

Explaining culture in terms of adaptation, meaning, or system

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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
 - called **Basarwa** or **Sarwa** by many non-San in Botswana (BaTswana), especially in government and planning contexts (this comes up later in Lee’s book, see pg. 148)
 - **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** (the politically dominant group in Botswana, after whom the country is named)
 - 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...
- A major goal of anthropology is to help us understand people and cultures
 - we try to *explain* things

- unlike hard scientists, we often can't test whether we are right
- but at least we can suggest ways of looking at things that fit the evidence and make sense
 - you will do this in your interview with an immigrant
 - not just report what your interviewee says, but try to explain
 - why he or she acted or thought in some specific way
 - why her/his culture has certain features
 - why our culture differs from his/hers in some ways
- Middleton suggests 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 necessarily “flexible”, “changes to fit changing situations”, etc.
 - So, to explain something about a culture, this approach explains
 - how it is 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
 - adaptive explanations are often etic, but also frequently emic
 - the outside observer may explain in terms of a practical reason, while insiders may have a different explanation
 - as in explaining the sacredness of cows to Hindus in terms of the economic importance of cows
 - Hindus would normally not see it that way at all
 - we will look at this example more fully next time
 - but insiders often are aware of the practical, “adaptive” function of their behavior
 - as in the adaptive explanation of “street-corner men” mentioned by Middleton
 - they are fully aware of the practical reasons for their behavior
 - Middleton is really lumping a number of related anthropological viewpoints together under this idea of “culture as adaptation”
 - **Cultural materialism**: a theoretical approach that we will look at later
 - **Functionalism**

- promoted by Bronislaw Malinowski
- A functionalist explains beliefs and practices in terms of the problems they solve or the needs that they serve
 - that is, cultural beliefs and practices are functional
- Malinowski's version of functionalism was based on his "**Doctrine of Needs**": ideas and practices serve basic human needs of individuals
 - needs for food, shelter, friendship, sex...
- this is a very reasonable way to look at many aspects of culture
 - modern anthropologists explain beliefs and practices in terms of their functions all the time
- but it is not sufficient for a complete understanding
 - because it does not explain why a given culture satisfies a need in one way, and a different culture does it in a different way
 - all individuals have roughly the same needs, so why are the cultural practices that satisfy them so variable?
- **Structural functionalism**
 - a variant of functionalism, promoted by Arthur Reginald (A.R.) Radcliffe-Brown
 - A structural functionalist explains beliefs and practices in terms of how they meet the needs of society as a system, helping to maintain the social structure
 - a society's social structure places people in roles and situations that involve tensions that threaten to disrupt the structure
 - roles like husband and wife, parent and child, mother-in-law and son-in-law
 - these involve inherent tensions, conflicts, differing viewpoints
 - simply by virtue of the roles themselves
 - example: parents will always want to control their children more than the children want to be controlled
 - many cultural beliefs and practices can be seen as serving to deflect those tensions or otherwise protect the smooth, continued functioning of the social structure
 - example: beliefs about respect for elders help to smooth the inherently difficult relationship between parents and children
 - example: Radcliffe-Brown noticed that many cultures require certain kinds of behavior between people in certain family relationships, such as between in-laws
 - many cultures require either "avoidance relationships" or "joking relationships" between people in certain kinds of relationships
 - "joking" relationships require
 - standardized, acceptable expression of conflict or sexuality
 - while limiting how far they can go
 - and requiring that no offense be taken
 - "avoidance" relationships require
 - efforts to avoid contact
 - so conflicts do not arise and no offense is taken
 - He suggested that this is because the structural relationship between in-laws inherently tends to create tension
 - such as mother-in-law and son-in-law

- both are competing for attention, time, love of the daughter/wife
- mother-in-law sees the son-in-law drawing her daughter away from her
- son-in-law sees the mother-in-law as exerting power and making demands of his wife and him
- or brother-in-law and sister-in-law
 - the man has a sexual relationship with his wife
 - but cannot with his sister-in-law
 - even though she is similar to his wife in many ways
 - and he is placed in a fairly close, familiar relationship with her
- these stereotyped behavioral roles channel or avoid tension in acceptable ways
- they are not just random or weird behaviors
 - rather, they make sense as responses to specific, recurring structural situations
 - they serve a function in dealing with tensions inherent in the social structure, helping to preserve it
 - hence “structural functionalism”
- Both variants of functionalism are no longer popular in their original, overstated forms
 - each offers only a partial explanation of why a culture includes a given idea or practice
 - but that partial explanation is still useful
 - the basic ideas are sound, and functionalist explanations are included in most modern anthropological work
 - even though few anthropologists call themselves functionalists anymore
- **2. culture as (a system of) meaning**
 - culture is a set of meanings assigned to things, and responses appropriate to those meanings
 - I have been emphasizing this view in many of the past class sessions
 - 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
 - explanations in terms of meaning almost have to be emic
 - explanations in terms of meaning must use the same meanings that members of the culture use
 - 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
 - seen as converting land from unproductive wasteland to productive, useful farmland
 - providing food for those who need it
 - even expressing the proper, moral role of people to support themselves through the exertion of effort

- Thus plowing is a straightforward good thing
- Farmers just do it
 - as a secular (practical, businesslike, not religious) task
 - feeling no guilt or spiritual overtones
 - but rather a sense of accomplishment about it
 - even morally good: they are doing something that rightly should and must be done
- 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 the person or community that has pleased or displeased them
 - Plowing is a physical violation of the earth, and thus of Pachamama, spirit of the earth
 - Pachamama supports people with the bounty of the earth
 - yet plowing is an assault on her
 - Thus plowing is not just a secular matter, but one with serious supernatural and practical implications
 - so farmers must appease Pachamama by showing appreciation and respect 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
 - and might get angry or worried if someone plowed without the proper offerings
 - might even resist or sabotage efforts of outsiders to bring in modern farming
- 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 Y institution led to Z change in W, and why...
- May be emic or etic
- 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
 - so 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
 - Peru owed big debts to the World Bank, so the Bank could offer to cut deals on the debt in exchange for Peru following its wishes
 - 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
 - Peruvian labor 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 their termination bonuses in setting up these internet places
 - so far more such businesses sprang up than would have otherwise
 - this is an explanation in terms of culture as a system because it emphasizes the interaction between many different areas
 - Peru’s economic picture
 - Peru’s educational system
 - Peru’s tradition of political patronage
 - US politics
 - the World Bank
 - technological innovations
 - the social phenomenon of the Internet
 - Peru’s labor laws, etc.
- example from Lee: Have the San always been foragers?
 - Wilmsen and others think that San foraging arose in response to relatively recent changes in the larger social system
 - they think the San were originally just the poor among a “Khoi-San” population of pastoralists

- as peoples' individual fortunes shifted, they shifted between pastoralism and foraging
- the San were essentially stranded permanently in the bush in the late 1800s when incoming Blacks and Whites in the early days of colonialism took their herds and the good land
- cutting off the option of returning to pastoralism,
- and leaving them in permanent poverty, with no alternative but foraging
- Lee argues that this story is incorrect
- but true or not, this is an explanation in terms of system
 - because it emphasizes the impact of the larger social, political, and economic system in which the Ju/'hoansi were embedded
- Middleton gives more examples of explanation in terms of culture as a system, but I will only refer to them briefly here
 - example: how can we explain why women and men have relatively equal status in some societies, while women have lower status in others?
 - The culture-as-system approach says we should consider how the status of both genders is affected by the economic, social, and political systems of their societies:
 - the mode of subsistence (hunting, farming, factory work, professional work...), and the family arrangements that result from that
 - the economy and labor market
 - amount and nature of warfare
 - relative income contributed by each gender
 - degree of separation between public and domestic spheres of activity, etc.
 - we will look more at gender roles and these influences on them later in this course
 - example: how can we explain why people sometimes separate themselves into ethnic groups with sharp divisions and tense relationships, and other times do not?
 - the culture-as-system approach says we should consider how ethnic divisions are involved in the larger systems of economics and power (politics)
 - this subject comes from Fredrick Barth's book, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*
 - ethnic boundaries often become more clearly marked in times of hardship and competition, and fade away in good times
 - that is, ethnic groupings and identity can be explained in part by looking at the larger systems of economics and politics
 - example: anti-immigrant feelings, laws, etc. often rise when unemployment rises
 - as is happening now in this country
 - this approach sees ethnicity as negotiated, historical, dynamic, responding to changes in other aspects of the social system
 - it does NOT see ethnicity and relations between ethnic groups as an essential, almost unchanging feature of people (“ancient rivalries between the X and Y...”)
- These three approaches are just different ways of looking at a problem
 - for any given issue, one, two, or all three might help us understand how it works
 - it usually helps to look at things from a variety of angles
 - no one way is generally more correct or useful, they are just different