Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

**OBTAINING FOOD IN DIFFERENT CULTURES**

**Strategies for Obtaining Food**

Food obtaining strategies vary from culture to culture. Food obtaining strategies are developed in response to particular environments. There are five major food obtaining strategies found in different cultures of the world. These five forms of obtaining food are not mutually exclusive and within each category there are evident variations due to technological and environmental differences. Therefore, often one form of obtaining food predominates within a given culture.

While food obtaining strategies vary widely around the world, none is necessarily ‘superior’ then another.

**Major Food Obtaining Strategies**

**Food Collection:** collecting wild vegetation, hunting and fishing.

**Horticulture:** cultivation, using simple tools and small and shifting plots of land.

**Pastoralism:** keeping livestock and using its produce for food.

**Agriculture:** cultivation using animals, irrigation and mechanical implements.

**Industrialization:** producing food using complex machinery. Most developed countries and an increasingamount of developing countries rely on industrialized processes to obtain food.

**Food, Environment and Technology**

Some environments enable a number of modes of food acquisition, while others permit limited number of adaptations. Technology provides the advantage of adaptation to a given environment. It can be said that specific food obtaining modes are influenced by the interaction of a people’s technological and environmental conditions.

The extent, to which any society can procure food, depends on sophistication of tools used and the abundance of plant and animal life in a given area. Productivity of agriculturalists not only depends on technology but also availability of natural resources like water and fertile soil.

Anthropologists agree that while the environment does not set limits on food obtaining patterns, it does place a limit on the adaptations possible and on the ultimate productivity of an area. People with simple technologies also cope well with their environments and are intelligent given their circumstances and surroundings.

The environmental capacity of a given area is referred to as ‘carrying capacity’. The natural consequence of exceeding carrying capacity is to harm the environment.

**Optimal Foraging**

Many foraging societies spend extra time and effort to obtain a particular food. Ethnographic studies of the Ache in Paraguay for example have revealed that this is not irrational behavior but due to caloric returns of these food sources despite the energy expended in killing, collecting and preparing it. This reveals that optimal foraging is a calculated strategy not a irrational whim.

**Useful Terms**

**Foraging:** collecting or gathering

**Optimal:** best or most feasible

**Expended:** spent

**Environmental capacity:** carrying capacity of the environment, i.e. the amount of productive pressure theair, water and soil can take without being damaged

**Suggested Readings**

Students are advised to read the following chapters to develop a better understanding of the various principals highlighted in this hand-out:

Chapter 7 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and/or Chapter 16 in ‘Anthropology’ by* *Ember and Pergrine*

**Food Collection**

Food collection involves (systematic exploration) of natural plants and animals available in given natural environments. People have been foragers for an overwhelming majority of time, and have only developed other options to secure food in the last 10,000 years or so.

**Food Collectors**

Most societies prefer to produce food, but half a million people in different cultures live by foraging even today. There are considerable variations in the life patterns of current foragers but it is possible to make some generalizations about them.

**Contemporary Food Collectors/Foragers**

Food collecting societies have low population density. They are usually nomadic or semi-nomadic rather than sedentary since their prey often migrates. The basic social unit amongst food collectors is a family or a band, a loose federation of families. Contemporary food collectors occupy remote and marginal habitats, due to pressure from food processing people with their dominating technology and thirst for more land

While food collectors hunt as well as collect wild plants, vegetation provides almost 80% of their food intake. Food collecting people live in a wide variety of environments including deserts, tropical forests, mountains and the polar regions of the Artic and Antarctic circles.

Unlike food producers, food collectors possess inbuilt mechanisms (low population and little use of technology), which prevents it from becoming too efficient and completely destroying their own source of food.

**Do Foragers Live Well?**

Despite inhabiting the most unproductive parts of Earth, foragers are well off and dubbed ‘the original affluent society’ by anthropologists. They enjoy leisure time, have enough food and use remarkable intelligence and ingenuity in securing their food.

Most contemporary foraging societies remain small scale, unspecialized, egalitarian and non-centralized. The Khung in the Kalahari Desert in Namibia and the Inuit in the Artic region, provide good examples of hunting and gathering peoples today.

**Food Production**

About 10,000 years ago, humans made a transition from collecting to producing food by cultivating crops and keeping herds of animals. The earliest cultivation occurred in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East.

Archeologists think this transition was due to demographic and environmental pressures. Early farmers paid a high price for this new food strategy. They did not switch convinced by the superiority of agriculture, which was more monotonous, less secure and required more labor and time. Evidence reveals early cultivators also experienced a decline in nutritional and health standards because they had to shift from collecting to growing food.

**Changes Resulting From Neolithic Revolution**

Food production resulted in the first population explosion. Fertility rates also increased since children could make an economic contribution. People became sedentary and civilizations began to develop. As farming became more efficient, people had more free time and began making farm implements and pottery, leading to the division of labor and specialization. The egalitarianism of foraging societies was replaced by social inequalities and the thirst for private ownership.

**Useful Terms**

**Population:** number of people in a given area

**Sedentary:** settlement, or settled down in one place

**Strategy:** a thought out method to obtain some objective or goal

**Monotonous:** boring

**Nutritional value:** amount of energy

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**Horticulture**

Horticulture is the simplest form of farming, using basic tools, no fertilizer or irrigation, and relying on human power. Horticulturists use shifting cultivation techniques, also referred to as ‘slash and burn’ cultivation.

**Horticultural Crops**

Crops growth by horticulturists can be divided into three categories: tree crops, seed crops and root crops.

Common tree crops include bananas, figs, dates and coconuts. Major seed crops are high in protein. Wheat, barley, rice, millet, oats and sorghum are all seed crops. Major root crops are high in starch and carbohydrates. Yams, sweet potatoes, potatoes are all root crops.

The Lacondon Maya of Chiapas, Mexico, are more productive than mono-crop agriculturalists. They achieve three levels of production from the same land and do so by maintaining (by imitating the dispersal patterns found within ecological systems of tropical rainforest) rather than displacing them.

**Slash and Burn Technique**

In unused areas of vast land, slash and burn can be a reasonably efficient form of production. Ash fertilized soil resulting from slashing and burning wild vegetation must lie fallow to restore fertility.

Under drought conditions of Al Nino (during the 1990s), horticulturists were severely criticized for destroying large tract of grasslands and forests in Madagascar, Brazil and Indonesia, since the fires they lit for clearing land often raged out of control.

**Pastoralism**

Keeping domesticated livestock as a source of food is widely practiced in areas where cultivation is not possible. Pastoralism involves a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle within small family based communities. Pastoralists also maintain regular contact with cultivators to help supplement their diets.

**Agriculture**

More recent than horticulture, agriculture uses technologies like irrigation, fertilizers and mechanical equipment to produce high yield and large populations

Agriculture is associated with permanent settlements and high levels of labor specialization. Intensive agriculture leads to even further specialization and use of technological inputs. It also leads to social stratification, political hierarchies and administrative structures.

**Industrialization**

Since several centuries, people have used industrialized food getting strategies. There is increasing amounts of mechanical power available for the purpose of obtaining, storing and processing food.

Industrialization also uses a mobile labor force and a complex system of markets, which has led to the increasing commercialization of food. Therefore, food is grown not only for consumption but also for exporting to other countries of the world.

Biotechnology provides a current example of industrialized food getting, as does laser leveling or use of GPS transmitters on grain harvesters. All these technological innovations have been incorporated into the food production process and helped to increase food output.

Yet there are environmental costs resulting from exceeding the carrying capacity of land and from overuse of technological innovations such as pesticides and fertilizers. The use of biotechnology in food production is also a much debated topic.

**Useful Terms**

**Horticulture:** A form of small-scale crop cultivation characterized by the use of simple technology and theabsence of irrigation

**Carbohydrates:** energy source found in particular types of food group

**Tropical:** humid

**Drought:** lack of rainfall

**Criticize:** disapprove of

**Supplement:** add on

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