Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

# CULTURE AND CHANGE

**Cultural Change**

Although the rate of change varies from culture to culture, no cultures remain unchanged. Small-scale cultures that are less reliant on technology are seen to change more slowly than industrialized cultures and societies.

However, nothing is as constant as change. There is no culture or society which can safeguard itself from the processes of change.

**How Cultures Change**

The two principal ways that cultures change are internally through the processes of invention and innovation and externally through the process of diffusion. It is generally recognized that the majority of cultural features (things, ideas, and behavior patterns) found in any society got there by diffusion rather than invention.

**Inventions**

Inventions can be either deliberate or unintentional. Although intentional inventors usually receive the most recognition and praise, over the long run, unintentional inventors have probably had the greatest impact on cultural change. Consider for example the common phrase, ‘necessity is the mother of all invention’, which implies that often circumstances are a more compelling factor inducing innovations in society than the declared intention to make something new.

Because they are not bound by conventional standards, many inventors and innovators tend to be marginal people living on the fringes of society. Anthropologists examine the backgrounds and psychological factors that influence innovative personalities. Some of them maintain that inventors are often amongst the well off segments of society, yet there are other anthropologists who present other arguments concerning innovators.

**Diffusion**

The following generalizations can be made about the process of diffusion:

Cultural diffusion is selective in nature (*selectivity*) – not all things diffuse from one culture to another at the same rate

Diffusion is a two-way process (*reciprocity*) – both cultures change as a result of diffusion.

Cultural elements are likely to involve changes in form or function (*modification*) – a diffused cultural item will not remain exactly the same as it is to be found in its original culture. Consider for example the case of Chinese food or pizza, which are modified according to the taste of different countries. The idea of chicken *tikka* topping is an example of cultural modification.

Cultural items, involving material aspects, are more likely candidates for diffusion than those involving non-material aspects. Diffusion is affected by a number of important variables (duration and intensity of contact, degree of cultural integration and similarities between donor and recipient cultures).

**Useful Terms**

**Variables:** values which are subject to change

**Cultural items:** these include both material and non-material items ranging from clothing to ideas **Donor:** a country or even an individual entity which is at the giving end of a relationship

**Recipient:** a country or even an individual entity which is at the receiving/taking end of a relationship

**Conventional:** standard or acceptable

**Intentional:** *being motivated by*an intention. Intentional innovators, for example clearly state that they aretrying to deal with a particular problem and will attempt to identify a solution for it.

**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 16 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and/or Chapter 13 in ‘Anthropology’ by* *Ember and Pergrine*

**Acculturation**

Acculturation is a specialized form of cultural diffusion that is a result of sustained contact between two cultures, one of which is subordinate to another.

Whereas diffusion involves a single or complex of traits, acculturation involves widespread cultural reorganization over a shorter period of time. There are events in history, like colonization, which have caused acculturation to occur in many parts of the world.

Some anthropologists have described situations of acculturation in which the non-dominant culture has voluntarily chosen the changes. Other anthropologists claim that acculturation always involves some measure of coercion and force.

**Cultural Interrelations**

Because the parts of a culture are interrelated, a change in one part of a culture is likely to bring about changes in other parts of the given culture. This is the reason why people are often reluctant to accept change since its consequences cannot be exactly predicted nor controlled. This insight of cultural anthropology should be kept in mind by applied anthropologists, who are involved in planned programs of cultural change.

**Reaction to Change**

In every culture there are two sets of opposing forces; those interested in preserving the status quo and others desiring change. The desire for prestige, economic gain and more efficient ways of solving a problem are reasons why people embrace change but the threat of loss of these can lead other people to oppose change as well.

**Barriers to Cultural Change**

Some societies can maintain their cultural boundaries through the exclusive use of language, food, and clothing. Some societies can resist change in their culture because the proposed change is not compatible with their existing value systems.

**Barriers to Cultural Change**

Societies resist change because it disrupts existing social and economic relationships. The functional interrelatedness of cultures serves as a conservative force discouraging change. Cultural boundaries include relative values, customs, language and eating tastes.

**Change Agents**

Change agents including development workers for example facilitate change in modern times. Change agents sometimes fail to understand why some people are resistant to change and should realize cultural relativity and barriers to change.

**Useful Terms**

**Facilitate:** to make easier or to promote

**Functional:** useful or practical aspects

**Cultural relativity:** the realization that cultural traits fit in logically within their own cultural environmentsand that since circumstances around the world differ, cultures are also different.

**Status Quo:** The existing conditions or circumstances. There are always those who are interested inmaintaining the status quo since they are doing well due to it and others who oppose the status quo since it tends to exploit them or puts them in a disadvantaged position

**Coercion:** An act of force rather than that based on the need or desire of a particular individual or society

**Interrelations:** interconnections

**Subordinate:** in an inferior or subordinated position

**Dominant:** in a position of power over others

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**The Complex Process of Change**

Accepting change in one part of a culture is likely to bring about changes to other parts of a culture. To understand socio-cultural aspects of urbanization, it is important to view the rural area, the urban areas, and the people who move between them as parts of a complex system of change.

Until some decades ago, anthropologists made differentiations between the mechanical solidarity of rural areas and the organic solidarity of cities. Recent research notes that there is not a simple flow of migrants from rural areas to urban areas but rather a circulation of people between these areas.

Urbanization or the process of rural development therefore needs to take into account the fact that there is a constant crisscrossing of people, ideas and resources from urban to rural areas.

Rural migrants rely on kinsmen for land purchase, dispute resolution or general household management, while they go to the cities in search for cash based employment. Conversely rural kinsmen may in turn obtain economic support from a urban wage earner, or seek his support in finding work or a place to stay in the city for other kinsmen.

**Planned Change**

Planned programs of change have been introduced into developing countries for decades under the assumption that they benefit the local people. Yet, a number of studies have shown that although some segments of the local population may benefit, many more do not.

**Globalization**

Globalization is a broad-based term which is used to describe the intensification of the flow of money, goods, and information across the world, which is seen to be taking place since the 1980s. Globalization has made the study of culture change more complex due to its varied effects on various cultural processes including that of change.

In some cases, globalization is responsible for an accelerated pace of change in world cultures. In other situations, the forces of globalization may stimulate traditional cultures to redefine themselves. Developing countries in the attempt to better deal with the forces of globalization, such as trade liberalization, have begun to revamp their own economic systems in order to make them more competitive internationally. This economic revamping has tremendous cultural impacts as well.

Globalization has resulted in diffusion of technology but also compounded existing inequalities. There are human and environmental costs associated with globalization.

For example, increased productivity has led to pollution and there are many theorists who argue that globalization has also increased the gap between the rich and the poor, with those with wealth doing even better and those without it, experiencing even worse poverty than before.

**Useful Terms**

**Globalization:** intensification of the flow of money, goods, and information across the world

**Urbanization:** the process of people moving from rural areas into the cities. This phenomenon is takingplace in both developed and developing countries and cultural anthropologists are very interested in studying why and how urbanization takes place and the cultural changes it brings

**Revamping:** reforming or changing

**Competitive:** the process of trying to do better than those engaging in the same activity

**Environmental Costs:** the impact of a particular activity on land, water or air and on various other specieswhich inhabit the Earth alongside human beings

**Impacts:** results or effects

**Suggested Readings**

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