

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 14
Constructing Identity: Self, group, and rites of passage
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- Identity is a social construct
 - As Robbins says, you are not born knowing who you are: you learn your identities
 - you interact with others on the basis of their identities
 - you categorize people so that you can apply learned rules about how to interact with them
 - parent, sibling, fellow student, professor, boss, potential girlfriend, etc.
 - others respond to you based on what they perceive your identity to be
 - you try to project an identity that involves who you want others to think you are
 - and you learn from their responses who they actually think you are
 - so identity is learned and negotiated
 - constructing a person's identity is a
 - social process, accumulating through many interactions
 - cultural process, involving shared, cultural ideas about
 - what kinds of identities are possible, normal, deviant, desirable, etc.
 - and an individual process, in that each person has or develops his/her own unique wants, abilities, etc.
- Even the concept of personhood (what a “person” in general is) is culturally constructed
 - the concept of “a person” differs from one culture to the next
 - some cultures have more “egocentric” concepts of personhood or self
 - this is NOT your usual use of “egocentric” to mean “selfish”
 - **egocentric concept of personhood:** persons are
 - independent actors, responsible for themselves,
 - with inherent personal characteristics that are relatively permanent as they pass through various roles in life
 - laziness, honesty, optimism, etc.
- Examples:
 - in popular Euroamerican culture of the 20th century, a “person” was comprised of a conscious mind and an unconscious mind
 - two entities only partially aware of each other, both influencing thought and behavior
 - together, they made up your identity
 - you could understand people's identities by using concepts about the conscious, unconscious, and how they interacted
 - often, you needed help from a professional to do this
 - Nuyoo Mixtec personhood involves a “coessential animal” born at the same moment
 - the “coessential animal” could be any species
 - it lives in the forest while you live in society
 - things that happen to it affect you, and things that happen to you, affect it
 - you can understand yourself (or others) in terms of your coessential animal
 - it explains your talents, interests, luck, dreams, status and role in life, etc.

- usually, you need to consult a professional (shaman) to learn who your coessential animal is, interpret your dreams about it, etc.
- other cultures have more “sociocentric” concepts of personhood or self
 - **sociocentric concept of personhood**: persons are
 - nodes in networks of social relationships,
 - composites of social roles,
 - whose identity and behavior depend on the current social context
 - and in a sense do not exist outside of some specific social context
 - Robbins: “nobody is anybody except in relation to somebody”
- Examples
 - in Robbins:
 - Gitskan naming
 - Japan
 - 16th century Mixtec personhood involved membership in a group that is determined by one’s date of birth (Monaghan & Just pp. 135-136)
 - You belonged to one of twenty types, based on day of birth
 - All of the types were thought necessary for a complete society
 - they had different general occupations and status
 - Identity was partially in terms of roles and social relations of these groups
 - similar to people who take astrological Zodiac signs very seriously: a key part of who you are and how others relate to you is determined by the moment you happened to be born
 - More typically: Dou Donggo personhood is determined in part by social relations (Monaghan & Just pp. 71-74)
 - identity is made up of membership in a criss-crossing set of social groups
 - kin groups, residential groups, etc.
 - Elder to La Ninde (the guy who supposedly assaulted ina Mone in the case earlier this semester):
 - “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 rather persons that are nodes in networks of relationships...
- the concept of personhood in the US more on the “egocentric” side
 - we generally think that persons are
 - autonomous,
 - individual,
 - responsible for self
 - identity is internal, not fundamentally part of an external social context
 - we value this autonomy so much that young people tend to cut themselves loose from their parents
 - and the parents push them out on their own
 - success in life is only really valued if it is achieved by your own efforts, without help from the family, government, etc.

- so much so that people tend to insist that they achieved success independently
 - ignoring or denying the help they have gotten by being born into a well-off family, getting subsidized student loans and education, etc.
- this concept of independent identity is part of our ideal culture
- but is it so in our real culture?
 - isn't part of your identity also tied to groups you belong to by no choice of your own?
 - family
 - gender
 - social race
 - ethnicity
- Point: identity is best understood as a combination of egocentric and sociocentric aspects
 - independent, autonomous identity with permanent qualities
 - *and* identity comprised of one's position in social networks
 - different cultures emphasize one or the other relatively more
- So, how are individual identities constructed and maintained? How do you establish who you are?
 - individual identities are created and maintained by social processes
 - some aspects of identity are chosen by the person
 - working with what Robbins calls an “identity toolbox” of existing culturally constructed categories
 - from which individuals choose some and reject others
 - culturally defined categories
 - student, athlete, nerd, gangster, theater person, preppie, frat brother, stoner, etc.
 - and “tools” used to establish these categories
 - where you hang out, your choice of clothes, music you listen to, phrases you do or don't say, etc.
 - these categories communicate your desired identity to others
 - some aspects of identity are not voluntary
 - many aspects of identity are determined by other people
 - what you consider to be 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
 - your identity is created by a feedback between the cultural cues you present and how people respond to them
- identity usually involves
 - gender
 - we will look at gender more carefully next time
 - social race (in many, but not all, societies)
 - as we have discussed a bit before

- ethnicity
 - a socially constructed identity category
 - always in contrast to other ethnicities
 - based on perceived commonalities of
 - origin
 - language
 - culture
 - history
 - sometimes social race
 - often requires being born into the ethnicity
 - supposedly differs from social race
 - by emphasizing cultural and historical features more than physical ones
 - but in practice, the difference between race and ethnicity is not sharp
 - People tend to think of their ethnicity as inherent and permanent
 - this is ideal culture; the *idea* of what ethnicity is supposed to be
 - But in practice (in *real* culture), ethnic identities are constructed, negotiated, and changeable to fit circumstances
 - example: “Native American” as an ethnic category
 - unites groups that once considered themselves ethnically different
 - even hated and fought each other
 - example: you might highlight your Italian heritage (say) in one context, and not mention it at all in another
 - Who decides what someone’s ethnicity is?
 - the person him/herself
 - others who classify the person
 - these two opinions of ethnicity might not match!
 - that alone shows how much ethnicity is an arbitrary social construct, not a real, inherent, observable fact
- kinship, birth or descent
 - as in the Indian caste system, where people are (were) born into certain groups with specified roles
 - or any society where some families are wealthier than others, more politically connected than others, etc.
 - Rockefellers, Kennedys, Hatfields or McCoys; etc.
- age
 - you treat people differently depending on their age
 - many African cultures have explicit “age sets”
 - every male born in a certain range of several years is a member of a given “age set”
 - members of the same age set feel solidarity with each other, connectedness, share similar experiences, tend to support each other, etc.
- in US culture, identity may also involve
 - language, dialect, accent
 - wealth

- education
- class
- political party or views
- sports played or followed
- preference of music
- dress style
- hair color (blondes and redheads are supposed to have certain other characteristics, too) ... and so on
- Some aspects of identity are genuinely individual
 - personality, abilities, interests, idiosyncrasies
- but many aspects of identity involve membership in existing cultural categories (part of Robbins' "identity toolbox")
 - these categories themselves are not "out there", but are culturally constructed
 - our culture arbitrarily specifies that certain features are appropriate to use in categorizing people's identity,
 - and arbitrarily defines others as irrelevant to identity
 - for example, we arbitrarily do *not* typically categorize people by
 - right or left handedness
 - day of the week on which you were born
 - height
 - which is why the song "Short People" by Randy Newman was funny:
 - it treated height as a legitimate way to categorize people
 - that is, it treated short people as a social category
 - these are not deemed relevant to identity in our culture
 - yet in other cultures, they might be
 - in medieval France, lefthandedness supposedly indicated that one was a witch – an identity with severe consequences!
 - as we saw, 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 most people being assigned randomly to a college, one's college immediately become a major part of one's identity
 - yet totally irrelevant to anyone but another Yale student
- **othering**: establishing identity by contrast to some other group
 - defining others as different in order to define ourselves by what we are not
 - 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
- example: anti-immigrant attitudes
 - “immigrants are intruders, take our jobs, are under-educated...”
 - lumping and describing the “others” like this is a way for the speaker to define his/her own group by contrast
 - “we are legitimately here, we deserve those jobs, we are well-educated...”
- othering typically involves value judgments about 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)
- What specific practices teach or establish identity?
 - one kind of practice that establishes identity is **rites of passage**: rituals that mark and produce a change in an individual’s identity
 - (“rite” is an old-fashioned word for “ritual”; it is not related to “right”)
 - baptism: transition from virtually pre-human infant in the natural, wild state to human infant accepted by God and Church
 - coming of age: transition from childhood to adulthood
 - quinceñera, debutante’s ball, etc.
 - circumcision, as in Saitoti reading
 - fattening for marriage, as in Simmons reading
 - high school graduation, university graduation: transition from student to educated adult
 - marriage (transition from single and independent to married with obligation to other person, and link between two families)
 - military boot camp: transition from civilian to soldier
 - funeral: transition from living person to memory
 - 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, but not there yet: still in a special, liminal state
- two weeks of recovery: liminality
- now an “initiate”: a liminal state
 - part of a group of other boys who were also 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
 - a classic sign of liminality
 - people avoid too much contact with those in liminal states
 - they are not quite normal, a bit unsettling or dangerous
- when healed, discard the special cloaks, headdresses, etc.
- ceremony of shaving head to become a “newly shaven warriors”, Irkeleani
 - finally, incorporation into the new identity as a warrior and an adult
 - 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