CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

# CULTURE AND BELIEFS

**Systems of Beliefs**

Although all cultures have belief systems, the forms these beliefs take vary widely from society to society. It is often difficult to define belief systems cross-culturally because different societies have different ways of expressing faith

**Anthropological Perspective on Beliefs**

The anthropological study of belief systems does not attempt to determine which belief systems are right or wrong. Cultural anthropologists concentrate on describing various systems of belief, how they function, and influence human behavior across cultures.

**Social Function of Religion**

Belief systems fulfill social needs. They can be powerful, dynamic forces in society. Beliefs provide a basis for common purpose and values that can help maintain social solidarity.

By reinforcing group norms, they help bring about social homogeneity. A uniformity of beliefs also helps bind people together to reinforce group identity. Beliefs enhance the overall well-being of the society by serving as a mechanism of social control and also reduce the stress and frustrations that often lead to social conflict, whereby helping intensify group solidarity

In most societies, beliefs play an important role in social control by defining what is right and wrong behavior. If individuals do the right things in life, they may earn moral approval. If they do the wrong things, they may suffer retribution.

**Psychological Function of Beliefs**

Belief systems perform certain psychological functions by providing emotional comfort by explaining the unexplainable (for e.g. to confront and explain death).

A belief system also helps a person cope with stress, fears and anxieties about the unknown. Beliefs lift the burden of decision making from our shoulders because they tell us what is right and wrong, which is of tremendous help in times of stress or crisis.

Even prayers provide psychological comfort and solace. Moreover, beliefs help ease the stress during life crises such as birth, marriage, serious illnesses by providing appropriate guidelines and rituals.

**Politics and Beliefs**

Belief systems have played an important role in global social change through liberation theology (whereby believers for social reform and justice for the poor) and religious nationalism (whereby religious beliefs are merged with government institutions).

**Useful Terms**

**Liberation** – freedom

**Rituals** – standardized way for performing some vital social function.

**Retribution** – vengeance or payback

**Merged** – combined or put together

**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 14 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and Chapter 25 in ‘Anthropology’ by Ember*

**LOCAL OR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

**What is Local Knowledge?**

Local knowledge consists of factual knowledge, skills and capabilities possessed by people belonging to a specific area. Given that local knowledge is usually geared to real-life practices, it can usually only be understood with reference to the situation in which it is to be applied.

Local knowledge is local to the extent that it is acquired and applied by people with respect to local objectives, situations and problems.

Local knowledge may on the one hand comprise fixed and structured "knowledge" which can be defined, or on the other hand may by virtue of its combination with the performance of actions involve a more fluid process of "knowing".

Human beings exist in a continuous flux of experiences and practices, so local knowledge must include information concerning social management, have forms of learning and teaching, and decision-making routines.

Local knowledge and its respective knowledge systems are rooted in local or regional cultures, the respective social contexts and their economies. Therefore, it is important to consider these surrounding circumstances when one is considering the content of local knowledge itself.

**Changing Definitions of Local Knowledge**

Originally, "indigenous" was equivalent to "local" or "folk" or, when applied to knowledge, "informal knowledge".

In the 1960s and `70s, the word then took on a populist flavor of grass-roots politics, in the sense of "indigenous" as opposed to state or "high" culture.

In view of the marginalization and destruction of the eco-zones inhabited by ethnic groups, the term "indigenous knowledge” is being used in a context of "non-western" or "anti-western" knowledge.

Local knowledge also refers to knowledge of the minorities, contrasted with knowledge at the level of the nation state. There are therefore various types of local knowledge.

**Element of Exclusivity in Local Knowledge**

There are normally various types of public knowledge. Some information is shared by all locals, other information remains concealed from the majority. Some items of knowledge are known only to women or only to men.

Within a society, only a few specialists possess more in-depth knowledge extending beyond laypersons’ knowledge in a particular field, for instance specific medical or cropping expertise.

**Using Local Knowledge**

Use of local knowledge for development should not be restricted to extracting information. The availability of local knowledge to multinationals carries the danger of delegating power to authorities, which are external to the local communities, and therefore restricts establishment of competent leadership and sustainable social structures in local communities.

There is an ongoing debate on intellectual property rights, equal benefit sharing and the role of local knowledge for development. Anthropologists investigate not only the behavior and the material products of people, but also their thoughts and feelings.

In all branches of anthropology, focus on the *emic* view and local knowledge has increased in the last thirty years. Many countries have taken political decisions to empower local institutions (union councils, districts etc.) based on the idea of giving more power to local authorities which have a closer contact with those at the grassroots level..

Decentralization should correspond with building local capacities. Therefore local knowledge on local natural and social environments (of local forest-dwellers, farmers) is often more detailed than that of formal institutions and can be used to assure sustainable development.

**Useful Terms**

**Anti-western-** against western values and or economic or political systems, mostly instigated by experiencesof exploitation

**Indigenous** – rooted in a specific locality, native

**Decentralization** – delegation of authority to lower levels of administration

**Scientific Knowledge vs. Local Knowledge**

Is local knowledge ultimately equivalent to knowledge gained through science, or is it structured entirely differently? This is an age-old topic of debate in anthropology; the debate concerned with rationality and so-called *alternative modes of thought.*

A corresponding practical question is if local knowledge can be utilized within the framework of scientifically-based measures? Or, is local knowledge a holistic counter-model to science (to be used to criticize measures founded on analytical science)?

Most characterizations of local knowledge are defined in complete contrast to scientific knowledge. But local and scientific knowledge are neither completely different nor entirely the same; they display both commonalities and differences.

**Similarities between Local & Scientific Knowledge**

Local knowledge and knowledge derived from science are similar primarily in having an empirical and a methodological basis. Both local knowledge and science use observations of the outside world which are in principle accessible and communicable.

While both forms of knowledge use experiments, local knowledge proceeds rather from observations gained through trial-and-error or so-called "natural experiments", i.e. inferences drawn from the impacts of natural changes in certain quantities. Scientific knowledge on the other hand relies on controlled experiments.

**Distinctions between Local & Scientific Knowledge**

Scientific knowledge seeks information which is transferable to any spatial or social situation, i.e. which is not context-bound. As a result, scientists know a great deal about small sections of reality. In contrast, local knowledge systems seek spatially, situation-bound or context-bound information.

The validity of items of local knowledge is locally restricted, i.e. they cannot be transferred to other local contexts. The potential for generalization and thus also mutual learning is in principle limited with local knowledge. Owners of local knowledge are often only inadequately aware of market mechanisms.

**Potential for Anthropological Contribution**

The inter-cultural perspective of anthropologists enables them to reflect on and integrate both ways of knowing, and for seeing where to draw the line. Local knowledge, out of its cultural situation, loses its frame of reference, and without the necessary skills to decipher it becomes meaningless.

**The Need for Caution**

While local knowledge increases people’s empowerment, enhances the visibility of their problems, is geared to subsistence and risk minimization, leading to more sustainable solutions, a cautious approach has to be adopted.

Practices which are based on local knowledge are not *per se* ecologically sound, necessarily socially just, or even democratic. Neither is local knowledge equivalent to "people’s knowledge" in the sense that it would always be shared by most or even all members of a group.

**Useful Terms**

**Democratic** – a system based on sentiments of the majority

**Risk minimization** – measures taken to decrease given risks associated with a particular activity

**Subsistence** - survival

**ANTHROPOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT**

**What is Development?**

In the popular meaning of the term, development is a transition towards directed change, towards modernization, industrialization and capitalization.

However, major development agencies and multilateral organizations often interpret development in terms of poverty.

Poverty, defined in relation to the absence of basic services and in income terms (less than one dollar a day), becomes a proxy for the absence of development, and a justification for intervention. Poverty and development are measured by indicators and targets, some global, others national, which become standard devices for undertaking development.

But even focusing on poverty does not necessarily imply that poor people are more involved in the development planning process. Often the poor, cannot represent themselves, they are represented.

It has also been noticed by anthropologists that development is often defined in negative terms, not so much as the presence of something as the elimination of an unacceptable state, like that of poverty.

**Role of Anthropology in Development**

Anthropological studies focus on the processes of social transformation, positive and negative, conventionally associated with development.

Anthropology helps development initiatives realize the context in which their activities are to be introduced. The cultural insights and the kinds of understandings that anthropology offers enables social development professional to envision what kinds of impacts particular interventions may have on particular types of social relations and institutions.

**Comparing Development and Anthropology**

Development approaches and methods have much common with anthropology, but there are also substantial differences. What constitutes social development knowledge is determined by the need to meet policy priorities rather than the pursuit of knowledge. Social development presents itself as a technical discipline, using social analysis as a precondition for social transformation.

Like anthropological methods, development is people focused and uses qualitative techniques. But unlike anthropological methods requiring extended fieldwork, social development methodologies are designed to fit into short timeframes.

**Who Undertakes Development?**

Development Organizations include multilateral agencies like the World Bank and UN agencies, bilateral agencies, national and international NGOs. Typical partner organizations include national governments, national NGOs and the lower tier community based organizations.

**Influence of Development Notions**

The influence of development extends far beyond the formal institutions charged with implementing development oriented programs. Cultural attitudes informed by development aspirations are entwined in popular cultures of developed and developing countries. For e.g. rural communities in Nepal utilize the category of `developed’ (bikas) as a means of classifying people according to perceived class position and social networks. Wealthy individuals in developed countries provide money for communities perceived as ‘poor’ via child sponsorship schemes for example.

**Useful Terms**

**Social Development** – the effort to meet basic needs and to assure access to basic human right

**Entwined** – joined or merged together

**Perceived** – considered or viewed

**NGOs** – Non government organizations

**Development and Change**

From an anthropological point of view, culture is an asset, even though managing it is difficult since cultures change and do not have sharp borders.

Examples of development planners' and development workers' ignorance of local culture, have had devastating repercussions on the local level.

**What Development Anthropologists do**

Development anthropologists in interpret practices which are difficult for others to access who lack detailed comparative knowledge of social organization: gender, kinship, property resources.

Anthropological input is often restricted to appraisal and analysis of planned outcome failures. Besides international development, use of applied anthropology has grown in the West as well.

Anthropology in the US and in South America is often associated with cultural brokerage between indigenous groups and national governments, and between indigenous groups and private companies, often those associated with natural resource extraction.

**Changing Notion of Development**

Development necessitates a kind of social analysis of the situations which the proposed intervention will be designed to address. From an anthropological view, this essentially requires matching two representations of reality, that of development practioners and that of local environments.

Research on development and culture during the past years has emphasized a culture-sensitive approach in development. Emphasis on people undertaking their own development, instead of imposing development on them, it is suggested that research into local culture is one of the most important features for ensuring participatory development.

Participation means that development should involve all its stakeholders. Even the World Bank has recognized the complex local environments in which development policy was supposed to operate and had failed was due to lack of participation. A modified policy discourse spoke the need to include local people, civil society, and social networks in planning and implementation

**Contentions in Development**

If anthropology has conventionally been suspicious of unplanned changes, it has been particularly distrustful of directed change and of the international development project which has had directed change as its objective.

The ambivalent relationship between anthropology and development has its origins in the colonial systems of governance. British anthropology strove to be useful to ‘practical men’ of colonial administration in the 1930’s to access public funds. In France, anthropological methods were used to improve colonial government.

This history accounts for the suspicion with which anthropology is still viewed in many countries which have a fairly recent history of colonial domination.

**A New Role for Anthropologists**

The involvement of anthropology in development did not end with the dawning of the post-colonial era. The inclusion of the discipline in the institutional structures of international development from the late 1970’s on has created a number of anthropological positions within development agencies.

Induction of anthropologists in development agencies in the 1980’s and 1990’s coincided with a new people oriented discourse in international development and a renewed focus on social exclusion and marginality.

**Useful Terms**

**Contentions –** controversies or opposing points of view

**Conventionally** - standardized way of doing something

**Natural resource extraction** – extraction of resources from the natural environment (from the land or thesea) for productive purposes

**Post -Colonial** – the time period commencing after the colonization period is over, although the influenceof colonizing countries may still remain after they have physically vacated a colony

**Ambivalent** – ambiguous or lacking a clear cut definition

**Expectations from an Anthropologist**

Commonly it is expected that an anthropologist can assist development programmes by bringing in the anthropological perspective. Anthropologists are expected to address social rather that technical aspects of development programs.

It is anticipated that an anthropologist should take care of the ‘soft’ elements of the project. This is a diffuse expectation which can imply many tasks. The anthropologist can be expected to report on, for example, the division of labour in an area or why cultivators prefer a special crop. In the latter case, the anthropologist collaborates with an agronomist on the given project.

An anthropologist is expected to give answers to certain questions which should lead to action: for e.g. to drill a well, it is necessary to form a water group which will contribute labor and/or take the responsibility of maintaining the well after it has become operational.

Anthropologists entered the field of development when development organizations acknowledged that things often did not work out, according to expectations, because of cultural factors. Anthropologists can help in this regard given their understanding of cultural similarities and differences.

**Anthropology’s Contribution to Development**

Anthropologists have highlighted an appreciation of local knowledge and practices. Anthropologists argue that indigenous knowledge, practices and social institutions must be considered if local resource management and development plans are to work.

Interaction between so-called experts in the modern sector and people representing local, specific knowledge can result in the creation of new knowledge and be a starting point for development activities.

In an anthropological sense, culture is integrated in society and social development and is thus heterogeneous, dynamic and holistic**.** Anthropologists have shown that people are not an undifferentiated mass.

A first step of development workers is to get the whole picture of norms and values, and maybe their ideals, in a specific area. The second step is to look for the variations in the heterogeneity of what first looks like a homogeneous mass of people.

Hierarchies are found everywhere. It is of utmost importance to recognize hierarchies in the process of planned change. The manner in which certain groups are left outside the decision-making process also deserves attention.

**Requirements & Rewards of Anthropological Input**

Research into culture and development requires time. It involves considering the interaction and interchange of different kind of knowledge and learning between development agents, the so-called experts, and people representing local knowledge - all this also requires much effort and resources.

Much work done by the anthropologist is anticipatory in nature. Anthropological experience helps anticipate potential, both negative and positive changes. A well done cultural analysis of development initiatives also helps to anticipate conflicts, which can be addressed before they become serious problems.

**Useful Terms**

**Hierarchies** – segmented responsibilities accompanied by differences in rewards and prestige

**Undifferentiated** – lacking differentiation, similar

**Integrated** – tied or connected to each other

**Operational** – functional or workable