CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

**ASSOCIATIONS, CULTURES AND SOCIETIES**

**What Are Associations?**

Associations are non-kin and non-territorial groups found amidst all types of societies and cultures around the world. Associations possess some kind of formal, organizational structure and their members also have common interests and a sense of purpose which binds the varied types of societies together.

Cultural anthropologists are interested in examining how different cultures give shape to different types of associations and in turn what functions different types of associations perform within particular cultures.

**Variation in Associations**

Associations can vary from society to society. They vary according to whether or not they are voluntary and whether the qualities of members are universally ascribed, variably ascribed or achieved.

**Qualifications for Associations**

Achieved qualities or skills are those acquired through one’s own efforts, there may be hurdles in acquiring necessary skills, but by and large skills have to be learnt through personal effort as they are not biologically transferable.

Ascribed qualities are determined at birth because of gender or ethnicity or family background. A person does not need to make an effort to acquire ascribed qualities nor can effort do much in changing ascribed status since it is largely determined by forces beyond the control of individuals.

Universally ascribed qualities are found in all societies. Gender is an example of an ascribed quality. Variably ascribed qualities are unique and thus vary across cultures, like ethnicity, social class differences etc.

**Non-Voluntary Associations**

In relatively non-stratified societies, associations tend to be based on universally ascribed characteristics like gender and age. An age set is a common form of non-voluntary associations, evidenced around the world, even today.

**Age Sets**

An age grade includes a category of people who fall into a culturally distinguished age category. An age set on the other hand is a group of people of similar age and the same sex who move through some or all of life’s stages together.

Entry into an age set is usually through an initiation ceremony and transitions to new stages are marked by succession rituals.

In non-commercial societies, age sets crosscut kinship ties and form strong supplemental bonds. Age sets are prominent amongst the Nadi of Kenya for example. Young warriors were given spears and shields in the past and told to bring back wealth to the community, now they’re given pens and paper by their elders and told to go out and do the same.

The Karimojong are predominantly cattle herders and number 60,000 people living in northeastern Uganda, who are organized via age and generation sets, including 5 age-sets covering 25 years.

The retired generation passes on the mantle of authority to the senior generation and the junior generation recruits members until ready to assume authority and thus the society continues to function in a seamless manner.

**Useful Terms**

**Recruit** – to admit or to actively enlist

**Supplemental** – added on, so as to help reinforce existing ties

**Characteristics** – identifying features

**Seamless** – continuous

**Organizational** – having features of an organization, like defined roles and responsibilities

**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 22 in ‘*Anthropology*’ by Ember

**Regional and Ethnic Associations**

Regional and ethnic organizations are voluntary associations whose members possess variably ascribed characteristics.

Both forms of associations are usually found in societies where technological advance is accelerating, bringing with it numerous forms of economic and social complexities as well.

**Regional and Ethnic Associations**

Despite a variety of types, regional and ethnic associations commonly emphasize helping members adapt to new conditions, particularly if they are migrants.

Many rural migrants keep members in touch with home area traditions by the help of regional associations. These associations promote improved living conditions for members who have recently migrated to urban areas in several countries where urbanization is taking place at a fast pace.

**Examples of Regional Associations**

Regional associations (*serranos*) help rural migrants adapt to urban life and Lima, Peru. The *serranos* have been seen to actively lobby the government on community issues, assist members with enculturation, organize fiestas, and act as clearing house for flow of information.

Chinatowns in major cities of the world have associations performing a similar function for Chinese immigrants.

**Ethnic Associations**

Ethnic Associations are based on ethic ties. Such associations are particularly prominent in urban centers of West Africa. Even tribal unions are commonly found in Ghana and Nigeria which superimpose the notion of ethnicity with that of tribal ties.

**Rotating Credit Associations**

Such associations are based on the principle of mutual aid. Each group member contributes regularly to a fund, which is handed over to one member on a rotation basis.

Such associations are common in East, South and southeastern Asia, in western Africa and the West Indies.

Default is rare in rotating credit associations due to social pressure and the incentive is reasonable since membership ranges from 10 to 30 contributors. Since no collateral is needed, trustworthiness is considered essential when letting people become members of such groups.

**Multi-ethnic Associations**

Associations with a common purpose of economic or socio-political empowerment are often multi-ethnic. Savings and loan associations in New Guinea often link women from different tribal areas.

**Formation of Associations**

Age sets arise in societies which have frequent warfare breaking out amidst them, or it is found amongst groups with varying populations, due to which kinship systems are not sufficient for alliance purposes.

Urbanization and economic compulsions (lack of access to credit) also form associations due to the need to cooperate out of self-interest.

**Useful Terms**

**Collateral** – the act of pledging an asset in order to qualify from a loan from a lending institution like abank

**Empowerment** –to empower or reinforce the capacity of individuals

**Multi-ethnic** – different ethnic groups coexisting within the same society

**Default** – being unable to pay back a loan.

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Chapter 22 in ‘*Anthropology’ by Ember*

**RACE, ETHNICITY AND CULTURE**

**Ethnicity**

Ethnicity refers to selected cultural and sometimes physical characteristics used to classify people into (ethnic) groups or categories considered to be significantly different from others. Commonly recognized American ethnic groups include American Indians, Latinos, Chinese, African Americans, European Americans, etc.

In some cases, ethnicity involves merely a loose group identity with little or no cultural traditions in common. This is the case with many Irish and German Americans. In contrast, some ethnic groups are coherent subcultures with a shared language and body of tradition. Newly arrived immigrant groups often fit this pattern.

**Minority versus Ethnic Group**

It is important not to confuse the term minority with ethnic group. Ethnic groups may be either a minority or a majority in a population.

Whether a group is a minority or a majority also is not an absolute fact but depends on the perspective. For instance, in some towns along the southern border of the U.S., people of Mexican ancestry are the overwhelming majority population and control most of the important social and political institutions but are still defined by state and national governments as a minority. In small homogenous societies, such as those of hunters and gatherers and pastoralists, there is essentially only one ethnic group and no minorities.

**Ethnic Categorizations**

For many people, ethnic categorization implies a connection between biological inheritance and culture. They believe that biological inheritance determines much of cultural identity. If this were true, for instance, African American cultural traits, such as "black English", would stem from genetic inheritance. This is not true. The pioneering 19th century English anthropologist E. B. Taylor was able to demonstrate conclusively that biological race and culture is not the same thing.

It is clear that anyone can be placed into another culture shortly after birth and can be thoroughly encultured to that culture, regardless of their skin color, body shape, and other presumed racial features.

**Race**

A race is a biological subspecies, or variety of a species, consisting of a more or less distinct population with anatomical traits that distinguish it clearly from other races.

This biologist's definition does not fit the reality of human genetic variation today. We are biologically an extremely homogenous species. All humans today are 99.9% genetically identical, and most of the variation that does occur is in the difference between males and females and our unique personal traits. This homogeneity is very unusual in the animal kingdom. Even our closest relatives, the chimpanzees have 2-3 times more genetic variation than people. Orangutans have 8-10 times more variation.

It is now clear that our human "races" are cultural creations, not biological realities. The concept of human biological races is based on the false assumption that anatomical traits, such as skin color and specific facial characteristics, cluster together in single distinct groups of people. They do not. There are no clearly distinct "black", "white", or other races.

**Similarity in Human Adaptations**

The popularly held view of human races ignores the fact that anatomical traits supposedly identifying a particular race are often found extensively in other populations as well. This is due to the fact that similar natural selection factors in different parts of the world often result in the evolution of similar adaptations.

For instance, intense sunlight in tropical latitudes has selected for darker skin color as a protection from intense ultraviolet radiation. As a result, the dark brown skin color characteristic of sub-Saharan Africa is also found among unrelated populations in the Indian subcontinent, Australia, New Guinea, and elsewhere in the Southwest Pacific.

**Safeguarding Against Cultural Biases**

We must not let our own cultural biases get in the way of understanding the lives of other people.

Avoiding cultural biases is a very difficult task given the emotionally charged feelings and deep beliefs that we have concerning race and ethnicity. However, suspending these attitudinal barriers in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomena is well worth the effort.

**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 13 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro*

**The Complex Nature of Human Variations**

The actual patterns of biological variation among humans are extremely complex and constantly changing.They can also be deceptive. All of us could be classified into a number of different "races", depending on what genetic traits are emphasized.

For example, if you divide people up on the basis of stature or blood types, the geographic groupings are clearly different from those defined on the basis of skin color. Using the B blood type for defining races, Australian Aborigines could be lumped together with most Native Americans. Some Africans would be in the same race as Europeans while others would be categorized with Asians.

Historically, human "races" have been defined on the basis of a small number of superficial anatomical characteristics that can be readily identified at a distance, thereby making discrimination easier.

However, focusing on such deceptive distinguishing traits as skin color, body shape, and hair texture causes us to magnify differences and ignore similarities between people.

It is also important to remember that these traits are no more accurate in making distinctions between human groups than any other genetically inherited characteristics. All such attempts to scientifically divide humanity into biological races have proven fruitless.

**Relevance of Nurture**

In the final analysis, it is clear that people, not nature, create our identities. Ethnicity and supposed "racial" groups are largely cultural and historical constructs. They are primarily social rather than biological phenomena. This does not mean that they do not exist.

To the contrary, "races" are very real in the world today. In order to understand them, however, we must look into culture and social interaction rather than biological evolution.

**Inter-group Relations**

How ethnic and racial groups relate to each other can be viewed as a continuum ranging from cooperation to outright exploitation and hostility.

* **Pluralism:** Two or more groups living in harmony while retaining their own heritage and identity
* **Assimilation:** when one racial or ethnic minority is absorbed into the wider society. PacificIslanders assimilation into Hawaiian society provides a good example of assimilation.
* **Legal Protection of Minorities:** While such legislation cannot ensure that minorities have equalrights, they provide a measure of security against blatant forms of prejudice and discrimination.
* **Population Transfer:** physical removal of minority to another location. The ethnic Tutsi fleeingRwanda to avoid prosecution by the Hutu government is an example of population transfer.
* **Long-termed Subjugation:** Political, social and economic suppression evident in political history.The example of the black majority’s subjugation in South Africa under apartheid is a recent example from history.

**Genocide:** Mass annihilation of groups of people in Nazi Germany or in Serbia for example.

**Useful Terms**

**Exploitation** – take undue advantage of another’s weakness

**Subjugation** – political or social suppression

**Prosecution** – to accuse or take legal action against an individual or a group

**Minority** – a group with a lesser population in comparison to another groups within the same are

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