

Adaptation, Meaning, System

Anthropologists today often explain a society's culture and its traits in three different ways: In terms of adaptation, in terms of the meanings the specific culture places on things, and in terms of the system in which they are a part (Middleton 48-61). These three explanatory models can be easily applied to any culture or cultural trait, such as the traits of Muslim culture presented in Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York*.

One of the most distinguishing features of Muslim culture is *halal*, the prohibition of certain foods unless the animal has been "slaughtered according to scriptural provisions," which we see when Ansary's brother Riaz comes to visit and must find an appropriate lamb (Ansary 119-121). Something like this, although an integral part of Muslim religious belief, can also be explained as an adaptation to the environment because in the past food could easily be diseased, full of parasites, or spoiled and therefore dangerous to eat. By having it necessary for the animal to be chosen and slaughtered personally, or by a religious professional who would have expertise in the area, the safety of the food would increase dramatically, providing an adaptive advantage to those that followed *halal*.

One of the greatest conflicts that arises between Muslim culture and western culture is the seclusion of women, which often takes the form in *West of Kabul* as someone complaining about 'alcohol and short skirts'. This is an example of culture in terms of meaning. Muslims are offended and shocked by short skirts or alcohol consumption, because they have assigned negative meanings to these, such as promiscuity and indecency, while western ideals only see a short skirt as fashionable and alcohol consumption as an enjoyable way to socialize.

Another feature of Muslim culture, at least as portrayed in Ansary's view of Afghanistan, is the resurgence of Muslim conservatism. This could be explained as a response to the many difficulties and disappointments Afghans have had with foreign powers that riddle the text of *West of Kabul*, such as the American's Helmand Valley project, the Russian invasion, and the failure of communism. Afghans now pulling back to their fundamental beliefs and culture and rejecting foreign ways shows how culture can be explained as a system, where an act in one area can have major effects in another, seemingly, unrelated area.

These three examples from Ansary's *West of Kabul, East of New York* show how three separate cultural traits can be described as adaptation, in terms of meaning, and in terms of a system in which they are part, but one single trait could also be explained in each of the three different ways, which demonstrates what a powerful and flexible tool looking at culture this way can be for the anthropologist.