "You think you belong to yourself, but you don't! You are owned by your parents, you are owned by your kinsfolk, you are owned by your village, you are owned by God. You can't just do as you please!"
 - Dou Donggo persons are not autonomous individuals, but persons that are nodes in networks of relationships...

- US personhood is autonomous, individual, responsible for self and not fundamentally part of something else
 - according to our ideal culture
 - but is it really?
 - isn't part of identity for us also tied to groups we inherently belong to?
 - family
 - social race
 - ethnicity (may or may not be negotiable)
- For example, in US culture, identity may involve
 - gender
 - social race
 - age
 - hair color (blondes and redheads are supposed to have certain other characteristics, too)
 - family (Hatfields or McCoys; Pelosis; Kings; etc.)
 - language, dialect, accent
 - ethnicity (ie. perceived cultural group membership)
 - wealth
 - education
 - class
 - political party or views
 - sports played or followed
 - dress style, music preferences, etc.
- Some aspects of identity are genuinely individual
 - personality, abilities, interests, idiosyncrasies
- but many aspects of identity involve membership in existing cultural categories
- these categories themselves are not "out there", but are culturally constructed
 - we arbitrary choose certain features as appropriate to use in categorizing people's identity, and arbitrarily consider others to be irrelevant
 - for example, we arbitrarily do not typically categorize people by
 - height
 - which is why the song "Short People" by Randy Newman was funny:
 - it treated height as a legitimate way to categorize people
 - it treated short people as a social category
 - right or left handedness
 - day of the week on which you were born
 - these are not deemed important in our culture
 - yet in other cultures, they might be
- other cultures use different categories for constructing identity
 - Nuyoo identity involves the person's co-essential animal
 - the 16th century Mixtec categorized everyone by which day of the 20-day month they were born on
 - to them this was an obvious and essential feature of identity

- so much so that people born in the five-day year-end period without these named days had no normal identity!
 - they were said to be worthless
 - not even to have a real physical form, so they were not treated if they get ill
 - at Yale, the first question when freshmen meet is "Which college you are in?"
 - despite the colleges being assigned randomly
- **othering**: establishing identity by contrast to some other group
 - emphasizing the importance of the difference between the groups
 - *they* have a distinctly different identity from *us* - usually not a positive one
 - by contrast, emphasizes the homogeneity or solidarity within our own group
 - defining "others" is used to define one's self by what one is not
- people typically judge these aspects of identity
 - **positive identity**: good characteristics - the ones *we* have
 - **negative identity**: bad characteristics - the ones *they* have
 - note that the "positive" and "negative" both have two meanings at the same time
 - what we *are* like (positive) vs. what we are *not* like (negative)
 - things we think are *good* (positive) vs. things we think are *bad* (negative)
- individual identities are created and maintained by a social process
 - some aspects of identity are chosen by the person
 - Robbins: an "identity toolbox" of existing culturally constructed categories
 - from which individuals choose some and reject others
 - these categories communicate one's desired identity to others
 - of course, some aspects of identity are not voluntary
 - many aspects of identity are determined by other people
 - and what you consider your own identity is strongly influenced by how people react to you
 - if people say you are smart or act like you are attractive, you will start to feel that is part of your identity
 - if they react negatively to you, you may incorporate that into your identity, or resist it by changing how you present yourself
 - identity is created by a feedback between the cultural cues you present and how people respond to them
- How is identity learned or established?
 - one way is through rites of passage: rituals that mark and produce a change in an individual's identity
 - christening, baptism
 - quinceñera, debutante's ball, etc.
 - high school graduation, university graduation
 - marriage
 - funeral
 - military boot camp
 - idealized pattern of rite of passage
 - 1. **separation** from previous identity
 - 2. **transition**

- **liminal state** or **liminality**: state of being between states, right on the line, not in any of the normal categories
- often a difficult or uncomfortable state, since the normal cultural rules apply to people in known identities, not to those who don't fit into any identity
- a person in a liminal state is not quite in society or this world
 - may be more able to experience the supernatural world, as in shamans
- 3. **incorporation** into the new identity
- different rites of passage emphasize different parts of this idealized sequence
- shared liminality can create strong bonds: group membership as part of identity
 - African age sets, college graduating classes, priesthoods, military
- Rites of passage are especially emphasized in many societies for the transition from childhood to adulthood
- example: Maasai reading about Tepilit Ole Saitoti
 - how does this fit with the ideal pattern above?
 - does it work to create adult identity out of juvenile identity?
 - Note that it is a group of boys who prepare and go through it together
 - membership in this group means an intense shared experience
 - membership in that particular group of initiates becomes a key part of their subsequent identity
 - preparation is separation from old identity
 - collecting feathers, wax, honey for beer, etc.
 - three days before, discards all his belongings and is shaved: more separation from previous identity
 - building tension is also separation, building into a liminal state
 - sister and others withdraw their support
 - recently circumcised warriors ritually ridicule him
 - circumciser splashes white paint on his face
 - marking him as in a special, liminal state
 - gets gifts of cattle immediately afterwards
 - starting into the new identity
 - two weeks of recovery: liminality
 - now an “initiate”: a liminal state
 - part of a group of boys who were recently circumcised
 - hunt birds to make feather headdresses
 - use blunt wax arrows to shoot at girls
 - wander around being feasted and well treated
 - considered unclean, must use sticks to eat food without touching it
 - when healed, discard the special cloaks, headdresses, etc.
 - ceremony of shaving head to become a “newly shaven warriors”, Irkeleani
 - incorporation into new identity
 - now proud, happy, considered responsible
 - now allowed to have sex
- example: Nigerian fattening reading

- how does this fit with the ideal pattern above?
- Separation
- Liminal state, special decorations, white face paint
- Physical change; psychological change (training, indoctrination, initiation, enculturation)
- Incorporation into new identity:
 - Ekombi dance on emerging
 - often immediate wedding

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