

## Explaining culture: Cultural materialism and culture as text

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- First: Clarifying some terms that Lee uses for ethnic groups of people in the Kalahari – see the diagram in the slides
- Main population groups
  - **San**: southern Africans who speak “click” languages and are traditionally at least partially foragers
  - **Khoi**: physically like San, but keep herds
  - **Khoi-San**: lumps Khoi and San together; used by those who think the distinct foraging group is recent
  - **Bantu**: physically, culturally, linguistically different, pastoralists and farmers, relatively recent immigrants
    - sometimes called **Blacks** in Lee
    - include **Tswana** and **Herero**
- Subdivisions of the San
  - **Black San**: speak Central San Tshu-Khwe click language, but physically like the Bantu: tall, dark skinned
    - apparently due to lots of intermarriage...?
    - or due to Bantu people adopting a San language?
  - **Yellow San**: short, paler, deep chest, delicate faces
    - Speakers of **!Kung (Northern San; called !Kung San)**
      - Speakers of “!Kung proper”, the Vasekla
      - Speakers of **Ju/'hoansi** (called Ju/'hoansi-!Kung, Ju/wasi, **Ju**)
        - those in Dobe area are called **Dobe Ju/'hoansi** or **Dobe !Kung**
      - Speakers of ≠Dau//keisi
    - Speakers of Tshu-Khwe (Central San)
    - Speakers of **!Xo** (Southern San)
    - Speakers of **//Xam** (further south, in South Africa; thought extinct until speakers revealed themselves after end of apartheid)
- This is a good example of the complex way in which people classify each other
  - at different levels, based on physical traits, subsistence practices, language, dialect, location
  - partially crosscutting: “Black San” speak a click language, but are physically indistinguishable from the Bantu
    - there is no way to arrange these terms in a perfectly logical tree
  - the categories are all culturally constructed...
- Cultural materialism (Marvin Harris)
  - Why do Indian Hindus consider cows sacred, and polluting to eat?
    - Harris: because this belief serves a practical, material purpose
  - Concepts:
    - **Infrastructure**: systems of “production and reproduction”
      - the basic practices that provide for survival and continuation of the society

- especially food production practices and technology
- but also other basics such as how people survive the weather (housing, clothing, heating, moving seasonally, etc.)
- how they move around (walking, horseback, cars, etc.)
- and so on
- **Structure:** how social relations are arranged
  - social organization, kinship, economics, politics
- **Superstructure:** systems of meanings
  - religion, symbols, philosophy, ideology, worldview, aesthetics (art, design, music, dance)
- **Cultural materialism:** the view that infrastructure shapes or determines structure, which in turn shapes or determines superstructure
  - aspects of culture can be ultimately explained in terms of survival and reproduction
  - these explanations usually involve ecology and/or economics
  - that is, the material realities of life determine the rest of culture
- Classic example of cultural materialism, suggested by Harris:
  - Why do Indian Hindus consider cows sacred, and polluting to eat?
    - **pollution:** in this use, means the taint one gets from committing a wrong (a sin)
    - may affect your afterlife (or next life)
    - may cause people to shun or despise you
    - weak examples: becoming a teenage single mother, cheating on your spouse (Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina, with his Argentine mistress)
- Cattle are needed to
  - pull plows (male cattle: bull, bullock)
  - provide fertilizer (dung)
    - both of the above are essential to producing enough food by farming to feed the population
  - provide fuel (dung)
  - provide milk (female cattle: cow)
  - provide leather, horn, meat, etc. to non-Hindus
- Supporting them is almost cost-free
- In times of drought, people would be tempted to eat them
  - but this would be disastrous in the longer run
  - since next season, there would not be enough cattle to plow, fertilize, provide milk, etc.
- a simple rule against eating cows would not be enough to stop hungry people from doing so
- so a really strong, religious prohibition does the job
  - necessary to overcome desperate individuals' short-term needs for the long-term survival benefit of the group
- it may not have been invented for this practical purpose
  - but groups that held this belief did better than those that did not
  - so over time, it became widespread

- Harris strengthens his case by giving a materialist explanation for a related, but different rule about an animal that cannot be eaten
  - Why do Muslims consider pigs dirty (as opposed to sacred), and polluting to eat?
    - Pigs provide little besides meat
    - Supporting them is costly and wastes resources in a desert environment, where Arabs developed this rule
    - they eat food that people would otherwise eat
  - Well-off families could afford to keep them
    - but this would harm everyone else by reducing the food supply
  - So a very strong prohibition on even having them around at all is needed to prevent hunger for the poorer members of the group
  - so Muslims see pigs as unclean and bad
    - thus they don't eat *or* keep them
    - preventing the waste of resources
    - benefiting the survival of the entire group
    - by preventing the wealthy from making a self-serving choice to raise pigs
  - while Hindus see cows as sacred and good
    - so they don't eat them
    - but they do keep them
    - preserving their source of dung, milk, and labor to pull plows
    - benefiting the survival of the entire group
    - by preventing farmers from killing the essential cows for short-term gain during famine caused by drought
  - both ideas about what is edible are arbitrary social constructs
    - but they are understandable in practical terms of cultural materialism
  - Harris' cultural materialist explanations are essentially the same as what Middleton called explanations of culture in terms of adaptation
    - that was just his way of expressing the same set of ideas
- Culture as text (Clifford Geertz)
  - “Reading” the Balinese cockfight
    - an activity that almost all Balinese are passionate about
      - linguistic clues indicate symbolism
      - cocks “mean” men, masculinity
        - same double-entendre or pun as in English
    - cockfights are a metaphor for disputes, political competition, trials, wars, etc.
    - people bet on their kin's or fellow villagers' cocks
    - yet no one expects to significantly profit in the long run
      - and no one actually gains or loses much status, either
    - cockfights can be seen as representing men's struggle for status
      - it is a “story” about how life works
      - that Balinese “tell” to each other when they participate in a cockfight
        - by using the symbols and setting up the situation so that the story plays out as expected

- and Balinese “read” the “text” when they see and interpret a cockfight
- “Reading” American football
  - an activity that almost all Americans are passionate about
    - linguistic (and visual) clues indicate symbolism
    - football players “mean” men, masculinity
    - cheerleaders “mean” women, femininity
  - football is a metaphor for war, politics, business, romance
  - people root for their home teams
  - yet no one expects to significantly profit in the long run
    - and no one actually gains or loses much status
  - football can be seen as representing life, war, politics, gender roles, etc.
    - it is a “story” about how life works
    - that Americans “tell” to each other
    - and “read” when they see and interpret a football game
- do Americans really think this way?
  - George Carlin on the language of baseball and football
  - General David Petraeus, Sept. 7, 2007, letter to personnel of the multinational force in Iraq:
    - “We are, in short, a long way from the goal line, but we do have the ball and we are driving down the field.”
  - Alan Dundess, an anthropologist at UC Berkeley, wrote a famous paper “reading” aspects of American football as referring to homosexuality
    - which was then popularized in the media
    - he actually got death threats!
    - apparently some people do “read” gender messages in American football, and feel pretty strongly about them
- Why is “Lingerie Football” apparently funny or interesting?
  - Photo of game between Dallas Desire and Los Angeles Temptations
  - it is funny precisely because it upends the gender imagery we expect
    - humor is often about pointing out or violating assumptions or unstated rules
      - laughter releases the tension caused by being faced with contradictions
    - comedians (like George Carlin) often do something very close to anthropology, in seeking out contradictions and the assumptions they reveal
  - if seeing the picture of lingerie football in class makes you even a little uncomfortable,
    - that is a hint that it really is touching something real about how we think about football and gender...
    - and that the idea of “reading” football as a “text” about gender in American society might make some sense