

Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Class 3
The concept of culture: Deeper than you think

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- Sara Jones, from COTS
- If you haven't sent me a photo yet, remember to do so – “a203-11f-SimpsonBart.jpg”
- Kluckhohn, Queer Customs
 - comment on the language and assumptions of Kluckhohn's article
 - written right after WWII, hence references to a Japanese Bansa charge and relocation camps.
 - some aspects of the language are dated and no longer acceptable in current writing
 - but we forgive them here because at the time, they were standard
 - "man", "mankind", "he" in every case
 - “primitive tribes” p. 10
 - Basically explaining the concept of **culture**
 - What is culture?
 - Kluckhohn gives at least 8 definitions or descriptions (or more, depending on what you count), plus at least one attributed to someone else (Ruth Benedict)
 - “the total lifeway of people, the social legacy the individual acquires from his group” p. 6
 - “that part of the environment that is the creation of man” p. 6
 - that is, the material culture we surround ourselves with, plus...
 - the shared ideas that affect how we perceive and interact with our environment
 - interpretations of things
 - rules of behavior and social relations, etc.
 - “a kind of blueprint for all of life's activities” p. 6
 - “a people's design for living” p. 7
 - “a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up (in memories of men; in books and objects) for future use” p. 9
 - humans are born with less instinctive behavior than other animals, more ability to learn to do different things p. 9
 - learned culture replaces instinct among humans p. 9
 - “the distinctive ways of life of ... a group of people” p. 9
 - “our social legacy, as contrasted with our organic heredity” p. 10
 - all humans experience the same general biological facts and events
 - but different cultures place different meanings on them
 - which then call for different interpretations and responses
 - hunger
 - puberty
 - death
 - sex
 - “a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men” p.

- “Culture is like a map. ... If you know a culture, you will know your way around in the life of a society” p. 11
- A different approach to defining culture (not from the Kluckhohn article)
- Anthropologists generally agree that culture has the following characteristics: It is...
 - **learned**
 - any normal child learns the culture in which he or she is raised
 - Kluckhohn's example of the child of American missionaries raised in China
 - the child looked Euro-American, but thought and acted like a Chinese person
 - adults can learn other cultures too, but adults take longer to adopt a culture, and may never become fully acculturated
 - **shared**
 - that is, numerous people hold roughly the same set of beliefs, values, etc.
 - if beliefs, etc. are not shared, then they are just individual quirks, not culture
 - **symbolic**
 - symbols are things that refer to other things
 - A red octagon outlined in white refers to the concept “stop”
 - the symbol “means” something else
 - saying that culture is symbolic means that culture is essentially about *meanings* that people place onto, or read into, the world
 - that is, by placing meanings on things, culture turns objects, actions, etc. into symbols of other things or ideas
 - a black and silver sweatshirt with certain designs on it *means* “the wearer is an Oakland Raiders fan, passionate about football, etc.”
 - being male *means* that the male person should act in certain ways, and not in others
 - these meanings, interpretations, or ideas are the essence of culture
 - ... much more on this later and throughout the course
 - **integrated**
 - that is, its many parts fit together in a generally (but not necessarily completely) coherent, logical way
 - two senses of integration (at least!)
 - **organizational** integration
 - culture is a system of interconnected parts
 - each affecting, and affected by, many others
 - systems of production, exchange, and consumption
 - systems of social relations, family, marriage, class, etc.
 - systems of religious belief and practices
 - and many others
 - changing one aspect generally creates ripples of change through other aspects
 - **cognitive** integration
 - the different ideas, values, beliefs, etc. of the culture fit together logically
 - they make sense with each other
 - they often share common some broad, common themes, underlying logic, and values and beliefs

- examples:
 - in some cultures, a strong value placed on respect or honor may influence many aspects of the culture
 - or an emphasis on individualism
 - or an emphasis on conformity and the good of the group
 - or aggression... etc.
- **practical** (often put as "**adaptive**" in the ecological or evolutionary sense)
 - that is, many aspects of culture are ways of dealing with practical problems
 - of the physical environment
 - like getting food and keeping warm and dry
 - of the social environment
 - like resolving conflicts, forming a family, etc.
 - of the emotional or cognitive environment
 - like handling death, unpredictable events, etc.
 - a culture's the ways of dealing with these problems may not always be effective, but they are meant to be
- **naturalized** and **unconsidered**
 - the meanings that culture places on the world seem natural, normal, inherently human
 - most people do not consciously question or check their cultures values and beliefs
 - people just assume that they are true facts of nature
 - for example:
 - most US women find the notion of polygyny (a husband having multiple wives) obviously, naturally wrong; it would never work
 - due to natural jealousy
 - Koryak women of Siberia (like some Shiite women of Iraq, some Mormon women of Utah, etc.) feel that polygyny is normal, natural, and good
 - to them, being restricted to *monogamy* would be obviously, naturally wrong
 - each would think the other was mistaken about polygyny
 - The Shi'ite women in Iraq in the 1950s that you meet in *Guests of the Sheik*, like others in recent news reports, say of polygyny: "Our way is better"
- Culture is **arbitrary**
 - not established by fixed features of the real world
 - arbitrary ideas that differ from culture to culture
 - as in Kluckhohn's example of Native Americans of the same clan and white US brother and sister both being repelled at physical contact
 - "equally nonrational responses, culturally standardized unreason" p. 8
 - "arbitrary" does not mean "random"
 - arbitrary beliefs or ideas are probably often present for a reason
 - so the question for anthropologists is: why does a given culture have its arbitrary beliefs, and not others, which are equally possible?
 - where did those ideas come from?
 - what function do they serve?
 - who benefits from these ideas, and what do they do to preserve them?

- why do people continue to believe them, or why do they change?
- Culture’s influence is profound: even individualists know and mostly follow their culture's prescriptions
 - of dress, eating, behavior, etc.
 - even what an individualist resists, he or she must share enough to understand and manipulate
 - individualistic Goths, bikers, punks, hippies...
 - "How to be a nonconformist like everyone else"
- Kluckhohn points out that culture is not a force - it is an abstraction for the convenience of discussion
 - *culture* doesn’t assign meanings; *people* do
 - *culture* does not do things; *people* do
 - be careful not to “**reify**”
 - “to regard an abstraction as a material thing”
 - reification tends to lead to sloppy thinking and meaningless statements
 - ex: “*democracy* is on the march”
 - as if democracy had a will like a person, or had momentum like a physical object
 - ex: “we will defeat *terror*”
 - as if terror was a being that could be injured or put in jail
 - “American culture is taking over the world”
 - no; many people are adopting aspects of American culture
- society vs. culture
 - **society** = “group of people who interact more with each other than they do with other individuals” p. 9
 - **culture** = “the distinctive ways of life of such a group” p. 9
- Boundaries between cultures are fuzzy, not “real”
 - we just make up these divisions for ease of discussing different cultures and societies
- Cultures may also be subdivided
 - subcultures within cultures
 - we could discuss “American culture”
 - or “Urban American culture” vs “Suburban American Culture” vs. “Rural American culture”...
 - or “American youth culture” vs. “American ‘Boomer’ culture”, etc.
 - or “Euroamerican culture” vs. “African-American culture” vs....
- Background: Culture as a system of meanings
 - we react not to things, but the **meanings** we put on them
 - your response to someone who gets out of a BMW, vs. someone who gets out of a Toyota Corolla
 - Peruvian adult riding a “stingray” bicycle with high handlebars and a banana seat
 - they don’t assign the same meanings to this bike that we would
 - We also react to **systems** of meanings, or relations between things
 - school desks are appropriate in classrooms, but not in living rooms
 - you would be surprised to come into a classroom and find sofas and lazy-boy recliners

- and your behavior would probably be different as a result
- These meanings, and thus the behaviors that result from them, are **socially constructed**, or **culturally constructed**
 - Not “out there” in the world
 - Rather, created in people’s heads (“constructed”)
 - Through social interactions (“socially”)
 - And to fit with other aspects of the culture (“culturally”)
 - **Social constructs** or **cultural constructs** are shared by members of the culture
 - A sort of unplanned consensus
 - Therefore **arbitrary**, and variable from culture to culture
- One goal of anthropology: to show how given cultures are consistent, ordered, understandable, make sense in their context
- Anthropologists ask “why do some groups of people assign certain meanings to things, and other groups of people assign different ones?”
 - that is, “why do some people see things *this* way, and not some other way?”
 - And then “why do WE see things *this* way, and not some other way?”
 - that is, anthropology encourages us to look at our own culture from outside
- often looking for **unconscious assumptions**
 - discovering assumptions and figuring out how they fit into the rest of the way people think gives a clearer, more complete understanding of the culture - of the meanings that lead people to behave in certain ways
 - by finding OTHERS’ assumptions, we highlight our own, different assumptions about the same things
- **naïve realism**: the assumption that some *arbitrary cultural construct* is actually a universal, real fact of life
 - the assumption that the concept or way of behaving applies to all people, is a feature of the real world
 - rather than being arbitrary and socially constructed (p. 17)
 - "English was good enough for Jesus Christ, and it's good enough for the children of Texas." Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, Governor of Texas, 1924
 - Ma Ferguson simply assumed that since everyone in her culture spoke English and read the Bible in English, obviously Jesus Christ did, too
 - but English as a universal language is a cultural construct that is specific to our culture; it does not apply outside it
- Examples of cultures as systems of arbitrary meanings: different meanings about food
 - every culture defines different things as edible or not
 - we respond to the meanings our culture teaches us to place on potential foods, not simply to the actual food itself
 - as in people who vomit when they are told they have eaten something they consider inedible, like rattlesnake meat (in Kluckhohn article, p. 7)
 - other examples of responding to culturally constructed meanings
 - sushi (raw fish)
 - mondongo (beef stomach, or tripe)
 - cuy (Guinea pig) in Peru

- pumpkin pie in Peru
- point: what we consider to be edible is determined by the meanings placed on the items, not their taste, nutrition, etc.
 - there is nothing inherent in sushi, mondongo, or cuy that makes people sick
 - is it only the strength of the culturally constructed meanings that does that
- Point: culture is both
 - arbitrary (socially constructed, rather than part of the real, natural world)
 - and profoundly influential in how people perceive, think about, and behave in the world
- *Guests of the Sheik*, Chapter 2
 - what is a mudhif?
 - men's house, used for meetings and politics
 - 3 day's hospitality at mudhif for any (male) traveler
 - how polygynous marriage works (more on this later in the book)
 - each of Hamid's 3 wives has her own, separate block of rooms for her and her children
 - wives of Hamid: one deceased, three still living: Kulthum (oldest), Bahiga, Selma (the youngest)
 - a different concept of personal achievement and honor
 - Kulthum and Selma refer to "Haji Hamid"
 - A Haji (or Hajji) is someone who has made the haj (or hajj), a pilgrimage to Mecca
 - Hamid inherited his status as landowner and leader
 - Hamid's father: Abdul Emir, was a famous warrior against the British-backed government, head of a confederation of tribes
 - Hamid inherited his position at Abdul Emir's death
 - later we learn that succession was not simple
 - rivalry with uncle Urthman (brother of Hamid's father) (p 118)
 - Hamid's older brother Abdulla is second in command (p 126)
 - various other brothers are more or less favored
 - Cultural constructs: Assumptions about wealth, gender roles, etc.
 - Selma asks where BJ's clothes and jewelry came from (family or husband?), and what it cost
 - Selma is wearing at least \$1000 in gold, in 1957 dollars
 - In 2010 dollars, that is about \$7,820
 - Iraqi women like Selma see gold not just as ornamentation, but financial insurance
 - BJ would avoid owning lots of gold as an unnecessary expense
 - BJ would avoid wearing lots of gold as tasteless
 - El Nahra women want lots of gold as a guarantee of future security and independence
 - they would wear it to show that they have their own means of survival, are not helpless
 - El Nahra women have a different idea of the role and importance of one's mother: "where is your mother?"
 - they assume she is lonely without her mother
 - "To be alone without any of one's womenfolk was clearly the greatest disaster which could befall any girl."

- Kulthum: "Children are gifts of Allah... When you have children, you will not feel so alone without your mother"
- presumably because in El Nahra, women's social networks and independence depend largely on female relatives
- Different ideas about clothing and modesty
 - They don't wear the abayah in America... "Why not?"
 - Just as reasonable a question as "why *do* they wear it in Iraq?"
- Different ideas about hospitality towards guests: custom of haranguing guests to eat more
- The women's reactions to breaking cultural rules show that while they are not slaves to the rules, they do deeply believe they should be followed
 - Selma and Alwiyah eat with BJ when she insists (p. 34)
 - Selma is amused at breaking the rule
 - she has the strongest position, is the least threatened by transgressing
 - but the fact that she treats it as being funny shows that she is setting this behavior apart from what she would normally do
 - her amusement helps to insulate her from the behavior's wrongness...
 - Alwiyah is uncomfortable
 - she will break the rule when pressured, but does not feel good about it
- Of course, BJ would have been uncomfortable eating alone, which would have broken *her* cultural rules
 - wanting company when you eat is no more "normal" than expecting or granting privacy when you eat
- breaking cultural rules is never just the action; it creates tension for people
 - tension may be experienced as the situation being funny, or uncomfortable, or worse...