BELIEFS: AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MAGIC, WITCHCRAFT, AND RELIGION



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Licensing

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1: Welcome to The Anthropology of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion

Chapter 1 audio can be accessed on Soundcloud. Instructor resources are available on Canvas Commons.



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Chapter 1 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Explain and distinguish the complex definitions of "magic," "witchcraft," and "religion."
- Summarize and discuss the goals and research methods of cultural anthropologists.
- Critique the work and motivations of colonial anthropologists.
- Apply the principle of cultural relativism.
- Apply an intersectional and holistic approach toward the analysis of cultural beliefs and practices.

1.1 Welcome to The Anthropology of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion

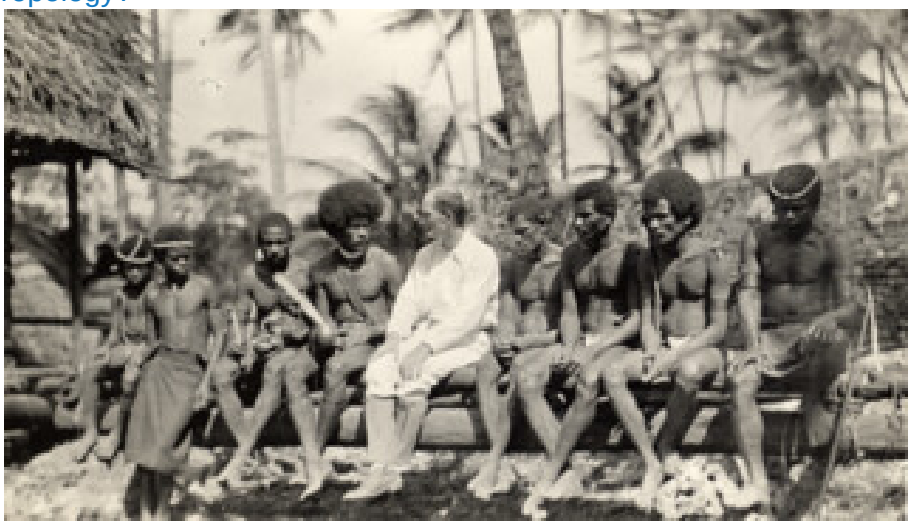
"The Anthropology of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion" is a classic course in departments of anthropology all over the world. In part, this is because every culture engages with these three topics. Their universal presence across cultures provides lessons about our shared nature as humans. At the same time, every culture engages with these topics in its own way. Their diverse expression across cultures also warrants explanation.

What exactly do we mean by the terms "magic," "witchcraft," and "religion?" And why should we care – either about the terms themselves, or about the anthropological study of magic, witchcraft, and religion more broadly? In this chapter, we provide detailed answers to the first set of questions: questions about terms, definitions, and their implications for how we might organize our thoughts and think more critically about humanity and about the world.

Throughout this text, we also present a response to the second question ("Why should we care?"). That response involves explicit statements about the value of anthropological perspectives on magic, witchcraft, and religion (don't worry if you're not sure what anthropology is yet – this will be defined soon enough!). We will also explore case studies that illustrate anthropology's direct impacts on the world around us, in the past, present, and hopefully in the future as well.

We encourage you to reflect on the impacts that the anthropological study of magic, witchcraft, and religion have in the present day while you are reading this text or taking the course it's assigned for. If you have questions or comments as you reflect, share them with your instructors and classmates, or you can even reach out to us (the authors of this textbook).

1.2 What is Anthropology?



Bronislaw Malinowski by Parliament Press, Flickr 2012

Before we can begin our exploration into the anthropological study of witchcraft, magic, and religion, one key term first requires discussion. That term is anthropology. **Anthropology** is the study of humanity. Anthropologists – the scientists, scholars, activists, and other cross-cultural and data-driven critical thinkers who *do* anthropology – are interested in all elements of human life. There are four major fields of anthropology:

1. **Anthropological archaeology**: the study of human behavior using objects people have left behind.
2. **Linguistics**: the study of the human experience through language.
3. **Biological anthropology**: the study of human biological diversity and evolution.
4. **Cultural anthropology**: the study of human cultural variation, as well as its causes and its impacts.

Although we will encounter elements of all four fields of anthropology, the contents of this course most often fall under the category of cultural anthropology (but see below for more on this). Cultural anthropologists are interested in every part of human culture, including religious beliefs and practices, but also political structure, family organization (kinship systems), economies, and much more. This is in part because, as you can imagine, the term **culture** is hard to define. We may use it to refer to a group's beliefs or practices or sense of identity, to symbols and objects, or to shared knowledge. In this text, we will often approach culture simply as "the way human beings create meaning in their lives." Again, this is only one of many possible definitions, but it is one that we will ask you to keep in mind and to reflect on throughout the text. The anthropological study of meaning-making, otherwise known as **semiotics**, is a central focus in our class. Taking a semiotic approach toward culture means that while we examine our own cultures and the cultures of others, we will not just strive to understand what different cultural groups believe or how they express those beliefs. We will also consider how humans actually produce (and reproduce) beliefs, meaning, and culture itself.

Exercise 1A

Anthropology is the study of humanity and modern anthropologists use unique research strategies to better understand the complex human experience. Listen to this 4-minute radio story that explores the work of anthropologist **Jason De León** to better understand how anthropological research can be used to address modern problems.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How does De León use physical objects to better understand human experience and human culture? What does his research reveal about the material needs of humans?
2. How is meaning created in human life? Consider concepts like nationality, migration status, and employment opportunity in your response.

1.3 What is the Supernatural?

As discussed above, anthropologists study humanity and seek to gain a better understanding of the human condition and the human experience. To do so, we need terms that allow us to study human cultures in an unbiased and comparative way. Nowhere is this more true than in discussions of scientifically-unverifiable beliefs like many of the topics covered in a course on magic, witchcraft,

and religion. To describe these kinds of beliefs, we use the term **supernatural**, which refers to anything that people might believe exists, but that falls outside the laws of science or the natural world. Even though supernatural beliefs cannot be proven or disproven by the scientific method, they still maintain a central role in the cultural identities of human groups throughout the past and present.

Three major concepts we explore throughout this text that each engage with the supernatural are "magic, witchcraft, and religion." Anthropologists define these concepts in a manner that may not be in line with the way you have heard them used colloquially, or even with the ways you tend to use them yourself. For the purpose of clarity in the rest of this text, we will define each term below.



Religion by AmandaConrad, Flickr 2007

1.4 What is Religion?

We use the term **religion** to refer to a system of beliefs, symbols, and practices that have at least some supernatural elements. These systems often impact the way members of a culture understand reality and shape people's lived experiences, behaviors, and attitudes. Of course, there are also many non-religious areas of culture – those that do not engage with the human soul, the afterlife, the divine, and with other supernatural elements – that influence people's lived experiences as well (e.g., politics, science, beliefs and expectations about gender norms).

Critically, the "supernatural elements" that make up a religion vary enormously in their specific details. Some religions believe in one god, some believe in multiple gods, some believe in spirits, and others don't believe in or explicitly identify any gods or spirits at all. What is important is that religions are faith-based; because they involve the supernatural, they cannot be proven through science. If a religious belief could be proven by using the scientific method, it would by definition cease to involve the supernatural. And yet, although its beliefs cannot be scientifically proven "*true*," we certainly know that religion is "*real*" because of the impact that it has on people's lives.

All this being said, the term religion is nonetheless exceptionally hard to define in a satisfactory way because so much variation exists in the range of ideas, behaviors, and associations that the term conjures up. We want to be able to discuss religion in a *universal* way: one that includes all belief systems and practices that we intuitively associate with the term. This way, or cross-cultural exploration might actually hope to glimpse the full range of variation in human beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural. At the same time, students may be tempted to object to a definition of religion so broad that it starts to include belief systems that don't intuitively *seem* like religions to them. Compromises will have to be made in our course, and along the way, we might just realize that many seemingly "non-religious" beliefs and practices we take for granted as part of human cultural life in the past and present do in fact fall into the category of "religious beliefs and practices." Another way to say this is that if we define the phenomenon clearly, we may be able to identify supernatural thinking in places we didn't already *realize* that it operates.

1.5 What is Magic?

We use the term **magic** to refer to a person's efforts to change their life through supernatural means. Magical rituals differ from religious ones because the latter involve whole communities. In contrast, magic addresses individual needs. If "a farmer wants rain, a young man wants a wife, a woman needs a cure for her illness [they might use magic to fulfill their desires… Magic] is directed at very practical ends as articulated by an individual" (Frankle 2005, 137). Put differently, magic has a definite beginning and end; it involves someone who desires something and the specific outcome they desire (Graeber 2001, 245-246).

Consider an example. If you are unable to pay your rent this month and you decide to sell your bike to make ends meet, you aren't engaging in magic because the steps you are taking are not supernatural. However, if you are unable to pay rent this month and decide to take action by following the principles of Feng Shui, you might place a money plant in your living room facing south. This would be considered a magical action because your efforts are engaging with supernatural forces that cannot be directly observed or explained by scientific means.

Other examples of magic use would include instances when people pray to supernatural beings to grant them specific outcomes. Sunday prayers to the Christian deity Jesus Christ may fall under the heading of "magic" if the person or people praying are praying for something specific. Since engagement with this deity is not scientifically or naturally observable, they are "supernatural," for the purposes of our analysis as anthropologists. In general, by praying to any divine beings with specific goals in mind, you are conducting magic: engaging with supernatural forces in an attempt to change your circumstances.

1.6 What is Witchcraft?

We use the term "**witchcraft**" in two different ways in this course.

- First, we use the term to refer to the many different religious communities who refer to themselves as witches. Although this form of witchcraft actually exists in many forms, it is often the case that witches believe in the supernatural powers of the "natural" world (parts of the world that are not human-made).
- At the same time, many societies also use the term "witch" as an accusation intended to punish people who don't conform to society's standards.

We will explore the very different lessons, histories, and belief systems associated with these two uses of "witchcraft" (witchcraft as a description of one's own spirituality and witchcraft as an accusation against others) at length in this course.

1.7 A Word about Our Goals as Cultural Anthropologists

Anthropologists are not interested in determining which religions or belief systems are "better" or "worse," or are we interested in deciding which religions or belief systems are "true" or "false." In fact, decisions about what is "true," "false," "better," or "worse" are not universal (they are culturally specific) and are therefore impossible to make with any kind of scientific or unbiased certainty. In this text, you will be challenged to engage with concepts that may be different from your personal understanding of reality, and we urge you to stretch your mind to understand the beliefs of people who think differently about the world than you do. To enter the study of magic, witchcraft, and religion without an open mind will hinder your ability to understand the course material.

Remember that your goal this semester is to understand the beliefs and practices of others – and of your culture too – while also developing your own unique perspective. You are not expected to like or to agree with everything that we discuss in this course, but you are expected to work hard to understand how anthropologists and other scholars study the topics of magic, witchcraft, and religion, and why other people's religions and spiritual beliefs are as valid as your own.

1.8 Anthropology and Holism

While this course specifically focuses on magic, witchcraft, and religion using perspectives drawn from cultural anthropology, we also incorporate ideas from linguistic anthropology, anthropological archaeology, and biological anthropology. Anthropologists call this a **four-field** approach toward the study of humanity, and we use it because we acknowledge that there are connections between the cultural, biological, linguistic, and material aspects of human life. In fact, these connections are quite common; no part of a culture exists in total isolation.

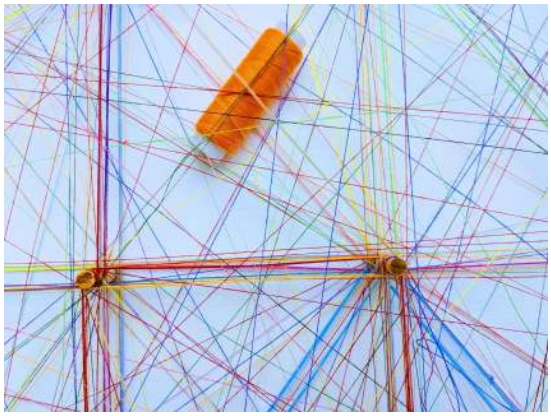


Photo by Omar Flores on Unsplash.

For example, think of all the ways that religion can be affected by "other parts of culture":

- Economic forces might favor the development or disappearance of specific types of religious practices over time, affecting the way that a religion changes.
- There are laws in most countries that govern how religious institutions can operate. These laws can affect whether and where a religion spreads and might even lead to conflicts between religious institutions and governments.
- Cultural norms and beliefs about what constitutes acceptable behavior likely also affect elements of a religion. For example, consider ideas about what forms of dress are appropriate; what defines masculinity, femininity, or even "success"; what a "normal" family should look like. All of these cultural expectations might shape how the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that are part of a given religion develop or how people might receive (or reject or transform) them.

In this sense, religion is always connected to other parts of culture, both *impacted by* and *impacting* culture in various ways. Clearly, religion cannot be understood effectively if we fail to take its cultural surroundings into account.

In fact, any part of a culture is similar in that it is connected to other cultural institutions. For this reason, anthropologists use what we call a **holistic perspective** to study culture. Rather than using a naive approach that expects to simply and easily delineate a single part of culture in which we are interested, we instead seek out the connections between cultural institutions like religious beliefs, kinship systems (family structure), economies, gender ideology, political life, cultural understandings of health, and much more.

Anthropologists know that we have to consider the whole cultural situation – using a perspective we call **holism** – if we want to understand the reality of a person's cultural experience. Holism refers to the idea that no "part" of a culture exists by itself. Later on in this course, you will be asked to examine the cultural practice of cannibalism holistically in order to understand how spirituality, gender roles, and language all play a role in one anthropologists' examination of the practice (see Chapter 11).

For now, consider these examples of how anthropologists use holism. The perspective will come up frequently throughout our course:

- Medical anthropologists worked in West Africa throughout the Ebola epidemic. Simply examining the genetic material of the Ebola virus was not sufficient to understand why and how the disease spread so rapidly. Anthropologists therefore looked to religious beliefs and practices and observed that some West African communities touch and hold the bodies of their deceased loved ones as part of religious and cultural rituals. A holistic approach to the Ebola epidemic acknowledged the impact of religious practices on health-related issues, and ultimately enabled more effective medical intervention (Wilkinson et al. 2017).
- Marriage is practiced in a variety of ways across cultures, and in some rural Tibetan communities, women marry multiple men at the same time. Most commonly, a woman will marry all of the brothers from one family. We call this practice **fraternal polyandry.** Anthropologists have examined this practice at length, and by examining the culture holistically, we understand that a variety of factors have led to its development (Starkweather and Hames 2012). In traditional Tibetan society, families prefer to keep their farms intact without splitting the land between children, and fraternal polyandry keeps the entire farm intact within the same family (Goldstein 1987). Here, our holistic approach has revealed connections between Tibetan ideas about families and wider economic and social practices.

Exercise 1B

Watch Kimberlé Crenshaw's Ted Talk titled "The Urgency of Intersectionality" to better understand her groundbreaking framework.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What does Crenshaw mean when she speaks about "frames"? How do these frames tangibly impact our cultural lives?
2. What is the "problem" that Crenshaw proposes? How can a new concept (intersectionality) help us understand the reality of this problem?

1.9 Intersectionality and Holism

We can look at the work of UCLA Professor Kimberle Crenshaw to better understand certain aspects of the holistic approach as it relates to contemporary discussions surrounding race and racism in the United States. Crenshaw argues that while some American media narratives do bring the murders of unarmed Black men to light, American media and American society at large more often ignore or downplay the murders of unarmed Black women (the same is true of other injustices and mistreatment faced by Black American women). By examining this phenomenon holistically, anthropologists and social scientists understand that forms of adversity these women face are harder to address because both their race and gender intersect to create a type of marginalization

that is unique. Black women in America are marginalized differently than Black men are and we cannot study the two trends in the same way; we must consider the way that beliefs about race *and* gender interact together in parts of American culture. Crenshaw calls this **intersectionality** whereby all of our different identities (our race, gender, class, nationality, ability, sexuality, etc.) intersect with one another in order to create unique lived experiences.

1.10 Worldview and Enculturation

When we take a holistic approach, we are examining the "whole" of something. The whole of our culture influences our **worldview**. Anthropologists are very interested in examining and understanding different people's worldviews. Your worldview is the way that you view the world, including:

- Your understanding of "good" and "bad."
- Your ideas of how people should behave.
- Your idea of what gender roles are.
- Your idea of what is "just" ("what constitutes justice").
- Your understanding of history.

It is important to note that no two people possess perfectly identical worldviews, not even two members of the same culture. However, anthropologists know that worldviews are **culturally specific;** they are shaped by our cultural surroundings to a large extent. By holistically examining all of the elements that tie into a person's life or into a cultural setting, we can better understand how different worldviews emerge. In this text, we'll be examining a wide variety of different worldviews.



A boy playing with trucks as an encultured behavior. Play, by Alec Couros, Flickr, 2010

The process through which you learn your culture and worldview is called **enculturation**. You were likely enculturated through media such as TV and movies, as well as by a family, who taught you what "proper" behavior was, and by friends, who rewarded or "positively reinforced" some behaviors while discouraging or "negatively reinforcing" other ones. Your view of the world was likely also developed by medical experts who told you what was mentally and/or physically healthy and by religious leaders who made similar pronouncements.

Consider the following examples of the enculturation process:

- Human bodies are very diverse. Weight, skin tone, hair color, length, and texture all vary widely. From a medical standpoint, different heights and weights can all be equally healthy and normal. However, our ideas of what is "beautiful" and "attractive" are largely defined by powerful cultural trends that typically only promote one type of body as the "ideal" type. When we grow up in a society that consistently puts one form of beauty on magazine covers, in TV shows, and on children's toys, then we are enculturated to value only one very small sampling of human bodies.
- People are not born with a preconceived notion of what "success" or "power" looks like. In fact, these concepts vary from generation to generation and from society to society. We learn culturally-specific ideas of success and power throughout our

lives, as teachers, parents, religious leaders, media, mythology, and other widespread narratives define and reinforce these concepts.

With many of the key terms now clearly defined, we can turn our attention to a few major shifts and developments in the way anthropologists study magic, witchcraft, and religion that will inform the rest of this course.

1.11 Shifting Gears: Anthropology, History, and Colonialism

The actual "beginning" of anthropology is hard to identify because human beings have, to some extent, always been interested in studying each other. Long before anthropology was officially recognized as a field of study, early travel writers and philosophers from ancient societies all over the world studied and wrote about the diversity of human culture. (Guest 2020, 68). The value of anthropology became more pronounced during the era of European expansion from the 16th-20th centuries, as European countries strove to expand their political influence and control areas across the entire globe. In many cases however, European-run colonial governments struggled to control local populations (Wolf 1982). During this time, early anthropologists produced works that often assisted colonial governments in their missions (Kuper 2006).

We use the word **colonialism** to refer to the control of people and their land by a foreign power. Colonialism has existed throughout the past and present to varying extents and in different forms. During the 16th-20th centuries, European powers sought to expand their political and economic control of various resources throughout the world: commodities like foodstuffs and other more exotic materials, strategic waterways and valuable trade routes, and in many cases, people. Often, colonial invaders, administrators, and rulers viewed native peoples, their practices, and even their basic human needs, as an obstacle to the success of the colonial undertaking. In many cases, these groups treated native people and their cultures as little more than resources to be enslaved, without equal standing or claim to human rights.



This map of the world shows the scale of the British Empire in 1886, providing only a fractional sense of the extent of global colonial domination at just one point in the past. Imperial Federation, map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886. Colomb, J. C. R.

At this point, it may be useful to take a look at a world map and identify parts of the world that were colonized during the era of European expansion. Nearly the entire African continent was colonized, as was all of South America and the Pacific Islands. More than half of the Middle East and Asia was colonized by European countries during this time as well. As discussed above, early anthropologists and their "scientific studies" of human culture were involved at least indirectly in colonization efforts and in perpetuating uneven power dynamics during this period. The role of anthropology has certainly shifted since that time, but the colonial era is a critical part of the history of ideas we will encounter later in the text.

1.12 What Did Colonial Anthropologists Actually Do?

During this period, European anthropologists wrote and shared "scholarly works" they wrote about other cultures. These works may have assisted colonial governments in their efforts by:

- Serving as propaganda that presented native peoples as "savage" or less-than-human, while simultaneously serving as propaganda that held Europeans up to be fundamentally different ("civilized"). When these early anthropologists were viewed as "experts," they were taken at their word by European audiences. When anthropologists produced accounts that were steeped in racism, these accounts served to justify the abusive control that European powers sought to keep over the rest of the world (Crewe and Axelby 2014, 28-31; Kuper 2006, 111).
- Developing a hierarchy of cultural value. European anthropologists believed that their culture was, inherently, the "best" culture. They then strove to compare all other cultures against that standard in order to determine which people were more advanced than the rest. This logic is inherently flawed because the European standard of greatness is not a universal standard and these cultural hierarchies were not objective.
- Collecting census data. By surveying the number and types of people in each community, the colonial governments could better exercise control.
- Studying and learning the local culture and languages. It was easier to control a population if you could understand how they spoke to each other and about themselves.
- Studying and learning about local judicial systems so that the foreign governments could use them to better control the local population.

We call anthropologists of this era **armchair anthropologists** because they did not spend a great deal of time among the people whose cultures they studied (Guest 2020, 69). In fact, some never visited the people they wrote about at all. Armchair anthropologists would rely on information provided by missionaries, government officials, merchants, and travelers in the field; they would then combine these disparate observations to write articles and books about human cultural variation. As you can probably imagine, this type of research is often unreliable and did not actually reflect the real practices of the cultures it investigated. Similarly, cross-cultural patterns that these early anthropologists observed were often inaccurate.

Early anthropologists' impact on the cultures they studied is hotly debated. While we know that anthropologists were offered funding and access to native lands during the era of European expansion (Guest 2020, 69; Crewe and Axelby 2014, 28-31; Kuper 2006, 113), and that many of these anthropologists marketed themselves as helpful to colonial governments in order to gain funding and other support (Kuper 2006, 94-114), the actual contribution that anthropology made to colonial rule is widely contested (Asad 1991). For example, anthropologist Adam Kuper argues that anthropologists were in fact mostly ignored by government officials as eccentrics while anthropologist Talal Asad argues that the contributions of early anthropologists were too specific to be helpful to colonial administrators.

Did anthropologists directly help colonial governments? This is unclear. But what is clear is that early anthropology was steeped in a worldview of white, European supremacy during its early development (Wolf 1982; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008, 18-19). Whether each individual anthropologist was assisting or resisting the colonial effort, they were working within a framework that constructed the world in terms of European whiteness (Said 2004, 1).

1.13 Cultural Relativism

Colonial anthropologists practiced ethnocentrism. **Ethnocentrism**is the practice of measuring the achievements or practices of a culture on the basis of your own cultural standards. In other words, if your favorite color is blue, then you might say that a green car is ugly because it isn't blue. In this circumstance, we know that the judgment is not objective because not everyone agrees that blue is better than green. This was the mistake that anthropologists made during the Era of European expansion and the early development of anthropology as a field: they harbored ethnocentric biases, believing their own (European) culture to be more "advanced," "evolved," or "civilized" than other cultures. and then measured other cultures in terms of their degree of similarity to Europe.

Anthropologist **Franz Boas** developed the concept of **cultural relativism** in direct response to this kind of ethnocentric thinking. Cultural relativism is the principle that all cultural beliefs and practices are equally valid in their own context. In other words, to judge a culture other than your own based on the standards that you learned within your cultural setting is always a pointless exercise that is biased by ethnocentrism. Instead of judging from the perspective of an outsider, as early anthropologists did, we now strive to understand cultures on their own terms: through their own, culturally-specific logics.

To that end, throughout this text, we will present diverse cultural beliefs and practices, some of which are likely to be quite different from your own (including, for example, cannibalism and polygamy). You never have to agree with or even like these cultural practices, but you must strive to understand how they make sense to cultural insiders, in their own cultural context.

1.14 Engaging with Cultural Relativism: What is a "Liberated Woman?"

We can look at the example of a liberated woman to better understand how cultural relativism works. Many women's liberation movements in the United States are of the view that a woman's body is natural, not inherently sinful, and that the amount of clothing a woman wears should not determine whether she can be safe in public (Mascia-Lees 2010, 33-58).

This worldview makes sense in its own, culturally-specific context. However, there are many other forms of women's liberation in the US and across the world that incorporate a different form of logic and, ultimately, arrive at a different conclusion. In some religious communities – including some Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities – a liberated woman is a woman who is freed from the male gaze. In this context, a woman who covers most of her body is not pressured to be judged by society or to look attractive to men. By this cultural perspective, true freedom is the freedom from showing one's body (Abu-Lughod 2002, 787; Mascias-Lees 2010, 63-65).

While these two value systems seem contradictory, they both make equal sense in their own context and are both designed to achieve the same outcome. By practicing cultural relativism, we can move past the idea that these two cultural practices are mutually exclusive. Both cultural views address similar goals; they simply express the same cultural value in different ways.

In each case, deeply ingrained cultural preferences can limit a woman's freedom of expression and nonconformity can even threaten her safety. A community – like many in the United States – that expects women to uncover may react with hostility toward a woman who fully covers. On the other hand, a community that expects women to cover – like parts of Indonesia or the United Arab Emirates – may be hostile toward a woman in a bikini. In both cases, women are expected to internalize a specific value system that makes sense in context and anthropologists can examine both to better understand the larger human experience.

Now, you'll read the work of feminist anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod titled, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" Abu-Lughod addresses controversial issues surrounding the US invasion of the Middle East after 9/11. She also argues that different groups of women empower themselves in different ways and that when some American audiences judge other groups' "liberation" through an ethnocentric lens, serious misunderstanding and conflict can result.

Exercise IC

Using your college library's login, read Lila Abu-Lughod's piece titled, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?"

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Using specific examples from the text, how have the narratives about Muslim women been written without their consent or participation?
2. What does Abu-Lughod mean when she calls the burqa a liberating invention?
3. Do people in your community have free choice over what they wear in every situation? What parts of the body are expected to be covered? What parts of the body are expected to be revealed? Consider more than one gender in your response.

1.15 Participant Observation

In 1914, an anthropologist named **Bronislaw Malinowski** was offered a position to briefly visit New Guinea (a British colony at the time). Malinowski was a citizen of Austria-Hungary and was studying in the UK. He planned to do the minimal amount of research that the dominant approach to anthropology that was required at the time (the armchair approach, discussed above).

Upon arrival in New Guinea, Malinowski learned that the First World War had broken out and that he was, essentially, "behind enemy lines." Malinowski was required to stay in British territory as an "enemy of the state," but he was hired to complete fieldwork while he lived among the Trobriand Islanders. Malinowski transformed fieldwork by intimately getting to know the community he studied in a manner that previous anthropologists had not.

After the end of the war, Malinowski returned to the UK with a powerful book about the cultural lives of people he had actually observed first-hand. He had also lived among them and known them as a participant in their daily lives and activities. Malinowski's experiences led him to develop the fieldwork strategy known as **participant observation** that is critical to most anthropological research today.

The four steps of participant observation are:

1. **Stay for an extended period of time**: This may seem obvious to us now, but it was groundbreaking at the time. Malinowski wanted to make sure that anthropologists spent years living among the people they were studying in order to have enough time to fully understand all elements of the culture.
2. **Learn the local language**: If you are multilingual then you know that different languages lead to different ways of thinking. Malinowski realized that you can't understand a community if you can't learn how they speak about themselves and about the world.
3. **Explore the mundane imponderabilia**: in other words, "make the strange familiar and make the familiar strange." Anthropologists strive to make sense of cultural practices that seem "strange" while equally trying to identify what might be unique or "strange" from an outsider's perspective in order to highlight what, exactly, is a social construct in our own cultures.
4. "**Get off the veranda:**" Malinowski wanted anthropologists to leave their homes and actively participate in the cultural practices of the people they were studying (DeWalt 2011, 1-17). It is only by getting off the veranda and participating, while also observing, that we can ever fully know the people that we are studying.

Exercise ID

Anthropologists are required to learn the local language when engaging in fieldwork. Listen to NPR's story titled, "A Man Finds An Explosive Emotion Locked In A Word" to understand how our languages shape our reality.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How did language shape Rosaldo's reality? How did the expansion of language help to transform his emotional state?
2. How is grieving allowed in your own culture? How is it limited? Consider the range of allowed emotional expression, length of mourning time, required activities, and restricted activities in your response.

1.16 Ethnography

Anthropologists produce **ethnographies** (written descriptions of a community or cultural practice). In order to produce a good ethnography, we need to be able to conduct participant observation while practicing cultural relativism. An anthropologist in the field will face a variety of challenges that will inhibit good ethnography, including:

- Understanding culturally-specific logic.
- Removing power for people to speak for themselves.
- Instinctual desire to measure the culture against your own.

The term "ethnography" is not only a term for the written work that an anthropologist produces after observing and participating in a culture. It is also a shorthand term used to describe the method of participant observation that Malinowski pioneered. Throughout this course, you will encounter the term "ethnography" as a way of describing both the product of an anthropologist's fieldwork and the fieldwork method itself.

1.17 Emic and Etic Perspectives

A written ethnography presents a way of understanding a culture based on an anthropologist's insights and experiences as a participant observer. However, as it turns out, there is more than one way to "understand" a culture. We will sometimes find it useful to distinguish two separate perspectives we use when studying cultures, each highlighting a fundamentally different way of viewing cultural beliefs and behaviors. Each of these perspectives has an important place in the anthropologist's toolkit.

As you have learned, anthropological fieldwork involves immersing oneself in a group's day-to-day activities, participating in their rituals, attending social gatherings, and conversing with cultural insiders. All of this is done with the goal of understanding the culture from the perspective of its actual members. To learn how cultural insiders see the world is to gain what we call an **emic perspective.** Another way to say this is that when we take an emic perspective, we are looking at the world around us through the eyes of a member of a particular culture, interpreting it in terms of their beliefs, preconceptions, and categories.

In contrast, another approach that anthropologists use when trying to gain an understanding of a culture is what we call an **etic perspective.** This term refers to a way of observing a culture without the preconceptions, attitudes, or cultural knowledge of its members. In other words, an etic perspective is supposed to be free of any cultural biases, even cultural insiders' perspectives about their own reasons for doing what they do.



Consider the perspective of the person seated on a wall in this image. Are they an insider ("emic"), looking at their own city? Or are they an outsider, gazing at a foreign place ("etic")? Photo by picjumbo.com from Pexels.

1.18 An Example of the Emic and Etic Perspectives: a Morning Meal

Kenneth Pike, a scholar who coined the terms "emic" and "etic" in the 1950s, provided an example of a group of biologically-related individuals gathered together, eating toasted bread and butter, scrambled eggs, and orange juice, shortly after sunrise (Mostowlansky and Rota 2020, 5-6). An anthropologist using an etic perspective to interpret this event might choose to focus on the quantity of calories, cholesterol, and carbohydrates each individual ingests during this event. An anthropologist using this (etic) perspective might also emphasize the way that daily feeding events like this one allow the members of a household to share information about their schedules over the next day and coordinate with one another before they separate to fulfill their economic, social, political, and familial responsibilities.

In other words, an etic perspective focuses on the observable functions of a practice – even one as simple as "breakfast." It does not focus on what cultural insiders *think of*, what they *care about*, or how they *describe* this event when they reflect on it. When early anthropologists wrote about cultural practices among groups all over the world who they viewed as "primitive," they tended to use an etic approach. Members of the cultures that these anthropologists wrote about would likely have explained their own beliefs in very different terms than armchair anthropologists did.

Looking at the same event described above from an emic perspective, by contrast would frame it as cultural insiders see it. To cultural insiders, this event is a type of event that is both familiar and meaningful, and even carries its own symbolic importance due to the specific cultural information they have come to possess through the process of enculturation. This event is *breakfast* – "the most important meal of the day!"

Of course, from an objective and unbiased standpoint, cultural insiders may be correct or incorrect in their attitude or their belief about breakfast and its importance. Most likely, they have plenty of other ideas or expectations or associations relating to breakfast that are unique to their specific culture. In fact, the very concept of breakfast may be unique to their culture, such that outsiders observing them eating might not have any preconceived notions or even a word for this particular behavior.

In short, when we discuss an emic perspective, we are referring to cultural insiders' unique understanding of their own practices. Throughout this course, we will encounter instances where cultural insiders' (emic) perspectives are critically important for us in order to understand why people make the choices they make.

1.19 Why Emic and Etic Perspectives Matter

Anthropological research conducted over centuries teaches us that an enormous and diverse range of worldviews have always existed, and continue to exist across human cultures. We should expect that not all cultures use similar categories, and what members of one culture see as beautiful, ethical, or valuable might differ significantly from how people in another culture assign these attributes to objects, actions, and ideas they encounter.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the central goals of anthropology involves documenting and understanding these different cultural perspectives. To do so, we will often need to wear the lens of a cultural insider, taking on the emic perspective to the best of our ability. At the same time, there will also be instances where cultural insiders understand their behaviors in ways that do not fully capture what we are really interested in. In these instances, it may not be enough to know how insiders explain or justify their own cultural practices. Instead, we may also want to consider factors that aren't obvious or don't seem important to cultural insiders. Such cases require us to use the etic perspective.

Again, neither one of these perspectives should be treated as superior; in fact, most of the situations we consider will require us to understand both emic and etic perspectives.

1.20 Remembering Emic and Etic

If you're looking for a trick to remember the difference between emic and etic perspectives, consider the way that the word emic has the letters "m" and "e" in the word spelling the word, "me" and then you can remember the emic perspective is your own perspective. What this means is that when you grow up in your own culture, you, likely, understand why you practice certain holidays, why you dress a certain way, why you divide labor in a family differently than another culture might do it, and you can explain these things to outsiders if they're visiting your culture and looking to learn about it. However, because everything in your culture might feel so normal and natural and obvious to you, you may not know what is unique or interesting about your culture. This is why we need outsiders to visit our cultures and observe them with an etic perspective. The etic perspective, or, the outsider's perspective, can highlight what is unique about a culture from a new, alternative viewpoint.

1.21 A Final Note on Critical Thinking and Studying Anthropology

Education, including this class, is a part of the enculturation process (discussed above). Concepts are presented to us as facts in the classroom and we are expected to understand the material in the same way that our instructors understand the material. If you've ever felt frustrated by a teacher's bias, then you know that there can be an inherent power imbalance in the education system: teachers have a great deal of power to influence their students' understanding of the world around them (Freire 1972).

Educators have the power to:

- Identify and present information in a manner that we see fit
- Interpret the information in a way that is in line with our own worldview
- Encourage the reflection of our own worldviews in the grading process

Your instructors have culturally specific worldviews that can never fully be removed from the classroom. Your anthropology instructors strive to equalize this power imbalance as much as we possibly can by being transparent about our personal biases and by asking you, the student, to speak up and share your personal knowledge and experience (especially when it differs from our own).

The college classroom is the best place to learn how to think critically and you can achieve this by learning how to critically engage with academic arguments. Critical thinking is an essential skill that we work to help you develop. Critical thinking is the practice of examining evidence and using what you learn from it to reach a conclusion. By advancing your critical thinking skills, you'll be able to better separate fact from fiction when watching, listening to, or reading news stories or arguments from politicians or from other powerful sources that wish to maintain power over you. When thinking critically, it's essential to:

- Consider the speaker: What is their agenda? What are they trying to achieve? Do they want something from you?
- Consider the evidence presented: Is it reliable? How do you know?
- Consider your own knowledge: What has your experience been? What unique information do you possess about the issue at hand?

Then, finally, make up your own mind about the information presented. In your personal life, you should be able to do this with your teachers, news media, politicians, medical and religious experts. In this course we will work with you to help you critically examine the arguments presented by anthropologists so that you can decide, for yourself, which arguments are most valid and valuable.

The first step in understanding how to think critically is to remember that your instructors are also human beings with specific worldviews, and that Anthropology, like all of the social sciences, is based on debate and dialogue between social scientists' different theories. It's important that you understand that nothing we learn here is absolute, objective fact but, rather, our subject is made up of well-researched and developed arguments that rely on the arguments of social scientists who came before us. We will also be incorporating evidence from our own research and our own lived experiences in the material. Please consider all of this when critically engaging in the course material.

At the end of the semester, you should be able to:

- Critically examine the arguments of the social scientists we learn this semester
- Remember who made each argument because they are arguments and not absolute, objective fact (this is usually the hardest part of course, but we'll support you to make it easier)

- Critically examine our arguments, consider our perspective as authors and anthropologists
- Listen to the contributions of your classmates who have equally valid knowledge and experiences to share
- Contribute to the dialogue yourself by offering “I statements” (please do not make claims in the classroom that you cannot, personally verify to be true)
- Come to your own conclusions based on all of these considerations

Exercise 1E: Journal Reflection

Reflect on the principle of cultural relativism and identify an occasion in your life where cultural relativism might have helped overcome a conflict. Explain how understanding another person’s worldview using their own, culturally specific logic can lead to a better understanding of the human experience.

Exercise 1F: Study Guide

*Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms **in your own words**:*

- Supernatural:
- Magic:
- Religion:
- Witchcraft:
- Anthropology
- Archaeology:
- Linguistics:
- Biological Anthropology:
- Cultural Anthropology:
- Semiotics
- Holism:
- Intersectionality:
- Worldview:
- Culturally-specific
- Enculturation:
- Critical Thinking:
- Ethnography:
- Etic:
- Emic:
- Colonialism
- Participant Observation :
- “Mundane Imponderabilia:”
- Cultural Relativism:
- Ethnocentrism:
- Culture:
- Armchair Anthropology:

What are the 4 steps of participant observation?

1.
2.
3.
4.

Ensure that you can briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Franz Boas
- Kimberlé Crenshaw
- Lila Abu-Lughod
- Bronislaw Malinowski
- Kenneth Pike

- Jason De León
- Renato Rosaldo

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2: Ethnographic Research Methods

Chapter 2 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Plan, write and conduct interviews with primary informants.
- Visit a cultural space and analyze the cultural symbols in the space.
- Analyze your fieldwork data by selecting and applying a theoretical approach.

2.1 Introduction to Fieldwork

An ethnography is a description of a culture, custom, group of people, beliefs, and practices. Cultural anthropologists always take a holistic approach which means that we look at many elements that tie together to create a lived experience. We are not focused on making moral judgments, nor are we interested in proving anyone's belief systems to be true, false, better, or worse. Rather, we strive to understand a group of people in their own, culturally specific logic. You are expected to achieve all of these goals whenever you conduct your own fieldwork.

If required to complete ethnographic fieldwork for your anthropology class, you'll likely encounter some of the most common challenges faced by anthropologists:

1. You will need to understand the other culture's specific logic. This means that, when something doesn't make sense to you, you need to ask yourself, "what would need to be true for this to be the case?" You will need to speak to the people in the community and try to get to the bottom of the beliefs and practices that are the most foreign to you.
2. You will need to avoid removing the power from the people that you're interviewing. While you are expected to compose the paper, yourself, you should still rely heavily on the information given to you by members of the community. Feel free to include long quotes and stories directly from the community. You are expected to comment on information coming from your informants; you are expected to analyze the cultural practices anthropologically. But, you should try your best to amplify the voices of the people that you are studying at the same time.
3. You will need to overcome the instinctual desire to measure others' cultures against your own. If you approach the culture with the idea that it should be measured against your own belief systems, then you will not succeed in your fieldwork. You need to understand the community on its own terms and be prepared to understand the community based on its own standards.

2.2 Participant Observation: A Practical Guide for Students



First try of participant observation by Jonatan Zinger, Flickr 2007

Remember that there are four steps of participant observation. As students of anthropology (likely completing a miniature ethnography), you'll need to demonstrate your ability to engage with these concepts within the limitations of your anthropology course.

1. Stay for a long time: Without the ability to travel and live abroad for years as part of your anthropology class, you should still achieve a truncated version of this important step. When you plan to visit your community-of-study, plan to stay as long as possible. Don't simply swing by their information booth for 15 minutes and then go home. Rather, stay for many hours, share a meal with the community, participate in their activities and rituals. Whenever possible, return for a second visit and follow up with your informants.
2. Get off the veranda: You will need to participate in the culture at the same time that you are observing it. As you are required to engage in the cultural practices, please pick a community that you feel comfortable participating with. When you are engaging in the step, do not, for example, sit in the very back of a church slumped down ignoring the people in the church. You need to

sit in the front, pray with them, shake hands, and participate in the actual events in order to understand them from the people's perspective.

3. Learn the language: It's likely that you already speak the languages of the community that you'll be studying as your research will be conducted locally. However, you should expect to learn some new culturally specific terms while you are talking to the people. Maybe you'll learn slang terms, or you'll learn the professional terms they use in their field. But try to identify at least one or two new words and then explain to your instructor how they reveal something about the people's cultural beliefs and priorities.
4. Explore the Mundane Imponderabilia: You need to make the strange familiar and make the familiar strange throughout your research. Try to understand how your beliefs and practices are constructed and confusing to outsiders, while simultaneously trying to make sense of cultural practices that are confusing to you.

2.3 Emotion, Storytelling, and Vivid Language

Strong ethnographic research incorporates narrative elements and storytelling. When conducting and writing your own research, you may want to incorporate any of the following types of stories:

- A story that reflects on your personal experience in the new culture
- A historical tale that shapes the culture that you are studying
- A myth that is sacred to the community that you are studying



Storyteller by Tiago Besser, Flickr 2010

Remember also that you are a human being studying human beings so your emotional experiences during fieldwork are important to include in your research. If you felt scared upon entering the community and then felt relieved to find that they were very welcoming, then that would be an important element to include in your research. You can also vividly describe the environment including sights, smells, flavors (if the community feeds you).

2.4 Rapport

In fieldwork, anthropologists strive to develop rapport with their community of study. We use the word rapport to refer to a close and friendly relationship through which individuals can clearly communicate. In other words, if you are able to develop a relationship with the people that you're interviewing, then your fieldwork will go smoothly. In the interest of smooth fieldwork, please try to maintain a respectful relationship with the community throughout your research process. You can achieve this in the following ways:

- Remember to be grateful. The community that you are studying is doing you the favor of helping you complete your research, you are not doing them any favors. In the past, the vast majority of my students have maintained professional and respectful relationships with the people in their community that they were studyingYou will benefit from that reputation when you start your fieldwork. Please help future students have an easy time by maintaining a relationship of mutual respect.
- Be honest with yourself about your limitations. If you know that you will not be able to keep an 8 AM interview appointment on a Saturday, then please do not schedule it. Try to keep your word with the people that you are studying and, if they can't accommodate your own schedule and needs, then go ahead and switch to a different topic that is easier to achieve.
- Prioritize your own dignity. It's rare that anthropology students are not welcome in a community but it is possible. If you do not feel comfortable with the community that you planned to study, please switch topics. When conducting research, you should not feel unsafe in any way.

2.5 Primary Informants

An essential feature of anthropological research is the interview. Cultural anthropologists establish strong relationships with a primary informant. Your primary informant will be the person who you trust the most in the community and, likely, the person that you will conduct your interview(s) with.

It is likely that your informant will be the first person that you reach out to when you contact your chosen community of study. However, it's possible that the first person you reach out to will forward you on to someone who is a better fit for your research. Either way, you'll need to identify who your informant is in your paper. You are always welcome to anonymize anyone's name in your research because your paper may be posted publicly or shared widely. However, when you have your informant fill in a consent form, you must include their actual name and contact information.

2.6 Gaining Consent

It is unethical to include any interview information from anyone who has not expressly consented to be interviewed. You are required to gain written consent from members of your community of study. Ensure that your informants sign your consent forms before you conduct your interview. This book will offer a sample consent form that you are welcome to use.

Sometimes, anthropology students forget to bring any consent forms only to learn that their informants do not feel comfortable signing after the interviews are complete. This is unfortunate because that student's hard work could not be turned into a research paper. Please make sure this does not happen to you; make sure that you get consent before you interview.

Please understand that some communities will simply not feel comfortable signing a consent form. There are many communities in this world who, for a very good reason, do not trust outsiders coming in and asking them to sign things. If anyone refuses to sign your consent form, please accept their right to refuse and move on to either a new informant or to a new community altogether.

2.7 Planning and Conducting Interviews

You'll need to interview at least one member of the community after having completed the following steps:

1. Reach out to the community and schedule a time to join an event and conduct an interview
2. Get your consent forms signed
3. Participate in at least one cultural event with the community of study

Whenever possible, try to diversify the types of people that you are talking to. For example, if you only interview a group of men then you will not get a chance to understand how that culture is experienced by all genders. That being said, if you are specifically studying men's experiences, then it would be appropriate to only interview men. But, in that case, please interview men and boys of different ages. Or, speak to leadership and laypeople. The more diverse the viewpoints, the stronger your research will be.

Write up a few questions before you go into your interview. You're welcome to ask whatever you want. It's recommended that you formulate your questions in the following way:

- Avoid writing your questions with anthropological language. For example, asking someone what "myths" or "magic" they believe in might be offensive because they assume that you are implying that their sacred stories and beliefs are untrue. Instead, rephrase in a way that is more respectful and understandable to people who have not taken an anthropology class.
- Decide exactly what you want to understand about this community and structure your questions in that direction. Try to come up with an interesting thesis. So, identify a unique angle that you want to examine, and then prepare to interview on that topic.
- Remember that you are not an undercover cop trying to unveil any kind of secrets from this community. Anthropologists are open and honest about their motivations. You should always be transparent about what you are trying to understand, and how you are trying to understand it.
- Consider drafting 5 to 10 questions but prepare yourself to throw out a few questions throughout the interview. You may get an informant who is difficult to interview or someone who talks for so long that you never get a chance to reach the other questions. All of these circumstances are perfectly fine. Simply focus on identifying some bits of information that you can turn into a research, and don't worry about strictly sticking to your interview plan.
- Be prepared to improvise questions throughout the interview. You do not have to stick to prepared questions, you may want to take your conversation in an entirely new direction and you should be open to that organic flow.
- Write both directive questions and open-ended questions. Directive questions are structured in a way that requires a singular, clear, direct answer (often a yes or a no). Directive questions can help you get to the bottom of something that you need a clear

answer on. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to elaborate in a variety of different ways. Often open-ended questions to allow for more cultural context.

- You do not know if you will be interviewing someone who is clear, or a lengthy talker and you should prepare for both.



Survey team conducting survey by Dugong Seagrass, Flickr 2016

Plan to interview your informant in a setting that is comfortable for them. It's always best to interview them in their own cultural space because then you can observe how they interact with, decorate, and organize their cultural space. However, please assure that you never put yourself in harm's way. Your dignity and safety should always come first; please do not meet your informant somewhere that does not seem safe.

When you are interviewing please remember to be an active listener. We use the term "active listening" when someone is clearly engaged in the conversation. When you are listening actively, you are nodding your head, smiling, asking follow-up questions, making eye contact, and clearly participating in the discussion. If you are staring blankly at the informant and giving them no feedback, they will not be inclined to give you the lengthy answers that you need to write a meaningful paper.

You're encouraged you to take some notes during your interview so that you don't forget the informant's body language, the specific words, statistics, or terminology that they use, or anything else that you are likely to forget. However, please do not take so many notes that you are no longer listening actively.

Many students ask if they can record interviews on their phones. The answer to this is yes, however, please sincerely ask yourself if you will ever actually listen to the recordings. If you plan to record the interview, you must record yourself asking the informant if they are willing to be recorded and ensure that they respond in the affirmative on the recording. California is a dual consent state so you cannot record someone without their clear consent on the recording.

2.8 Journaling and Drafting

After conducting your fieldwork, be sure to sit down and journal all of your thoughts and feelings. Do not wait until you get home, but rather sit in your car or at the bus stop, and record everything that you can remember before you leave the space. When you journal, consider writing down the following:

- All of your initial impressions
- The new words that you learned
- Items to look into after leaving
- Follow up questions
- Anything that confused you
- Your emotional state before and after the interviews
- Sights, sounds, the atmosphere of the setting
- Any words or statistics that your informant mentioned that you need to look up upon arriving home

Taking this step will help you have more material to draw on when it comes time to draft your paper.

2.9 Getting Community Feedback

Finally, in order to ensure accuracy in your work, it's highly recommended that you draft your paper a few days before the paper is due. Then, you can email your draft to your primary informant for concrete feedback. Getting feedback from your informant is a

wonderful way to make sure that you are amplifying the voices of the people that you are studying and to ensure that you are representing them correctly.

Glenn Jordan and Delmos Jones are two anthropologists who have re-invented the meaning of ethnographic fieldwork. Continue on to better understand their approach to fieldwork and ethnography and to consider how their ideas and research can help shape your own.

2.10 Glenn Jordan: Visual Anthropologist

Adapted from Representations. Written by Zoe Jensen. Edited by Erin Hayes and Amanda Zunner-Keating.

Ethnographies are a staple of anthropological fieldwork. These deep, vivid descriptions of a people, culture or society allow for an understanding – and appreciation – of the vast cultural differences found around the world. Arguably beginning with anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski's 1922 ethnography, Argonauts of the Western Pacific, anthropologists have long been using vivid literary devices and elements of storytelling to enhance their work and connect readers to the people their books aim to represent. With technological advancements in an increasingly digitized world, anthropologists can now explore means of describing the people they study that go beyond words on a sheet of paper. Photography, videos, and even social media are now being used to complement fieldwork, creating more dynamic modes of storytelling that engage the senses.

An anthropologist, photographer, and curator — Glenn Jordan has dedicated his life to documenting and sharing the stories of people and their cultures particularly through a passion for photography. His work champions the underdog and advocates for an appreciation of human diversity. The focus of Jordan's research, ethnographies, and exhibitions is representation. Jordan states, "Behind everything I do, all my photography is all about identity and representation and culture, multiculturalism" (Haf 2012). Through exposure and education he aspires to challenge ignorance. Jordan uses his photography to enhance and bring life to his ethnographic work. By enhancing cultural knowledge through photographic representation, Jordan more vividly reflects the stories told by his informants (ibid).

While early anthropologists looked to study isolated cultures, modern anthropologists – operating in an increasingly globalized world – analyze how interactions between people shape our identities. Jordans exhibitions particularly look at the life and history of minorities present in Ireland and Wales. Jordan uses his visual art to tell the stories of Somali people living in Wales and Sikh communities in Ireland, among others. Jordan's 2015 collaboration with Andrew McNeill titled, "Under the Bridge: Being Homeless in Cardiff" explores the lives of unhoused people living in Wales ("Glenn Jordan" n.d.; Haf 2012). His article titled, "An African Presence in Europe" (2008) describes his ethnographic research on Somali people living in Wales as "an exercise in anti-racist education" (Jordan 2008). Jordan aims to improve understanding between diverse groups to create a more united community that does not discriminate against those of different backgrounds (Haf 2012).

Jordan is known to have a sensitive and caring nature which allows him to connect easily with those he photographs, often resulting in a willingness from people to be vulnerable and to tell difficult stories. The ability to develop a fruitful relationship with our communities-of-study is an essential step in anthropological fieldwork. When we invest in communities and follow the ethical codes necessary to establish genuine trust, we develop a good rapport (a relationship based on clear and direct communication) with our informants. The backbone of anthropology is fieldwork and good fieldwork requires meaningful interviews with diverse cultural groups.

Jordan has written several books and articles on culture, race, and African American history. Cultural Politics (1995), co-authored with Chris Weedon, focuses on power and reflects on the ways in which the constructs of class, gender, and race are upheld and perpetuated — Jordan writes "Social inequality is legitimated through culture" — or even how these social divisions may be challenged in a culture.

These themes are also touched upon in a later work with Weedon, in which the pair examine collective memory and its role in identity creation along racial and gender lines, among others (Weedon & Jordan 2012). They note the many influences on collective memory including the ways it may be politicized or biased to serve a dominant group (ibid).

Anthropologists use the term collective memory to refer to way that family, groups, and/or communities might share similar ideas of past events. Of course, as human memory is not perfect, social scientists know that our memories are largely impacted by the dominant narratives that are perpetuated by powerful groups. So when examining collective memory, we must take a holistic approach that considers the complex web of influences that may impact our ideas of past events.

In his piece "Re-membering the African-American Past" (2011), Jordan describes the art and history of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the "New Negro" that emerged during this time through in-depth analysis of the works of Langston Hughes and Aaron

Douglas (Jordan 2011). Jordan's work explores numerous facets of power and multiculturalism. has advocated for the agency of marginalized groups and championed the beauty of diversity through it all.

As an active member of the Association of Black Anthropologists (ABA), Jordan was editor of the association's newsletter from 1981 to 1985, while also serving as treasurer (Harrison 1987). Here he notably instituted the ABA's Occasional Paper series, thus expanding ABA's publishing range and provided an opportunity for further valuable literature on racism, colonialism, and African Americans in anthropology, among others (ibid). His dedication and stability within the organization would later lead him to become vice president (ibid).

Jordan has also curated several exhibitions across Ireland and Wales (Jordan n.d.). The same year Jordan arrived in the UK, he and the community founded the Butetown History & Arts Centre in Cardiff as a project dedicated to history and education, with aims to educate on the history and cultures of minorities and immigrants within the city and Wales in general through events, exhibitions, and books (ibid). By highlighting the vibrant diversity of the area and campaigning compassion and appreciation for others, the goal is to fight prejudice and inspire appreciation for the variety of cultures present (ibid).

Through dedication to education, whether as a professor, in the curation of exhibitions, or in publishing works committed to multiculturalism and the study of power, Jordan has no doubt contributed greatly to the advocacy for Black anthropologists and other under-represented groups. Jordan's recent works and the lasting effects of the organizations and institutions he has been a part of demonstrating a continuous impact on the world and undoubtedly will inspire and teach countless more.

2.11 Delmos Jones: Ethics in Fieldwork

Adapted from Representations. Written by Amanda Zuner-Keating and Ben Shepard. Edited by Laurie Solis.

A written ethnography presents a way of understanding a culture based on an anthropologist's insights and experiences as a participant observer. However, as it turns out, there is more than one way to understand a culture. We will sometimes find it useful to distinguish two separate perspectives we use when studying cultures, the emic perspective and the etic perspective, each highlighting a fundamentally different way of viewing cultural beliefs and behaviors. Each of these perspectives has an important place in the anthropologist's toolkit.

Anthropological fieldwork involves immersing oneself in a group's day-to-day activities, participating in their rituals, attending social gatherings, and conversing with cultural insiders. All of this is done with the goal of understanding the culture from the perspective of its actual members. To learn how cultural insiders see the world is to gain what we call an emic perspective. Another way to say this is that when we take an emic perspective, we are looking at the world around us through the eyes of a member of a particular culture, interpreting it in terms of their beliefs, preconceptions, and categories.

In contrast, another approach that anthropologists use when trying to gain an understanding of a culture is what we call an etic perspective. This term refers to a way of observing a culture without the preconceptions, attitudes, or cultural knowledge of its members. In other words, an etic perspective is supposed to be free of any cultural biases, even cultural insiders' perspectives about their own reasons for doing what they do.

Anthropologist Delmos Jones researched both perspectives throughout his career and he outlined his findings in his publication, "Towards A Native Anthropology." In this influential work, Jones makes the case that anthropologists must increasingly focus on studying their own communities. Jones rightly argued that anthropology's exclusive focus on being the "outsider looking in" was steeped in ideas of cultural supremacy (the exact racist and colonial worldviews that anthropology now strives to overcome). By working as both outsider and insider throughout his career, Jones exemplified a new, modern style of anthropological research that is now widely embraced by our field.

Jones conducted research in three separate areas: among the Papago Indians of Southern Arizona, among the Lahu of Northern Thailand, and within the Black community of Denver, Colorado. Each of these areas of research led Jones to profound conclusions that shaped the future of anthropology, and his work within Black communities in Denver offered a particularly powerful insight toward the power of "native anthropology". Jones writes, "I am an intrinsic part of the social situation that I am attempting to study. As part of the situation, I must also be part of the attempt to forge a solution (Jones 255)."

Jones lived from 1936–1999. Jones grew up partially in the South and partially in Oakland, California. Each circumstance influenced how he viewed the world: the former offered him an intimate knowledge of the Jim Crow South and how people struggled in oppressive cultural systems; the latter introduced Jones to the diversity of cultural views and political engagement (Klugh 2018). Later in life, in San Francisco, Jones earned his degree in anthropology in an era when student and faculty activism was on the rise alongside the increased popularity of anti-racism and feminism.

After moving to Arizona, Jones' initial position was as a field researcher among the Papago of Arizona. In this position, Jones developed his new anthropological consciousness: studying "the other" was also an opportunity to study one's own cultural understanding of the self. Jones found that anthropological research should not create a false binary of "West versus other" but that, rather, anthropologists should utilize the unique perspectives of our own cultural knowledge to offer insights about our communities and the other groups that we work among.

He writes:

> "As a graduate student, whenever I read descriptions of other people's way of life, I could never quite escape the notion that the writer could just as well be talking about me, and the way I lived as a Black youth in the rural south in the 1940's…I saw the Papago more as a poor people than as "Indians"…What I saw were people, who lived very similarly to the rural Black and White people of my childhood in rural Alabama (Jones cited in Klugh 2018.)"

Delmos Jones was particularly concerned with ethics within anthropology. While working in Thailand, the local government became interested in seeking out identifying information about socialist groups and demanded that Jones' research be handed over (Klugh 2018). Jones recognized that he could no longer conduct ethical fieldwork as his work was being used to target political groups; as a result, he suspended his research and subsequently published guidance for future anthropologists to protect the identities and lives of informants in the field.

As fieldwork is the backbone of anthropology, ethical fieldwork is a core value of our field. Without establishing and following ethical procedures, anthropologists are unable to accurately reflect – and protect – the lives of the informants who share their cultural knowledge with us. The American Anthropological Association offers 7 clear guidelines for anthropologists to pursue ethical fieldwork; each is essential for anthropologists pursuing ethnographic fieldwork.

The seven Principles of Professional Responsibility in the AAA Statement on Ethics are:

1. **Do No Harm**: Above all else, anthropologists must not harm their communities of study. This principle emphasizes the role of anthropologists as researchers whereby we must not experiment on or manipulate the communities who we are striving to better understand. Additionally, we cannot publish information that would jeopardize the safety or wellbeing of the community.
2. **Be Open and Honest Regarding Your Work**: Deception has no role in anthropological fieldwork. Anthropologists must remain transparent about our work. We share the purpose and implications of our fieldwork with our informants.
3. **Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions**: Before conducting any interviews or field observations, anthropologists must communicate their research interests and purpose to their informants and gain informed consent. Information gathered without consent cannot be used in any anthropological publications.
4. **Weigh Competing Ethical Obligations Due Collaborators and Affected Parties:** Anthropologists must consider how time, research, and publication might impact the people and institutions who we research and work with. Vulnerable groups must be protected and prioritized in fieldwork, research, and publication.
5. **Make Your Results Accessible:** The communities that we study have a right to understand and engage with any publications that result from our fieldwork. Your conclusions must be made available to the people who we interviewed and observed.
6. **Protect and Preserve Your Records**: Anthropologists must keep their research preserved (while protecting confidentiality).
7. **Maintain Respectful and Ethical Professional Relationships**: Anthropologists are required to respect colleagues and informants alike. Always credit informants or fellow anthropologists for their own information and research while always prioritizing equitable workplaces and field sites.

When we look at Delmos Jones' work, we see that we owe him a great deal. Jones developed a methodology to protect the safety and identity of informants and referred to his own field experiences to press the importance of informant protection. Additionally, Jones pushed for a new direction in the field known as "native anthropology." While cultural anthropologists were aware of the colonial legacy the marred the legitimacy of our field for generations, Jones identified and implemented a path to research that tangibly addressed these problems.

Exercise 2A: Journal Reflection

Which area of human life would you like to study as an anthropologist?

Which ethnographic research methods would you adopt in your own research?

Exercise 2B: Study Guide

*Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms **in your own words**:*

- Ethnographic Research Methods:
- Rapport:
- Interview:
- Primary Informant:
- Directive Questions:
- Open-ended questions:
- Active Listening:
- Express Consent:
- Dual Consent State:

Ensure that you can briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Delmos Jones
- Glenn Jordan

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3: Theoretical Approaches Toward the Study of Religion



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Chapter 3 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Summarize and interpret definitions of religion made by foundational figures in social science and anthropology.
- Compare and contrast arguments about functions of religion in human societies.

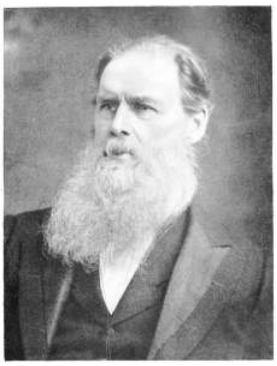
3.1 Setting Goals for the Anthropological Study of Religion

Before we begin our discussion on the approaches that anthropologists and other social scientists use when they study religion, it's important to understand that these disciplines are not interested in the truth or falsity of any given religion (Guest 2020, 61). Due to the very nature of religious phenomena as faith-based and scientifically unprovable, there is no way to examine which religions are "true" or "false," or which types of magic "work" or "do not work."

We are similarly not here to judge which religions are better or worse, because all religions make sense within their own culturally-specific contexts. So, as we examine the different beliefs that exist across world religions, it's essential that you approach each with an open mind. Try to separate your own religious beliefs from your study of other religions and do not measure them against your own culturally-specific standards.

3.2 Edward Burnett Tylor

In the next sections of this chapter, we explore key questions and interpretive frameworks that anthropologists use when they study religion across human cultures. Themes we outline here reflect centuries of discussion and heated debate among social scientists. One of these social scientists was **Edward Burnett Tylor,** an early British anthropologist who lived from 1832 – 1917. Born in England as a member of a religious minority group called Quakers (a branch of the Christian faith), he grew up to view religions as cultural structures rather than systems of belief. This view prepared him to be one of the world's first scholars on the matter of religion (Moore 2019, 4).



E.B. Tylor

Tylor is popularly called “the founder of modern anthropology.” Among other contributions (see below), he was one of the early scholars in the social sciences who attempted a definition of “culture” that was clear enough to enable scientific inquiry but also broad enough to reflect the complexity of human behavior. He organized our field as an inquiry into human social systems (Moore 2019, 3-4), and separated this type of research and analysis (anthropology) from biological fields of study (Kuper 2014, 3).

3.3 Why Magic Works

Tylor examined the logic that existed within societies that he considered to be “less evolved” than his own in order to make sense of their beliefs in their own terms (Kuper 2014, 25). One topic of interest to Tylor was the widespread belief in magic (recall that the term **magic** was defined in Chapter 1). In order to explain why forms of magic were taken seriously in so many societies, Tylor identified four ways that beliefs in magic were reinforced:

1. Randomly, the desired results of a magical ritual will sometimes occur, causing believers to think that the magic practice is effective.
2. Sometimes, a person performing the magic will use deception to convince participants that their ritual has been effective.
3. People tend to remember positive outcomes more often than the occasions when magic doesn’t work.
4. When magic doesn’t produce the desired results, believers often blame counter-magic from someone else (Winick 2014, 334). Thus, the *failure* of a magical ritual can actually be interpreted by cultural insiders as a justification for *more* – or *stronger* – magic to be used in the future.

For Tylor, these processes occurred uniquely in societies he viewed as “primitive” (these tended to be non-European societies). Tylor’s view that non-European societies were inherently different than the rest of the world was not only racist, but it is also safe to say that his ethnocentrism prevented him from understanding that people in *all* cultures can *and do* buy into perpetuate magical beliefs of different kinds. Again, today’s anthropologists consider the existence of these characteristics and processes as universal. Consider the following points from Rebecca and Phillip Stein’s textbook on “The Anthropology of Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion,” which expands upon the idea of “why magic works.”

1. The human mind frequently sees coincidence as evidence of causation. We might assume that two, unrelated events are causing one another (even in cases where the two events are not related).
2. Magic often attempts to cause outcomes that happen naturally. For example, people are unlikely to perform a rain ritual outside of the rainy season. So, when the rain ritual is performed immediately before the rains naturally start, a community might associate the magic with the outcome.
3. As humans, we are very resistant to changing our beliefs! Overcoming the long-held belief that magic exists can be very hard to overcome.
4. Practitioners of magic typically do not ask impossible things of magic. Magical beliefs and practices are usually restrained to the realm of possibility.

As defined in Chapter 1, magic refers to any efforts made to change one’s life by supernatural means. Magic, in this sense, is practiced in nearly all religions and can be examined in a variety of contexts.

3.4 Cultural Evolutionism, Animism, and Diffusionism

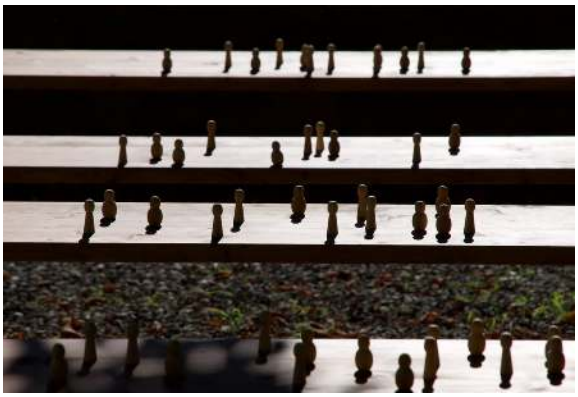
In his most famous work, *Primitive Culture*, Tylor outlined two key ideas . Please note that both of Tylor’s ideas are overly simplistic by the standards of modern religious scholars. While neither fully reflect modern anthropological thinking, both influenced early anthropological work and carry a small piece of validity that you may wish to revisit throughout the course.

- **Cultural Evolutionism**: The idea that cultures change and adapt over time to meet people's changing needs (Winick 2014, 196).
- **Animism**: Attributing a soul, a force, power, or personality to animate and inanimate objects like stones, plants, or the sun (Winick 2014, 26; Durkheim 2008, 27).

Specifically, Tylor argued that all societies believed that the soul continues on, in some form, after death (Tylor 2016, 1-43). Tylor specifically highlighted a belief in **transmigration,** or the belief that a spirit can move from one body to another (in the form of reincarnation, for example). Tylor argued that all human societies first develop the idea of a soul when they struggle to understand what is happening to them when they are dreaming (Durkheim 2008, 47).

Please note that Tylor's work was problematic in many ways. His most famous work, "Primitive Cultures" refers to non-European societies as "lower races" and "savages," and he held the belief that societies evolve toward an inevitable form: "civilization." This idea shaped his conception of human cultural variation, our collective history, and our future.

Tylor wrote extensively on the languages that he encountered abroad and labeled some forms of language as "degenerative" (Moore 2019, 5). He also strove to identify distinct 'races' of humans, and argued that members of these different groups were fundamentally different from one another in terms of their physical, intellectual, and ethical abilities (King 2020, 38-39; Stein and Stein 2010, 17). Similarly, he considered many non-European cultural practices to be "child-like" behaviors (Durkheim 2008, 50).



Like the wood figurines in this photo, E.B. Tylor's pioneering work in the second half of the 19th century presented human societies as occupying different "steps" along a set evolutionary pathway.
"Set of wooden figurines on steps" by Susanne Jutzeler

Tylor and his contemporaries developed a theoretical approach modern scholars refer to as **evolutionism.** Before we define the term "evolutionism," it is important to note that evolutionism arose in response to another theoretical approach: **diffusionism.** Both of these approaches answer the question "why are there similarities and differences between human societies?"

Diffusionism views 'cultural patterns' (practices, beliefs, and styles) as moving across trade and migration routes because people share and spread them (Winick 2014, 168). Diffusionists embrace the idea that "greater" civilizations are able to spread their cultural forms across the globe. Thus, a diffusionist explanation of human history sees cultural variation as the result of practices, beliefs, or styles spreading into new areas, where they are adopted wholesale or modified slightly to fit local traditions. Every culture, in the diffusionist view, is at least in part the result of borrowing and adoption from other cultures.

In contrast, **evolutionism** argues that cultures develop or change in order to **adapt** to their own surroundings, building on their own pre-existing adaptations. According to this way of seeing human cultural variation, similarities emerge between groups because human nature leads people everywhere to solve similar problems in similar ways, and to change in a predictable and linear manner.

While these two approaches to the study of cultural variation were initially considered to be at odds, in reality, human cultures are likely the product of both ever-evolving adaptations *and* contact through migrations and trade across the globe (Moore 5).

3.5 Critiquing Tylor

Tylor's ideas, as outlined above, are in many ways representative of the viewpoints that were widespread among early anthropologists. In hindsight, and owing to generations of scholars who have responded to the various problematic elements of these ideas, we can offer the following critiques:

1. Tylor's **cultural evolutionism** purported that human cultures inevitably change and evolve over time. We know that it is true that cultures evolve over time, but Tylor specifically argued that cultures (and religions) evolved in a linear manner. In other

words, Tylor was of the view that all religions would evolve from spirit worship, to polytheism, to monotheism (this was, obviously, because he believed in a monotheistic religion and felt that *his* religion was the most "advanced"). In fact, religions and cultures do not evolve in any kind of predetermined, linear manner. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a more or less evolved or advanced culture (these are all culturally-specific ideas).So, we do still consider Tylor's ideas to be important, because cultures do evolve and adapt. But they do so in a variety of directions. Thus, we do not embrace the idea that cultures evolve in a linear manner (Reed 1955, 322-323).

2. Tylor established the idea of **animism** or the idea that all religions share one thing in common: the belief in spirits (Stocking 1968, 103). For Tylor, spirits might manifest as human souls, as the power of the Gods/divine, or as the spirits of nature. While this is an interesting argument, we know that some forms of Buddhism do not actually believe in any spirit beings at all (not even the human soul).

Furthermore, some people believe in supernatural spirit beings such as the existence of leprechauns, ghosts, or guardian angels but they may not belong to an organized religion that governs these beliefs. So, while the term "animism" is helpful to discuss a common thread across religions, it's not a universal or exclusive characteristic that can be applied to all religions in all cases.

3.6 Social Darwinism

Social Darwinism is a political theory that likens cultural change to biological change, and is loosely related to Tylor's ideas surrounding the evolution of religion and culture. Social Darwinists believe that society naturally places "stronger people" in a place of privilege and power, and that global politics and competition naturally place "stronger cultures" in similar positions.

According to this view, disparities in social status and power are natural and inevitable, with some cultures naturally dominant and others naturally dominated. This domination can take many forms, including the military conquest of one group by another, as well as political or economic control.

Archaeologist Eric Reed critiqued cultural evolutionism in his commentary titled, "Diffusionism and Darwinism" (Reed 1955). Reed explained that evolutionists were seeking a "psychic unity of mankind" in the following three flawed steps:

1. Loosely identifying trends in human societies.
2. Developing overarching themes intended to establish common threads of humanity.
3. Attempting to force the remainder of human societies into the evolutionary framework previously established.

Reed pointed out that biological evolution does not translate to cultural life and cannot be used to explain cultural changes over time. Biological anthropologists know that evolution happens in organisms because it's demonstrated in the fossil record, can be witnessed in some organisms within a human lifespan, and is evident in the biological diversity of life. Conflating biological processes with cultural trends sometimes manifests in **social Darwinism,** which argues that the most powerful in a society should always maintain the power. This pseudo-scientific belief has led to human rights abuses throughout human history and must similarly be critiqued when it is present in anthropological history.

3.7 Robert Marett and Animatism

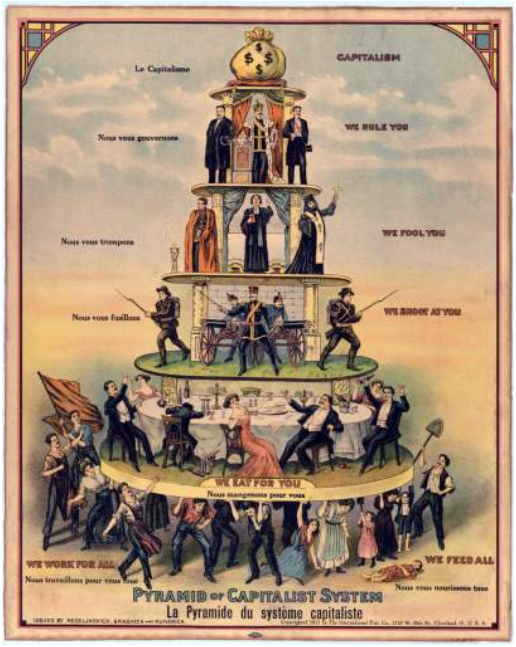
Robert R. Marrett (1866-1943) was, like Tylor, an early anthropologist who studied religion and who adopted an evolutionary approach. In Marett's view, the first form of religion was a belief in an ever-present and ubiquitous force that gave power to all elements of life (Durkheim 2008, 203). Marett called this concept **mana,** a term used in Polynesia and Melanesia to describe the supernatural forces involved in ritual (Winick 2014, 341; McCurdy et al. 2016, 25).

Marret argued that supernatural, spiritual, and religious beliefs emerge when human beings are overwhelmed by the absolute power of nature. When we cannot explain how the universe around us works, we strive to make sense of it through constructions of the mind. Marrett called this **animatism,** and it refers to the supernatural powers like mana (Winick 2014, 26). According to Durkheim's summary of Marrett's arguments, animatism arises in the face of "anything that makes us feel admiration or fear (Durkheim 2008, 203)."

3.8 Marxism

Among other things, historian **Karl Marx** is well-known for writing ***The Communist Manifesto*** along with **Friedrich Engels** in 1848. The M*anifesto* is a critique of the capitalist system of production that, in what came to be known as the Marxist view, commodifies workers for the benefit of those who possess far greater wealth. Marx and Engels' works examined the historical evolution of modern economic systems and highlighted the power imbalances within capitalism. In doing so, they also laid out a holistic model of how political and economic forces have interacted with belief systems and even with religion over time.

The Marxist viewpoint posits that under capitalism, less wealthy people leave their families and communities every day in order to produce more wealth for the most powerful members of their society. This perspective on money and power is increasingly mainstream as more information about income inequality enters the realm of popular culture. As Oxfam highlighted in January 2020, "The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than…4.6 billion people who make up 60% of the planet's [poorest communities]." When only 2,000 people have as much money and power as 60% of the rest of humanity, what makes workers continue to show up for work?



A poster by the Industrial Workers of the World ("IWW"), with religious leaders depicted as "fooling" common people into following the capitalist system by creating a false consciousness. An Industrial Workers of the World poster (1911). "Pyramid of Capitalist System"

Marx argued that religion, as an ideology, maintains this system of inequality. In Marx's view, those without wealth or power continue to work for low wages for many reasons, but one is specifically based on *belief*; they have internalized the idea that any type of work is, itself, an inherent moral value. Within a religious, capitalist culture, people work to benefit the rich because they may even believe that we will be rewarded in the afterlife (for more on this, see the section on the work of Max Weber in Chapter 10).

For a more in-depth understand of the relationship between anthropology and Marxism, read the following: "Marxism and Anthropology," "Examining Class Struggle," and, "Marxism and Feminism."

3.9 "The Opium of the People"

Marx once described religion as **the opium of the people** which is a commonly cited and commonly misunderstood quote. Many dictatorial regimes have, historically, misappropriated this Marxist argument to justify a violent crackdown on religion in their countries. At the time of Marx's claim, opium was legal and was widely used to relieve pain. So, he was not arguing that religion was some kind of addictive drug that causes people to behave in an unreasonable manner. Rather, he was arguing that religion was a comfort to people who were suffering (Stein and Stein 2010, 18).

Marx's exact quote on the matter is,

"Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. **It is the opium of the people.** The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusion." (Marx 1970).

Marx and Engels did not view religion as an inherent part of human nature, but rather as a construction offered by powerful groups in order to maintain the **false consciousness** necessary to keep workers working (Stein and Stein 2010, 18). Marx argued that

power flows from the top of society downward to influence the internalized ideologies of those with less power (Mascia-Lees 2010, 157).

Marx and Engels' works have had a variety of influences across the world since their original publications: socialism has taken hold in a variety of degrees across the world with varying levels of success. At the same time, socialism has been rejected in other parts of the world, resulting in a strengthened cultural commitment to capitalism (also with varying levels of success).

Within the field of anthropology, Marx and Engels' influence resulted in a new theoretical approach toward the study of culture which we call the **Marxist Approach** (Kuper 2014, 182-183). The Marxist Approach examines power imbalances that exist within and across cultures. Specifically, the Marxist Approach considers how material conditions (or, the production of things that people need to survive) lead to the spread, or elimination, or maintenance of particular cultural trends, beliefs and traditions.

3.10 Clifford Geertz and Symbolism

Clifford Geertz was an American anthropologist who strove to understand how human societies construct and engage with symbols used to convey layers of meaning in life. Geertz established his own definition of religion, as outlined in his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. He defines religion as:

"A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation in [people] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and by clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Geertz 1972, 97).

What his definition means is:

1. **Religion is a system of symbols.** When we look at our own religions, we can see a variety of symbols that are quite literal, and then other symbols which are more powerful and which reflect our ideologies. Consider, for example, if you have entered a Christian church before, you may have seen a crucifix on the wall. The crucifix represents the death of Jesus Christ, a supernatural being at the center of the Christian faith. This is a literal symbol. However, Christ's crucifixion symbolizes a much more important set of values that are central to Christianity including: God's unending love for humanity and immense suffering to gain forgiveness for humanity.
2. **These symbols (both large and small) establish certain moods and motivations within us.** For example, at the most literal level, you may not feel particularly religious until you enter a beautiful church. Upon seeing the tall structure and its stained glass windows with religious symbols on them, and upon hearing the religious hymns, you may start to feel more religious and to reflect on religious concepts. On an ideological level, the symbols of your religion establish motivations in you that change your behavior. To use Christianity as an example again, you may decide to forgive someone who wronged you based on your understanding that Jesus suffered a great deal and still forgave humanity.
3. **Using symbols, religions establish a general order of existence**. For example, nearly all religions promise good outcomes for humans who behave properly. Perhaps your religion promises Heaven, blessings for future generations, or reincarnation into a better life. However the universe is ordered in the context of your own religion, these concepts are presented using religious symbols. For example: artwork and religious texts may reflect the wheel of reincarnation or a soul's ascent into heaven.
4. **Geertz points out that these symbols and correlating value systems are presented to us as absolute fact**. As we've discussed before, religion requires faith to exist and it cannot be proven scientifically. As the majority of humanity is assigned a religion immediately at birth, the ideologies of our religions are established as absolute fact in our minds.
5. Then, because these religious values and principles are established as fact and presented symbolically, the moods and motivations feel like they are uniquely our own and they feel like they are coming, organically and naturally, from our spirits.



A ritual like the one depicted here presents a set of symbols, practices, and beliefs that each reinforce the others, establishing a deep and lasting way of thinking about the world. "Holi Festival 2020" by bhupesh pal on Unsplash

Geertz argued that our religions shape our reality and our sense of community. In this way, religion creates meaning in our lives. Anthropologists closely examine the symbolic nature of religious life in order to better understand these elements.

3.11 Functionalists on Religion

Functionalists argue that human cultural forms serve a particular function typically aimed at facilitating survival or procreation (but, not limited to these functions). Functionalists ask themselves, "what is the function of this cultural belief or practice?" and then strive to make sense of the practice holistically. When we ask, "what is religion," we can refer to answers proposed by two social scientists who we have already discussed and who have applied functionalism to this question.

Bronislaw Malinowski, an early functionalist who we encountered in Chapter 1, argued in a way that is somewhat similar to Marx's argument (see above): religions offer comfort and control to people. Malinowski argued that religion helps people meet basic human needs: a need for control and certainty in an otherwise uncertain world (Stein and Stein 2010, 19-20). Whereas Marx argued that religion comforts people in the face of their societal oppression, Malinowski argued that religion comforts us and gives us a sense of control in the face of a natural world that is, in reality, completely out of our control.

An example of Malinowski's arguments on this matter can be found in his research among the Trobriand Islanders. His research on their ritual practices is widely referenced because these practices reflect a pattern that exists across so many human cultures. Anthropologist George Gmelch explains some of Malinowski's conclusions in his article "Baseball Magic" as follows:

"Trobriand islanders, according to anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, felt the same way about their fishing magic. Trobrianders fished in two different settings: in the *inner lagoon* where fish was plentiful and there was a little danger, and on the *open sea* where fishing was dangerous and yields very widely. Malinowski found that magic was not used in the lagoon fishing where men

could rely solely on their knowledge and skill. But when fishing on the open sea, Trobrianders relied on and used a great deal of magic to ensure safety and increase their catch." (Gmelch 1971, 267).

In other words, human beings are likely to rely on magic and religions in times where we have little control over our circumstances. In contrast, on occasions where we can count on our skills, abilities or knowledge to assure a good outcome, we are likely to rely on those rather than turning to the supernatural to assist us. In Malinowski's view, this reveals the reality that religions function to fill a gap in human life by creating a sense of control and comfort.

3.12 Émile Durkheim on Functionalism

Another early advocate for the functionalist perspective, sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that religion in human societies serves the function of encouraging 'good behavior' and thus facilitates human survival. Writing at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Durkheim accepted a widespread belief that in ancient human societies, most adults regularly performed similar tasks to the other adults in their society. In these settings – where each family met its own needs by engaging in the same activities as their neighbors – Durkheim reasoned that religious beliefs would have served several critical functions for the good of the group:

- Religion lays out basic rules for behavior, creates a uniform understanding of which behaviors are appropriate and which are not.
- Religion restrains natural selfishness and promotes cooperation (Stein and Stein 2010, 18-20).

In contrast, within modern societies (here Durkheim was referring mostly to the European societies of his day), social life was highly differentiated. In other words, modern societies featured a variety of different professions, interest groups, and social classes. For Durkheim, it was clearly *not* the case that all adult members of French society in the 1890s lived in similar ways. In particular, 'modern' societies featured a division of labor, meaning that not all members worked at similar tasks on a daily basis.

Durkheim likened a society to a living organism, and suggested that the differentiated groups within so-called 'modern' societies could be thought of as distinct organs inside a living body (Jarvie 1973). Each social class and professional group produced goods or performed tasks that somehow helped the organism – the society itself – to survive. Groups within a society – unique "organs" – then exchanged the products of their labor with others so that all members of the society could efficiently meet their own needs.

3.13 Functionalism, the Organic Metaphor, and Religion

Certainly, this "organic" view was an optimistic way of understanding how society and economy work. For example, you might find it easy to think of professions or perhaps entire social classes that you feel actually *do not* provide a benefit to anyone but themselves, let alone their entire society. Karl Marx would have agreed, and the overly optimistic nature of Durkheim's ideas and of functionalism in general are certainly legitimate critiques.

Durkheim's central point, however, was that in a society that features a division of labor and where people experience vastly different lives than their neighbors, there must be some way to build cohesion, to maintain trust, and to enable cooperation between groups. He theorized that as societies become differentiated at some point in their development, religion tends to transform from its "original" functions (see the two bullet points above) to fill this new need.

Religion in modern societies (those that feature a division of labor) thus serves a *different* function than it did in ancient ones, now creating what Durkheim called **organic solidarity** – a sense of common identity or common interest among the different organs of a differentiated society.

Durkheim's theory of religion and its functions exemplifies the kind of linear thinking outlined earlier in the section on Edward Burnett Tylor's evolutionist ideas. Durkheim accepted a view we saw in Tylor's work, that all societies develop along similar trajectories, from one type to the next in a series of universal stages. Building on this framework, Durkheim proposed that as transitions between these universal stages occurred, religious beliefs would have automatically changed too, thus enabling human groups to adapt to the new challenges they faced by keeping increasingly differentiated groups working together, toward a common goal.

3.14 Taboos

As discussed above, Bronislaw Malinowski wrote a great deal about rituals and "taboo" among Trobriand Islanders, seeking to understand the "functions" these beliefs and practices played in their cultural settings. We use the term "taboo" to refer to anything that is culturally forbidden. You are likely familiar with a variety of things that are forbidden in your culture. Consider words that

are forbidden, topics of discussion that are forbidden at family gatherings or holidays, maybe certain colors or articles of clothing are forbidden in your culture.

However, anthropologists use the term **taboo** in a specific way. We define a **taboo** as any thing or action that is believed to bring about automatic, negative consequences. All cultures have taboos, and most of us view these as governing rules of the universe that, if followed, keep people out of trouble. Typically, these taboos are viewed as natural laws; even if a person breaks the taboo by accident, they may still bring about automatic, negative consequences.



Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism by William Hogarth illustrating taboos among 18th century British people as excessive, superstitious, and fanatical

What happens, for example, if you break a mirror? You may have encountered a cultural belief that you will have seven years of bad luck. Most likely, you didn't break the mirror on purpose in order to cause yourself bad luck. However, negative consequences of this action are still believed to occur automatically. We view these superstitions like natural laws.

Similarly, you may have heard the expression, "If you step on a crack you break your mother's back." Most of us might not actually believe that that one is true. But, an anthropologist who studies superstition still will struggle to walk under ladders without feeling afraid that something bad will happen to them as a result. We know that walking under a ladder is not connected to misfortune, but the cultural taboo is so deeply ingrained in us that we struggle to overcome it.

Drawing on Malinowski's ideas about Trobriand rituals, American anthropologist and former professional baseball player George Gmelch closely examined the taboos and magical practices that exist among professional athletes and their fans (Gmelch 2006, 2016). His studies reveal that some supernatural beliefs and practices are extremely important to baseball players – people we might not expect to engage so deeply with the supernatural. Some of these taboos and rituals clearly incorporate religious elements. Read his work and then reflect on the functions of baseball magic. Are you surprised to find beliefs in magic in this context? Once you have completed the article, you may also find yourself reflecting on where the line can be drawn between cultural categories with which you may be familiar, like religion and so-called superstition.

Exercise 3A

Do you engage in any superstitious beliefs? Read anthropologist George Gmelch's work, "Baseball Magic" to better understand how both religious and not religious rituals reflect our magical beliefs.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Using specific examples from the text, describe the superstitious American worldview. Consider evidence directly from the text.
2. How do anthropologists define “taboo”? What is the power of a taboo?
3. How are taboo and fetish beliefs reinforced over time? Are these practices reliable? What role does selective memory play in the reinforcement of these ideas?

Exercise 3B: Journal Reflection

Do your spiritual beliefs neatly fit into any definition of “religion”? In what ways are your belief systems more complicated than any universal definition?

Exercise 3C: Study Guide

Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms ***in your own words****:*

-
- Diffusionism:
- Cultural Evolutionism:
- Animism:
- Enchanted Worldview:
- Death Ritual:
- Magic:
- Meaning:
- Myth:
- Transmigration
- Social Darwinism
- Animatism
- Mana
- Catholic
- Protestant
- The Communist Manifesto
- “the opium of the people”
- The Marxist Approach
- false consciousness
- Functionalism
- Taboo

Briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Karl Marx
- Friedrich Engels
- Edward Burnett Tylor
- R.R. Marrett
- Martin Luther
- Clifford Geertz
- Émile Durkheim
- George Gmelch

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4: Postmodern Thought



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Chapter 4 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Explain and critique the philosophical frameworks of modernity and postmodernism.
- Recognize and analyze the social constructs that govern our behavior, beliefs, and traditions.
- Apply thick description.

4.1 Philosophy and Colonialism

As discussed in Chapter 1, early anthropologists played at least some role in European and American efforts to dominate the globe economically and politically during the era of European expansion and colonialism.

The tools that early anthropologists used in order to advance these goals included constructing ideas about distinct human "races" and placing these races on a hierarchical scale (Baker 1998). Notably, this specific idea of race developed due to specific political goals and out of specifical historic conditions that were part of the colonial era. Yet the hierarchical concept of race still impacts our lives today. Ideas surrounding "The West" versus "The Orient" developed at around the same time, as scholars aimed to support white domination across the globe (Said 1978; Lipsitz 1998).

Because the first forms of anthropological research and writing were conducted within this context, students of anthropology need a brief introduction to the European philosophical trends that shaped early anthropology. And, we must address the modern philosophical frameworks that modern anthropologists have used in order to challenge the early narratives of white supremacy in

our field. Understanding how our discipline's ideas have changed over time will provide a necessary framework for us to engage with the anthropological examination of religion in the past and present.

4.2 The Scientific Method



The Scientific Method by Thebiologyprimer

Let's begin with the "renaissance" which literally means "rebirth." **The Renaissance** was a period of cultural rebirth including scientific and artistic advancement across much of Europe from the 15th-16th centuries. Before The Renaissance, the European mindset largely explained life's mysteries by focusing on religion (specifically, they primarily sought answers in Christianity and The Bible) (Yu 1).

During The Renaissance, **The Scientific Method** was developed and rigorously applied as scientists strove to understand much of the natural world. The Scientific Method works in the following steps:

1. Observe: Scientists observe a phenomenon in the natural world (such as: the spread of disease, the changing of a species, the function of gravity, etc.)
2. Develop a hypothesis: Scientists develop a "guess" about what might be causing the event to occur. The scientists' goal is not always to prove that their hypothesis is correct because seeking to exclusively prove the hypothesis as correct would lead to biased results. Rather, a false hypothesis is also very powerful because a false hypothesis can reveal a great deal about the natural world.
3. Test the hypothesis: Scientists will test their hypothesis through experiments.
    - Scientists seek multiple lines of evidence. We always test the hypothesis in varied ways in order to assure that the findings are true and consistent. For example, we know that evolution happens because we can see some species evolving in our lifetime, we can look at fossil evidence, and we can look at genetic evidence. All of these different lines of evidence point to the same conclusion.
    - Good science requires a huge and diverse body of data that allows the experiments to be replicated and substantiated.
    - Scientists strengthen their findings through peer review: conclusions must be analyzed and critiqued by a body of other scientists who identify any potential failings or shortcomings (this strengthens the research).
4. Draw a conclusion: After observing a huge, diverse body of data using multiple lines of evidence, scientists will develop a **scientific theory**. Please note, we do not use the word "theory" in the same way that we use it in our everyday lives. Scientific theories are based in fact and huge bodies of evidence, but we use the word "theory" because new information can always be discovered to help advance the knowledge even further.

Can a scientific theory be refuted? It's possible! Scientific theories change as we continue to advance our scientific knowledge. We can change our understanding of the natural world if we discover stronger evidence to support a new understanding (of course, we cannot refute a scientific theory simply based on one sample, or through unproven personal opinion. We can only refute scientific theories with stronger scientific evidence).

The scientific method works so well that the sciences and social sciences embraced the practice fully and expected science to provide the answers to all of life's burning questions (Mascia-Lees 95; Stein 10-13). We call this the period of **modernity** and this

understanding of the world viewed science as the means to discover answers for truth, reality, and humanity. **Positivism** is the view that **empirical** (verifiable, provable) facts can be discovered through the scientific method.

4.3 August Comte and Positivism

One of the founders of the positivist movement, a French philosopher named **Auguste Comte** (1798-1857), spelled out these ideas in works like The Course in Positive Philosophy (published in volumes between 1830-1842). His early writing reflected the general ideas of what came to be known as 'the positivist movement' with respect to the natural world: physics, chemistry, biology, and other scientific fields of study. These, Comte said, are systems that can be observed and understood in terms of the interactions between clear rules that dictate how they work. However, in the later volumes of The Course in Positive Philosophy, Comte proposed that positivism could be important also in how we understand a phenomenon even more complicated than physics, chemistry, or biology: human behavior.

Auguste Comte Monument in Paris by MLWatts

Comte is also often credited as a founder of the discipline of Sociology, which studies the ways that humans organize themselves in groups ("societies"), and it is important to understand exactly why his application of positivist ideas to the study of human societies was a departure from earlier scholarly discussions on this topic. While Renaissance social theorists had written much about human nature and politics, they tended to develop abstract philosophical conclusions by reflecting on idealized versions of human groups. In contrast, the positivist approach instead involved creating theories of human behavior that could be tested scientifically by observing the outcomes of actual human actions in experimental and natural settings. In this sense, positivists believed in the importance of collecting and analyzing actual data or evidence and did not simply want to muse about unanswerable philosophical questions.

4.4 Comte, Positivism, and Religion

Interestingly, Comte was not only interested in understanding human societies. In fact, he believed that by understanding human societies, scholars could eventually help to elevate humankind to a new level of self-awareness and progress. Positivism was not just a way to learn about the world, it was also a way to make the world a better place for all of humanity.

Comte saw this goal as particularly important since he believed that religion was disappearing in "modern" society (like many others also incorrectly did, as we will see throughout this course). Comte feared that without religion as the traditional "glue" that brought societies together and helped to give people common goals and a common identity, some new way to understand our place in the universe and to establish a sense of purpose and morality was badly needed.

Other early social scientists, such as Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) shared Comte's belief that religion was disappearing and being replaced by science. Both were clearly interested in making a better future for humanity, which they saw as seriously threatened by the spread of "science" at the expense of "religion." However, both took an uncritical approach to what constitutes "religion," and both may have overlooked examples from their own societies where religion was thriving.

4.5 Science and Religion

As a human being yourself, you likely already know that not all elements of human life can be proven or disproven through scientific research and evidence. Religion is the perfect example. Religion, by its very nature, is defined by the faith that human

beings have in its truth. Faith requires a *lack* of evidence to *be* faith. If you were able to prove that your religion was empirically true based on the scientific method, then your religion would cease to be religion and would become a scientific theory. Religion is thus its *own* method of making sense of the world through observation and experience (Stein 2010, 137-138).

However, just because the claims a religion makes cannot be examined through the scientific method, does not mean that religion isn't real. Religions change people's behaviors, help communities survive through collective responsibility and caretaking, and can transform the way that adherents literally perceive the world. All of these are very real, tangible, and often measurable effects that religion has upon life and upon reality itself.

4.6 Postmodernism

Today, social scientists who study religion understand that not all areas of the human experience can be examined through the scientific method; in this sense, modern cultural anthropologists are *not* positivists (Kuper 1996, 187). We call this new trend and way of thinking " **postmodernism.** " Although postmodernism is important in many fields, it was largely brought into the field of anthropology specifically by American cultural anthropologists who found themselves living and working in a society that was more diverse than the world had ever seen before (Kuper 1996, 186). Within this new context, American cultural anthropologists started to understand that many of our identities are socially constructed and that different identities often lead to different lived experiences.

Postmodern anthropologists focus less than their 19th and early 20th predecessors did on identifying an objective reality, and instead strive to examine the myriad of subjective realities that human beings and cultures experience. The term " **objective** " refers to "anything that can be confirmed outside of the senses" and **subjective** refers to "anything that is perceived differently by different individuals" (White, 317).

Let's consider the example of color: as you already know, color does not exist independently of your eye's perception of color. Things do not actually have color but, rather, your eyes create the color so that you can identify the different makeup of the objects around you. Not all humans see the exact same colors (there are different kinds of colorblindness) so color is subjective.

To clarify, postmodern thought:

- Was a late 20 th century concept
- Impacted the sciences, the arts, and architecture
- Argues that all knowledge is a human construction and so, in order to understand how knowledge is created, we must deconstruct, or critically analyze, the processes that produce knowledge
- Argues that everything is determined by our perception
- Does not embrace the idea of empirical truth
- Emphasizes the *limitations* of science (does *not* deny science's validity)

We can look at two, recent examples in popular culture to illuminate the subjective nature of reality:

1. Perhaps you recall the controversy surrounding what we lovingly called, "the dress" in 2015. "The dress" was a photo of a dress hanging in a store; some people saw the dress as black and blue while others saw the dress as gold and white. For most of us, the colors of the dress changed before our very eyes.
2. In 2018, the "laurel/yanny" controversy emerged. During this time a recording was circulating where a person was trying to record themselves saying the word "laurel" repeatedly but many people heard them saying "yanny" instead. Again, many were arguing over what they heard while many more could actually hear the sounds change if they listened to the recording long enough.

With these two examples, we learned that our very eyes and ears can literally perceive the world differently than others' eyes and ears. No one is lying about what they are hearing or seeing when they describe "the dress" or the "laurel/yanny" recording, but we are still having completely different experiences. This is very much how modern anthropologists approach the examination of culture: multiple, seemingly contradictory experiences can exist and all still be "true."

Exercise 4A

Medical Anthropology is a branch of anthropology that examines the connection between health and culture; this type of research engages with scientific evidence while also considering the subjective realities that shape our cultural experiences. Listen to this NPR story titled, "Medical Anthropologist Explores 'Vaccine Hesitancy" to better understand this type of research.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What kind of research is this anthropologist doing? What conclusions has she drawn about the way that the media can shape our concept of reality?
2. How does this anthropologist apply her research in a practical way? What problem is she seeking to solve?

4.7 Social Constructs

A **social construct** is anything that human beings believe to be true that isn't based in natural law. Gendered hair length is an excellent example; we may expect women to have long hair on their heads and expect men to have short hair on their heads, but this expectation is not natural, genetic, or biological. Instead, hair length is a *cultural* expectation. Men's genetics do not cause their hair to stop growing at a certain length, rather, men with short hair have to exert a great deal of effort to maintain their short hair by cutting it frequently. Of course, women can – and do – have short hair while men also can – and do – have long hair, but that's usually considered to be outside the norm in certain cultural contexts.

Social constructs like the example above (and an infinite number of others) have enormous power over our understanding of the world around us. They are so common and so deeply rooted in our worldviews that people often assume that our socially constructed expectations about the world are actually natural laws. For example, an author of this textbook once had a student mention in class that, "I once saw a woman with armpit hair and it was so disgusting I almost threw up." While his comment was obviously problematic and hurtful to many, it was also quite funny because – of course – most women grow armpit hair! The majority of women's bodies grow armpit hair, but we've so widely applied the expectation that women should *remove* armpit hair that some people have forgotten what women's bodies naturally look like.

This is how social constructs function: when everyone strictly conforms to a social construct, it starts to look like a natural law and causes the constructed element of the norm to become invisible to us.

4.8 Summing Up: Postmodernism

Anthropology exists within the space of postmodern thought today. As a result, a successful anthropologist must:

- Be critical of their own role in the results of their research.
- Be aware of their impact on the culture that they are studying (both their in-person influence and on the large-scale power to transform others' perceptions of the cultures they are studying).
- Make a particular effort to amplify the voices of those you're interviewing rather than speak "for" them.
- Make a particular effort to holistically study a culture, this often pushes anthropologists to amplify the voices of marginalized groups (Kuper 1996, 188).

4.9 Postmodern Anthropology in Action: Geertz and Thick Description

Having explored the idea that our beliefs systems and cultures are socially constructed, you likely find yourself wondering how, exactly, a cultural anthropologist might study something that is so impossible to nail down as "truth." The postmodern approach toward the human experience was addressed directly by Clifford Geertz, who argued that the most impactful form of cultural anthropology is the study of how human beings create meaning in their lives. He wrote,

"Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos –the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood –and their world view –the picture they have of the way things in actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Geertz 1973, 89).

Symbolic cultural anthropologist **Clifford Geertz** advanced postmodern thought in anthropology in the 1960's and 1970's, and the movement finally took a hold over anthropology across the globe in the 1980's. Geertz argued that anthropology is akin to **semiotics** (or, the study of meaning-making) and that we need to closely examine how human beings understand their world.

Geertz also argued that the anthropologists themselves are steeped in a culturally-specific worldview which will impact their work. We cannot claim to be objective observers but are instead participants in the " **discourse** " (dialogue) surrounding the definition and negotiation of culture (Wilder 4).

For Geertz, culture was, "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, 89). On this basis, he argued that

anthropologists must strive to produce more than a basic description of what is literally happening in a cultural setting they observe. Rather, we must describe what **meaning** is *behind* the cultural events and social interactions we observe. Geertz called this practice " **thick description** " and argued that it was the opposite of " **thin description** " which is the literal description of events.

As an example, imagine the last time you were sitting in a classroom as a student. Let's analyze that event using both of the descriptive methods Geertz outlined.

Thin Description : A group is sitting quietly in seats while one person stands in front of them and yells at them for 1 hour and 20 minutes. When the designated time is up, the people get up and walk out of the room.

(Although true, this is obviously not a fair representation of what happens in a classroom.)

Thick Description : A group of people who identify as "students" are attending an event intended to offer knowledge, which in turn is believed to be helpful for achieving future successes in their culture. While some participants were brought here involuntarily, others attend the event willingly, seeking a better life, more money, or a higher social status by achieving a "degree." To many in this culture, college attendance symbolizes a certain level of success – one that not all are able to access.

This second description emphasizes culturally specific meanings behind practices we might observe and thus better reflects what's happening in the community. Notice that this description is in some ways more of a narrative than an observation, and that it contains layers of interpretation, including the writer's particular perspective.

Contemporary anthropological research and writing typically incorporates narrative elements and vivid language, while also foregrounding the researcher's own presence as a cultural participant/ethnographer. In this way, anthropologists strive to maintain an awareness of the fact that they are human beings studying other human beings. By acknowledging their own position in collecting information, they also acknowledge the potential for their own subjective perceptions and biases to exist and even to color their work. At the same time, good ethnography also means carefully examining these perceptions and biases in a manner that enables the anthropologist to arrive at meaningful and insightful conclusions.

Like Geertz, the American anthropologists who embraced and advanced postmodernism moved away from the idea that the human experience could be studied or measured empirically and that, in reality, much of what humans know and believe in are social constructs.

4.10 Elaborating on Geertz' Thick Description

Clifford Geertz argued four main points about thick description:

1. Anthropology is **semiotics** . In other words, anthropology is the study of meaning-making; we study how humans create meaning in their lives (Geertz, 1973, 311).
2. The study of culture is always **microscopic** . We can never study all humans nor can we even study *every single member* of a cultural group (consider, for example, how impossible it would be to study "all Christians.") Rather, we study a very small sampling of a very specific group and we need to recognize that specificity in our work (or else we will overgeneralize). (Geertz, 1973, 318)
3. We can study culture by **decoding** it. Cultures have sets of symbols within them that participants engage with in a variety of contexts. By learning the symbols, we can better understand exactly how the people engage meaningfully with their cultures. (Geertz, 1973, 312)
4. Anthropologists will only ever be able to examine **extroverted** behaviors. In other words, we can only ever observe what people do in public (even an interview is witnessed by you). We can never see what people actually do in private and can therefore never have a complete picture of their culture, beliefs, or behaviors (Geertz 1973, 318).

In Geertz's view, all social events are defined by a variety of influences which he called the " **layers of meaning** ." These include:

1. **The actor's intentions** : Whenever we communicate, we intend to convey something to someone else But, because no two people perceive of things in the same way and because we don't always use words in the same way, we can't always get across exactly what we mean and our intention is only one piece of the interaction.
2. **The recipient's interpretation** : The recipient might be one person or they might be a large group of people. The way the recipient of the information interprets the interaction is equally important to the actor's intentions.
3. **The observer's analysis** : When we do fieldwork, we bring our own perspectives, biases, and interests to the interactions. When we comment on the events that we observe, we add a layer of meaning the events. Sally Slocum tells us that "we are human beings studying human beings and we cannot leave ourselves out of the equation."

Geertz jokingly wrote that the difference between thin and thick description is easy to understand if you've ever embarrassed yourself by thinking that someone was winking at you when they were actually just blinking one eye. Blinking an eye is a biological process that we do to moisten our eyeballs whereas winking is a highly symbolic gesture that can convey a variety of meanings. If you've ever been embarrassed because you mistakenly thought that someone was winking at you when they were actually just moistening their eyeballs, then you already understand the significant difference between the literal description of something and the symbolic meaning behind it (Geertz 1973, 6).

4.11 Ancient Civilizations Challenge Our Preconceived Notions of Gender

Elisa Mandell's, "*A New Analysis of the Gender Attribution of the 'Great Goddess' of Teotihuacan*" argues that historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists should avoid gender labels when we try to understand the culture and art of ancient societies that perceived gender in a different way. As our ideas surrounding the gender binary are culturally-specific and generationally-specific, we cannot always interpret the cultural expressions of people from a different time and place using our own, culturally and generationally specific lens. Mandell's work argues that, as our cultural beliefs evolve over time our understanding of past societies similarly change transforms.

Elisa Mandell is an anthropologist and art historian whose work specifically analyzes symbols surrounding The Great Goddess of pre-Columbian Teotihuacan (now modern-day Mexico), also known as the "Teotihuacan Spider Woman". The Goddess has been a popular topic of research and discussion since her rediscovery in 1972 by archaeologist Alfonso Caso. With an affiliation to the study of the Olmecs and his own Mexican heritage, Caso played an integral role in uncovering this mystery. The Goddess appears on multiple surfaces, such as homes and important buildings, proudly displaying her elegant headdress covered in multicolored zigzag patterns. With her arms stretched wide and water dripping from her fingertips, she seems to represent birth and nurturing (Mandell). However, she is also surrounded by spiders, with a noticeable nose pendant and a variety of other features that continue to baffle scientists, as those attributes are always found on *male* deities. While some believe that this entity is actually an expression of multiple deities, Columbia University professor Esther Pasztory was the first to argue that the "goddess" may not be female at all—or male, for that matter (Pasztory 1997). In Pasztory's view, we must move beyond the binary construction of gender in order to understand this deity.

Great Goddess, Tepantitla Mural, Teotihuacan by Thomas Aleto, Flickr, 2007

Over the past fifty years, anthropologists have hotly debated the gender of this religious figure. Bouncing back and forth between male and female, history has settled on "goddess" solely due to the modern ideas of the outward appearance of this deity (Pasztory 1997). The reasons why it's challenging to settle on a particular gender for this deity can be attributed to our own understanding of the generationally-specific and culturally-specific construction of gender. As each anthropologist and archeologist comes, themselves, from a particular culture with a particular worldview about gender, we can see the anthropologists' own perspective in their analysis of the evidence. And, of course, archeologists and linguists still only know a small sampling of this ancient language which limits our ability to understand the complete picture.

Mayan societies typically clarify whether a hero or figure is meant to be masculine or feminine by sculpting the genitalia or including something telling that would help the viewer determine the sex. On some occasions, when no distinction is made between male or female, the Mayans typically left some type of documentation that explained why the deity or figure's gender was left ambiguous. However, in Teotihuacan's case, no such distinction was made. So, how do anthropologists decide which gender the deity of Teotihuacan is?

First, the anthropologist must ask: which genders exist? In his article for *Journal for Anthropological Research*, author Jay Miller writes a piece titled "Changing Ones: Third And Fourth Genders In Native North America." Miller explains that while it is widely accepted in Western societies that there are only two genders, male and female, there are a plethora of societies that see gender as nonlinear and fluid. Consider some of the following examples:

- Miller's research addresses Native American Lakota culture's concept of two-spirit or a person who embodies both gender identities
- Indian culture recognized a third gender called "Hijra" which can be expressed with a mix of gendered characteristics
- Traditional, rural Albanian cultures recognized a gender called "Burneshas" whereby people who were born female can completely transition to the male identity and can subsequently benefit from male privilege
- Traditional Hawaiian culture historically acknowledged a blended gender identity called "mahu: wherein which, individuals can float between male and female and do not feel the need to conform to one or the other
- The Muxe in Mexico are a group of gay men who date heterosexual men whose masculinity is not threatened by dating a Muxe
- The Bakla in the Philippines who are assigned the male gender at birth, but feel more comfortable living more on the "female" end of the spectrum where they are not considered homosexual

Anthropologists also consider the traditional division of labor when grappling with the gender of Teotihuacan (and, as the division of labor changes from culture to culture, so does Teotihuacan's gender). Men and women had some separate roles in Teotihuacan society, and some of these roles loosely reflect our modern gender roles. But, the division of labor was culturally cemented in the 19th and early 20th century European and American societies and, during this time, the discrimination of feminine men and masculine women became the norm (Hill 2006). These ideas, whether subtle or not, certainly affected the way that researchers looked at a Mayan society. And, of course, this biased decision-making can lead to incorrect information.

Finally, one of the main reasons why it is so difficult for anthropologists to distinguish the gender of this deity and what they represent is due to the overwhelming amount of evidence that this particular figure is both masculine and feminine. According to Columbia State University professor Esther Pasztory, symbols like the owl, the zigzag patterns in the headband, and the people underneath that all represent darkness are contradicted by the water, the spiders, and the trees that all represented a feminine energy (Pasztory 1997). These symbols also make it increasingly harder to determine what the deity represents exactly as they have been seen depicted with some of the items *some* of the time but never all of them, all the time.

Columbia State University professor Esther Paszorty has researched this deity at length. While this deity remains a mysterious figure, modern anthropologists still strive to place the religious figure into a female *or* male category. What *is* clear, however, is that the divine being of Teotihuacan represented many things to the people. This deity did not need to be just the goddess of water or Earth for them, but more fittingly, represented creation and destruction, light and dark. In other words, Teotihuacan seems to be a little bit of everything, for everyone.

As modern anthropologists are able to engage with this social expansion of gender fluidity and more genders become more and more prevalent, the influence appears in the work done at these archeological sites. By embracing diverse cultural attitudes toward the construction of gender, we can better engage with the meaning behind archaeological finds. Consider, for example, the Ancient Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten. As pharaohs of this era were believed to be divine beings, Akhenaten's artistic representations became increasingly non-gender-conforming throughout this lifetime. By presenting himself as encompassing all identities upon the gender spectrum, Akhenaten was able to approach more divine characteristics. In our modern world, Hijras in Indian culture are considered to be closer to the divine precisely because they embody both the male and female spirit (in a belief system that the divine is both male and female).

Compared to the societies mentioned thus far in this chapter, the Euro-American gender binary is uniquely strict. What can the Euro-American religious tradition tell us about these gendered ideas? According to Biblical scholar, Meg Warner, the Abrahamic idea of gender stems from the first story told —Adam and Eve. This Abrahamic story of creation purports that the first human, Adam, was created in God's image and that a second gender was created after. Interestingly enough, Warner argues that the Hebrew word used (a-d-m) was roughly translated to "Adam" in English, but stems from the word *adamah* which means "earth"; leaving Adam, essentially, genderless (Warner 2019). As the majority of anthropological research was, at first, steeped in the European colonial traditions that placed people, religions, and cultural practices on a hierarchical scale, it's understandable that this strict gendered binary was applied in archeological research and interpretation. But, by engaging with a more complete spectrum of gender identity allows modern archaeologists and anthropologists the opportunity to interpret cultural beliefs more accurately.

Exercise 4B: Journal Reflection

Now that you have a complex understanding of the Scientific Method, can you identify some pseudoscientific beliefs that are popular within your own community? Identify and examine a cultural belief that is presented to you as "natural" or "normal" without being based in any provable science. For this assignment, please remember to practice cultural relativism and to strive to understand why this belief persists before analyzing it.

Exercise 4C: Study Guide

Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms ***in your own words****:*

- The Renaissance:
- The Scientific Method:
- Scientific Theory:
- Modernism:
- Positivism:
- Empirical Evidence:
- Objective:
- Subjective:
- Discourse
- Social Construct:
- Semiotics:
- Thick Description:
- Thin Description:
- Microscopic:
- Decoding:
- Extroverted Behaviors:
- Layers of Meaning:
- The Actor's Intentions:
- The Recipient's Interpretations:
- The Observer's Analysis:

What are the four key elements of thick description?

1.
2.
3.
4.

What are three layers of meaning to consider in any cultural observation?

1.
2.
3.

Briefly summarize the arguments of the social scientist:

- Clifford Geertz
- Auguste Comte

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5: Witchcraft



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Chapter 5 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Define and identify examples of imitative and contagious magic.
- Explain the socio-cultural factors that lead to witchcraft accusations.
- Explain the differences between Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft.

5.1 "Witchcraft" and types of magic

The term **witchcraft** is a broad-reaching term that encompasses a wide variety of practices. Practices that we might define as "witchcraft" today have been performed for many thousands of years all over the world without being labeled in those exact terms. For most of human history, these practices were not seen or defined as 'witchcraft', but were simply the religious and spiritual practices of people.

Imagine living in a hunter-gatherer world, not knowing exactly what caused illnesses, whether there was going to be a harsh winter, or whether there would be plenty of game to satisfy the needs of the community. People created ways to seek out answers and interpret signs that could explain events or foretell the future. Like all religious traditions, these practices have and continue to give people a sense of security, a way to alleviate anxiety about unknown events, ensure a livelihood, or even bring retribution to those who have wronged them.

Recall that we defined the term "witchcraft" in Chapter 1 as

- We use the term to refer to the many different religious communities who refer to themselves as witches. Although this form of witchcraft actually exists in many forms, it is often the case that witches believe in the supernatural powers of the "natural" world (parts of the world that are not human-made).
- At the same time, many societies also use the term "witch" as an accusation intended to punish people who don't conform to society's standards.

Across cultures, witches are believed to be individuals who can manipulate the natural world through magical means. Recall that in chapter 1, we explained that **"magic"** refers to a person or group's efforts to change their life through supernatural means.

Across cultures, there are generally two fundamental principles of magic. The first is **imitative magic.** Imitative magic is based on the principle that 'like' produces 'like'. This is sometimes called sympathetic or imitative magic and can be seen in Voodoo, through the creation of dolls, images or drawings to perform magic.

The second is **contagious magic.** This is based on the principle that things once in contact can influence each other after the contact is broken. Items or things possess an 'essence'. Magic such as this uses a lock of hair, an article of clothing, or some other item or piece of an individual.

Witchcraft also includes the practice of **divination.** Divination is a magical procedure or ritual designed to find out what is not knowable by ordinary means; such as the foretelling of the future by interpreting omens. Types of divination that we might find familiar in society are Tarot cards, tea leaf reading, and bibliomancy (use of books to answer a question). The entrails of animals or random casting of stones (runes), as well as interpreting the movements and actions of animals or other natural events may also be used in divinatory rituals.

The contemporary usage of the term "witchcraft" has many connotations from the New Age/Earth-Based/Goddess-worshipping perspective to the perspective of witchcraft as something evil and dark. Remember, however, that both of these perspectives are **Eurocentric** *(* grounded in European thought and belief *)* . The modern/Western Wicca religion is based on pre-Christian Celtic religious beliefs (i.e. European), while the view of witchcraft as dark and dangerous stems from a Eurocentric Christian perspective. Even the Eurocentric term "witchcraft" is based on the Celtic word "Wicca" meaning 'wise one'.

None of these understandings of witchcraft take into consideration the rest of human history or and a Non-European worldview, where people engage in what *we* define as witchcraft. For billions of people, these practices are considered beloved religious traditions that connect them to the spirit world and give people a sense of hope and faith

Let's explore this further. When we use the term "witchcraft," we must be careful to clarify the exact context within which we are using the word. Consider the following:

- **Witchcraft in pop culture** : Witches are presented in popular culture as evil-doers who cause harm by harnessing dark, magical forces. This representation does not actually reflect any major religious or spiritual belief or practice and is used as a story-telling device.
- **Witchcraft as a spirituality:** There does, however, exist a myriad of religions and spiritualities that believe in every person's inherent power and in the divine elements of nature. Some of these groups engage in rituals that rely on magical beliefs. These practitioners may call themselves, "witches". These groups are firmly against using magic to harm others and do *not* resemble horror-based witches from movies and television.
- **The witchcraft accusation:** Across many human cultures and across generations, humans have utilized what anthropologists call the " **witchcraft accusations** ." The witchcraft accusation is a cultural tool that is used to punish individuals who do not conform to society's expectations. For example, if a woman in a religious society refuses to embody her culture's values of feminine docility, she might be publicly accused of being a "witch" so that her community can exercise power to more strictly control her behavior and regulate her life. While many are familiar with the way witchcraft accusations were applied throughout the Salem Witch Trials, these accusations are used in other places around the globe, too.

Specifically, within Christian society, the witchcraft accusation takes on a unique set of characteristics. While some cultures view witchcraft as a natural or neutral force, Christian cultures are more likely to equate witchcraft to **sorcery** (the practice of utilizing supernatural forces for evil) (Stein and Stein 2017, 219-224). In this context, practicing witchcraft is viewed as a crime against God and/or as a form of devil worship. Please note that, in some Christian communities, any non-Christian religion is *also* viewed as a form of devil-worship and/or a crime against God. In these particular cases, any form of non-Christian religious practice can be equated to witchcraft. It's this element that first connected the Ancient European Pagan religions that predate Christianity to the "witchcraft" label that was applied in an effort to convert the entire European continent to Christianity (Stein and Stein 2017, 219-220).

Exercise 5A

Various methods of divination are used across cultures. A number of these methods can be found on the web, such as the virtual fortune cookie site. To better understand the language used for divination open a virtual fortune cookie and examine your fortune.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What kind of language are you seeing? Is it very specific language or is it very ambiguous?
2. Why, do you think fortune-telling and divination need to utilize such generalized language?

5.2 Applying Cultural Relativism to Witchcraft Beliefs

Witchcraft accusations exist outside of Europe, and the most famous anthropological examination of this took place in Central Africa.

E.E. Evans-Pritchard was a British anthropologist who lived among the **Azande** people in central Africa (in the North-Eastern area). People within Azande communities build tall granaries on wooden stilts to hold their food and supplies so that no animals are able to get it. And since the region is very hot and offers little sources of shade, people often meet under the granaries to talk and share the news of the day. Unfortunately, sometimes the termites of the region will chew through the granary stilts, causing the granary to collapse and tragically killing (or injuring) everyone underneath. In the worldview of the Azande, a person who dies in this type of accident has been killed by an act of witchcraft. This situation was particularly interesting to Evans-Pritchard and led to his publication on the matter.

Evans Pritchard tried to explain to the local people that, actually, it was termites that were causing the tragedy. The local people turned to him and explained that they understood termites caused the collapse, but the odds that a person was standing underneath the granary at that exact moment was an unfortunate event and misfortune that needed to be explained. In Azande society, misfortune and suffering is typically thought to be caused by witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1935, 19).

This is not an entirely unique worldview; actually, most cultures have beliefs like this. Consider the last time that you saw a blue pendant hanging in someone's doorway, car, or as a necklace. These blue pendants are used to ward off the " **Evil Eye** ." Many cultures have a manifestation of the evil eye. It is believed in these cultures that when a person feels extremely jealous or angry with you then they can actually harm you by having such strong feelings. The idea that a person's feelings or thoughts can lead to negative outcomes serves two functions in society:

1. This belief prevents **antisocial behavior** . We define antisocial behavior as any behavior that does not conform with society's expectations. So, for example, if you get into a fight with a person in public and then learn that they fell and broke their leg afterward, you might be accused of hurting them with your anger. In Azande society, a person who is accused of witchcraft is often kicked out of the community or sometimes killed. So, many of the Azande will make an effort to maintain composure and to not behave with great jealousy because they don't want to be accused of being witches if the person they fought with has some bad luck (Evans-Pritchard 1935, 419). Anthropologists call these "witchcraft accusations" and they serve the function of preventing antisocial behavior (Evans-Pritchard 1935, 25).
2. This belief explains misfortune or suffering. To many human beings, life can feel exceptionally illogical and out of our control. All cultures find a way to explain why bad things happen. Witchcraft beliefs explain misfortune by tying the misfortune to people's intentions (Evans-Pritchard 1935, 30).

In the Azande worldview, a person is born with a physical ability to curse another with witchcraft powers. Witches can be both men and women and the ability is passed down genetically (from mother to daughter and father to son) (Gillies and Evans-Pritchard 1976, 2). The substance that gives the person powers is called "mangu" and it's believed that it can be seen at night. A person does not necessarily know that they were born with mangu though, and they can harm an enemy accidentally.

By practicing cultural relativism, we can understand the cultural logic of this belief system. By taking a cross-cultural perspective, we can understand that we have similar beliefs in our own culture, and by examining the function we can see the role that this belief system plays in society.

5.3 Witchcraft Accusations and Social Structure

As you already understand, witchcraft explains unfortunate events and is an explanation for suffering. We ask ourselves: "Why has someone died?" Or perhaps, "why are we not able to kill the wild pigs that are destroying the crops?" For many, nothing bad happens by chance alone.

When there are unfortunate events in society that are not explainable, witchcraft accusations are hurled at antisocial persons. It is typically part and parcel to a worldview that supports the pre-established moral order of that particular culture. Accusations tend to keep people in line, lest they be accused of witchcraft. In the case of an individual becoming a victim of witchcraft, suspicion of witchcraft falls on those closest to the victim. The greatest animosities are among those who are closely related. Where are the tensions in human relationships? They are typically between those who are most closely connected: brothers, co-wives, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, etc.

Anthropologist **James Brain** argues that witchcraft accusations are more prominent in societies with little or no social mobility. Social scientists refer to " **social mobility** " as the ability for families or individuals to move between class and social levels. In other words, a culture that allows people to advance their social status through different careers may have high social mobility. On the other hand, a society that strictly ties class and social status to race or gender will have less social mobility. In Brain's view, societies with little or no social mobility are more likely to strive to change their own social status and/or to reinforce the pre-existing social order through witchcraft accusations (Brain 1989, 15-27).

5.4 Witch Hunts in Early Modern Europe (1450 – 1700)

What led to the witch-hunts of early modern Europe? What were people accused of during this time? Who was accused and what was their demographic profile? Why did this all happen during this period? Anthropologist James Brain's "mobility theory" is useful in thinking about these questions. When a community is stuck in a bad situation, such as a famine, leaders often resort to witch hunts as a solution. This is one explanation for why a community initiates a witch hunt.

In the emic view of the late medieval world, coming into the early modern period, there were two principal activities that witches were thought to engage in:

1. **Performance of *maleficium*** – I.e., harmful magic.

Many human societies have believed in magic for a very long time. In Europe there were two principal sources of magical practice, good or bad: there were the folk magical practices that had been handed down probably from pagan times; you could put a hex on a neighbor's fields or animals, or do a little love magic, or protect yourself with charms and amulets. Then there was the scholarly magic that came from texts, most of which were brought into Europe from the Middle East and India in the 12 th and 13 th centuries. A lot of it was devoted to astrology/astronomy and alchemy; but there were hundreds of manuals and guides to the practice of both "good" and "evil" magic that have survived from many different historical periods. These texts are proof that people did in fact practice sorcery.

2. **Diabolism** – Worship of the Devil

Christian theologians were speculating on the source of these magical powers. There were only two powers in the cosmos, in their view: the power of God and the power of the Devil. Since magic wasn't based on prayer and the authority of the church, it had to be based on demonic or Satanic power. Thus the theory emerged that witches had made pacts with the devil or were worshipping the devil. By the 15 th and 16 th centuries, most educated Europeans believed that witches, in addition to practicing evil magic, had made pacts with the Devil and were engaged in active and regular worship of him. These beliefs included the Devil seducing witches by appearing at night and male witches desecrating the cross. The Devil was believed to put a distinctive mark on the witch's body, usually some kind of concealed spot.

But, was anybody really doing this? We have to ask this question because we have seen that in other parts of the world, the witch is almost always an innocent bystander accused of doing evil. There are many interesting possibilities of what might have actually been occurring, whereas no one accused of witchcraft during this time ever actually admitted to the practice. Evidence points to the fact that these people were accused due to their antisocial behavior rather than any form of actual devil worship.

5.5 The Malleus: "Hammer of the Witches"

Some of the first popular publications in Europe, most famously in Germany with Johannes Gutenberg's press from about 1436, were Bibles, woodcuts, and witch hunting manuals. In 1487 two German priests from the Dominican Order wrote and published *The Malleus: "Hammer of the Witches"* , which claimed to be the definitive manual on witches, Satan, and how to get confessions from accused witches. The book is highly misogynistic, with huge sections aimed at women. Women are described as more prone than men to become devotees of Satan and engage in sacrificial infanticide, orgies and sex with the devil. Along with detailing witches' behaviors it outlines punishment for witchcraft, which consists of torture and execution. This book has remained in print, and is still available today, with a lengthy introduction from the Roman Catholic Church that does not retract anything from the original version and claims it to still the best work on demonic activity available.

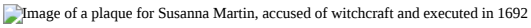
At this point the printing press had just been invented, and this was one of the first mass-produced books. This manual was disseminated all over Europe to priests and magistrates who were tracking down witches and trying them in court. When these women "confessed," their confessions all sounded alike. At the time, this was believed to be evidence of widespread Satanic worship. However, it was the result of interrogators all reading the same source and planting the ideas that the accused had to confess to under torture.

What was it that caused this outbreak of witchcraft accusations? These great witch hunts of 1450-1700 did not grow out of the common folk or the popular culture of the time. This process required an intellectual class of priests, scholars, lawyers, and judges to construct the demonological theory, to institutionalize judicial procedures, and to communicate a terror of the nefarious work of witches to a vast class-stratified public. It was a class of experts who created the witch craze, the prosecutions, and the executions.

There had been changes in the law during this time. Roman law which had been handed down from the Roman Empire was being replaced by new laws, especially in Germany. This movement was ahead in Germany, where the state sought expert advice from German universities. These changes allowed for confessions to be obtained under torture. The testimony of children was also allowed according to the new laws. In other surrounding areas, such as Denmark, the laws were different. In Denmark, for example, interrogation under torture was outlawed, the law forbade testimony of people who had been convicted of infamous crimes and the testimony of children was not allowed. In Germany, most of the huge trials after 1625 featured children as accusers and sometimes as the accused.

Every step of the proceedings against witches was laid out by the law. There had to be trials; these weren't lynchings. Charges had to be brought before a judge and a testimony had to be given. The witch had to be interrogated by officials acting on behalf of the state with everything being recorded. The witch was the one responsible for the court and proceedings costs, which often came out of their property, if they had any. All of these court cases were fully recorded, and the records exist to this day by the thousands, unless for some reason they were lost or destroyed.

5.6 The Salem Witch Trials: A Year of Terror



Susanna Martin Memorial Plaque by Benjamin Scott, 2012.

It began with a daughter and a niece of the local minister, Rev. Samuel Parris, showing very strange symptoms. They were 9 and 11 years old. At first a physician was called in, but almost immediately, it appeared they were victims of a crime, not a disease, and the crime was witchcraft.

The physician himself suspected the "Evil Hand," or evil witchcraft. Rumors immediately swept through the village. A young village wife named Mary Sibley suggested a divination in the form of a "witch cake." Rye meal mixed with the urine of the afflicted girls should be baked and fed to a dog. If the girls were bewitched, the dog would then exhibit symptoms similar to theirs. It is not recorded what the dog did, but later Mary Sibley was denounced from the pulpit for suggesting such a diabolic plan.

The affliction began to spread. Seven more girls—aged 12 to 19, came down with the same afflictions. Adults in Salem Village questioned them intensely about who had bewitched them.

They named names: Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba, a West Indian enslaved person in the pastor's household. These 3 women were arrested. Osborne and Good denied they were witches, but Tituba confessed, in great detail, and even gave descriptions of the devil. He was hairy all over and had a long nose.

The bizarre behavior of the girls continued. A minister from Boston (Cotton Mather) came to observe the strange goings-on. He found a mysterious set of teeth marks on one of the girl's arms. Another girl raced through the house, arms outstretched, crying "Whish! Whish! Whish!" and then began pulling burning logs out of the fireplace.

Timeline of events:

- March 20 – Cotton Mather gave a vigorous anti-witchcraft sermon from the pulpit, but as he did so, the girls again behaved hysterically. Later in the day, one of the girl's mothers fell victim to the spell.

- March 21 – Martha Cory was arrested and examined before several hundred persons. As she was led into the room, the afflicted girls cried out in “extreme agony”; she wrung her hands, and they screamed they were being pinched; she bit her lips, and they screamed they could feel it in their own flesh.
- April 21 – One of the girls claimed that former pastor George Burroughs was a wizard who had masterminded the entire outbreak. An officer was sent to Maine with a warrant for his arrest.
- June 2 – Bridget Bishop was sentenced to death.
- On June 10, Bridget Bishop was hanged on a rocky elevation west of town which has been called “Witches’ Hill” ever since.
- On June 29, the court sat a second time and convicted 5 more women. On July 19 all five women were hanged. One of them, Sarah Goode, was asked to confess, but instead she shouted from the scaffold: “I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink.”
- August 5 – Six more trials produced six more convictions. One of these was reprieved because she was pregnant and the court didn’t want to take away an innocent life. The “wizard” Rev. George Burroughs, was one of these, he protested his innocence and recited the Lord’s Prayer as he died.
- Early September – death sentence passed on another half dozen persons. One of them, however, was reprieved, and the other, the wife of a ship captain, was helped to escape from prison. One of these women wrote a petition from prison: “I petition your honors not for my own life, for I know I must die, and my appointed time is set, but if it be possible, that no more innocent blood be shed.”
- September 17 – Nine more persons were condemned. Five of them escaped hanging by confessing to the charges.
- September 19 – Giles Cory, whose wife had already been hanged, had refused to plead to the charges, which was taken as an implicit denial of the court’s right to try him. Pressing was an old English procedure designed to force prisoners to enter a plea so their trial could proceed. Giles was subsequently killed because he refused to enter a plea (if he had the court would have confiscated his family’s belongings to pay for the trial).
- September 22 – The last 8 witches were carried by cart to Witches’ hill to be hanged. When one of its wheels lodged in a rut, a group of afflicted girls cried out that the devil was trying to save his servants. And when Samuel Wardwell choked on the smoke of the hangman’s pike while making a final appeal to the crowd, the taunting girls shouted that it was the devil who was hindering him from speaking.
- September 22 was the last execution. A total of 19 people had been executed before it was over. There were still over 100 persons in jail waiting for trial.

Exercise 5B

Historian Stacey Schiff’s book, “The Witches” offers a fresh perspective on the Salem Witch Trials. Listen to her read an excerpt from her book on NPR, “A Witch’s Brew Of Fear And Fantasy: America’s Tiny Reign Of Terror.”

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How were gender roles central to the Salem Witch Trials? How did these lead to violence?
2. What was the function of the witchcraft accusation in Salem? Refer to Shiff’s arguments to support your answer.

5.7 The Salem Pattern

There was a pattern that emerged from the witch accusations and trials. The “victims” of witchcraft were mostly young girls and women that were members of powerful families, whose symptoms were “fits,” hysterical visions, and “spectral visits”. The “victims” then typically accused other women (and some men) of witchcraft. The authority figures were mostly male, who would imprison, try, and execute the witches.

5.8 The End of Terror

The whole colony of Massachusetts had been following these events with alarm. With 19 executions and over 100 persons still in jail, it had clearly gotten out of hand. Thankfully not everyone had been overcome with witch hysteria. There had been testimony and petitions on behalf of several of the accused. Daniel Elliot testified that late in March one of the girls had boasted to him that “she did it for sport; they must have some sport.” After the first hanging, one member of the court had resigned in disgust.

Finally, it was the ministers from elsewhere in the state that put a stop to it. On June 15 a group of Boston ministers submitted a letter of advice to the Governor of Massachusetts urging “exquisite caution” in the use of evidence. In October, Increase Mather,

Cotton Mather's father, delivered a forceful sermon against the Court that was handing down the sentences: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned."



Memoirs of the Life of the Late Reverend Increase Mather by Robert White, 1645 – 1703

What constitutes admissible evidence in witchcraft cases? Increase Mather argued that "the evidence ought to be as clear as in any other crimes of a capital nature."

But how do you *prove* the work of the devil? The most desirable kind of evidence was an outright confession. Over and over examiners tried desperately to draw a confession from the lips of someone whose guilt they never doubted—but against whom they did not have a true legal case.

The following examples were considered to be clear evidence of guilt:

- Being unable to get through religious recitations was evidence; e.g., being able to recite the Lord's Prayer was evidence. But better not fumble the words; one accused person said
  "hollowed be thy name" instead of "hallowed," and went to the gallows.
- Presence of the "witch's tit" – an abnormal physical appendage that would give suck to the devil in the form of a bird, turtle, or other small creature. Three women were examined, and a witch's tit was found between their vagina and anus; next day they were re-examined, and they appeared normal.
- Spectral evidence – Bewitched persons were always claiming that known witches came to them as specters. "One morning about sunrise, as I was in bed before I rose, I saw Goodwife Bishop stand in the chamber by the window. And she looked on me and grinned on me, and presently struck me on the side of the head, which did very much hurt me. And then I saw her go out under the end window at a little crevice about so big as I could thrust my hand into." But spectral evidence was always somewhat suspect. Increase Mather condemned spectral evidence.

On October 12, Governor Phips forbade any further imprisonments or trials for witchcraft. Three months later, he discharged all the remaining prisoners and issued a general pardon.

5.9 Satan in New England



A 1647 woodcut illustrating witches' activities The History of Witches and Wizards

What did people believe about Satan that led to all this? This woodcut depicts the alleged activities of witches in Lancashire, Massachusetts, in 1612, from Matthew Hopkins, the Discoveries of Witches, 1647. The accused witches confessed to riding to witch meetings and participating in the Lord's Supper and devil's baptism. Meanwhile, theologians debated whether the devil actually had power to transport people through the air. What this tells us is that ideas about the devil, witches, and witch practices were pretty well thought out for at least a century prior to the witch hysteria in Salem in 1692. The beliefs of the people in Salem during this time about Satan was remarkably similar to those in Europe 200 years earlier. Below, we continue to look at changing perspectives on witchcraft over time, looking at witchcraft as it is practiced today.

Exercise 5C

Read Los Angeles Times article, "The working witches of Los Angeles just want you to be your best self" to learn more about the lives and belief systems of modern witches.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What types of help do modern witches offer (according to this article)?
2. What types of belief systems are filling in for religion in secular society?

5.10 Reflections from practicing Witch, Griffin Ced

So, what is it like to be a witch today?

T he following excerpt is written by Griffin Ced, a practicing Witch in Los Angeles. Griffin Ced is the Virtue holder and Witch Father for the Ced Tradition and family line. He and Rita Morgan, the Dame and Mother of the Line, have led the Line and Tradition in the USA for the past 20 years. The Witchblood was passed onto him across the veil from his Great-Grandmother. Griffin has been teaching and leading public rituals for the past two decades and is committed to community-building today at The Green Man store in North Hollywood, where he is the manager. At the Green Man, in addition to selling Pagan products, Gri ffin and his associates offer public rituals and many diverse craft-related classes on a weekly basis.

> "I am of ten asked, "what is Traditional Witchcraft and how is it different from Wicca?" And, as with all Witchcraft paths and Traditions, this is not an easy question because Witchcraft is truly the path for the renegade free spirit within the Pagan/Spirituality community. Drawing Witches into a cohesive identifiable group of any sort is truly like herding cats and Traditional Witchcraft is no exception.
>
> I find it best to share my own perspective based on my own practices, beliefs and understandings. These I have gleaned over more than 4 decades as a Traditional Witch and over two decades of leading a Coven and Tradition as well as teaching and presenting Trad Craft to the general public. All that said, there are many others with valid experiences and credentials who, coming from other Traditional foundations, would present Traditional Witchcraft in quite a different manner.
>
> As with all such explorations, look for multiple, diverse sources and find what speaks to you personally. That is in fact an approach that would be perfectly in accord with Traditional Witchcraft practices, as I present it. As **Traditional Witchcraft** is rooted in one's personal senses or rather extra-sensory abilities, built upon one's intuition, we call it "The Sight" aka "The Gifts". Informed through direct communion with the many forms and expressions of Spirit, a Traditional Witch is then guided by their own sense of right and wrong employing what one might call one's Ethical Compass. It is this personal

and direct communion relationship a Traditional Witch has with Spirit that sets them as a “Heretic”: meaning outside of all forms of organized religion.

Witches circumvent any priesthood authority mediating Spirit or imposing a codified “One and True practice” or belief with regards all things related to Spirit. Hence, over the ages, since religion in its many forms has become such big business, the worst of all crimes against the Church or Temple has been that of Heresy. Therefore Witches have been identified as key Heretical practitioners, because of their engagement in direct communion, circumventing all forms of priesthood. Such Witches are impossible to control or direct, as they have a straight line to God/dess in all its aspects. We are the epitome of artistic free spirits within the arena of Spirit-based practices, such as religion. For this reason, we see our form of Witchcraft as the Olde Arte of Witchery.

To call it a faith would be incorrect, as it’s based upon personal experience of interactions with Spirits and Gods, and so faith doesn’t enter into it. However, those who are not born Witches or don’t have the Gifts, have identified Witches as practitioners who deal with Spirit and Gods and as such: those one may go to when in need of such an intermediary, circumventing the mainstream church or priesthood. And so such Witches have been identified as practitioners of what others may call The Elder Faith or the Old Religion.

So, how is this different from Wicca? **Wicca** has its modern day roots in a Tradition brought into its clear formation by a Witch of the 1950’s called Gerald Gardner. The Tradition he formed after the Witchcraft Laws were repealed in Britain has become known as the Gardnerian Tradition, which is still very much thriving today. Gardnerian Wicca is an initiatory tradition that keeps its practices secret until after initiation into a working coven. That said, some beliefs and practices have been published over the years either by Gardnerians or by associated Traditions such as Alexandrian Wicca which has published quite a deal of basic material. Foundational practices taken from these Traditional Wiccan publications have given us within the Pagan Community some basic tenets of belief and a basic structure for community rituals. As Wicca spread, the later eclectic Wiccan publications further embellished a myriad of forms for the Wicca. But more commonly it has become accepted that Wicca is a form of Goddess-based religious or spiritual practice, with a ruling High Priestess as final authority. Wicca has a structured working system based upon the elemental system as taken from Ceremonial practices. It sees itself as a religious practice, often seeing itself as an Elder religious system with Priestesses and Goddesses at the centre.

The Ceremonial ritual structure employed by Wiccans, being a more structured ritualized magical system, lends itself better to people of all walks of life, from those who purely seek a spiritual practice and connection to those who seek magical manifestation through a formula approach. If one does this and that, certain results can be expected. If one trains and perfects through practice certain ritual actions etc., then one can ascend through a hierarchy into a recognized position within the attendant magical community. Specific actions, codified and perfected through practice, serve anticipated results. This requires of the practitioner only faith in the system they are taking on and faith in the results they seek: basically faith in those who have worked this system out and are presenting their experiences and the system they have enfleshed as holding valid results if pursued.

This is not the case with Traditional Witchcraft. How can you tell a person to now follow instructions and paint a Mona Lisa? Or please follow the instructions and give birth to a Mozart Requiem? Now a Wiccan practitioner may also hold the Gifts and approach the Wiccan practices as an Arte of Spirit, and through their Witch’s Arte bring life to that system and prove its validity. And on the other hand, an ego-driven Traditional Witch may in no manner be able execute the things they may be presenting. It all comes down to the true Virtue of the practitioner. Whether you’re a Wiccan or a Traditional Witch practitioner, the Virtue of your Spirit is the only currency that finally counts. For some, this relationship with their own Witch’s Spirit and the importance of Virtue to their ethical compass, is something they clearly see because it’s part of who they are. Such Witches follow a hunger that can never be satisfied and they hold their feet to the coals of Truth because they know the danger of illusion will destroy all they hold dear in life. They live in a world as true free spirits and heretics without bounds or limitations, where reality itself is mutable. As such they understand how important a compass of spirit is, as it casts its light into the dark unknown.

At the end of the day, there are those who identify as Wiccan for religious, political or philosophical reasons. There are those who identify as Traditional Witches for many of the same reasons. There are those who seek academic recognition and serve the crowd just as any religious celebrity would. Then there are some who wish to further their minds, immersing into the well of mystery–which if they’re not careful, will drink their wits into itself. But for the most part, people are somewhere in between all these states of seeking or pursuit. They are looking to find their path and their way, and what is

most important is for them to find within themselves what speaks to them. Because if what you seek to hold is not true by your spirit, then it will never serve you truly and you will fall short of your true potential.

Regardless of how we identify ourselves, we can only be truly identified by others by visible mundane markers or keys. For Wicca it's a Goddess religious spiritual path, casting a circle and working an elemental Earth-based magical system, incorporating elements of Magic–though Magic is not a requirement by all Wiccan traditions. For Traditional Witches I would say working in an Airts Compass, which is to say Spirit-based, using the Sight, to commune directly with Gods and spirits and in particular one form of spirit as a working partner. But regardless of the system or form, the one defining earmark of all Witches, as I see it, is Heresy. We are the Heretical Arte of Witchery."

5.11 Reflections from practicing Witch, Jill Weiss

T he following excerpt is written by Jill Weiss, a practicing Witch in Los Angeles. Jill is an owner of The Green Man Store, and a Clan member of the Ced Tradition. At The Green Man, Jill is the Chief Thread Spinner, Keeper of the Kingdom, Denizen of the Rose Castle, Tazmanian Devil, Stone & Crystal Maven, Awesome Jewelry Procurer, and Magical Concierge. A daughter of Dame Fate, Jill can often be found spinning ritual energies into thread on her spinning wheel.

"What is Witchcraft, and what is Witchcraft to me? Ask ten witches and you'll get about 40 answers. To me, Craft is not a religion; it's a practice. There are atheist witches, Jewish witches, Christian witches, etc. Craft, or magic, is the process of working on your own reality by focused power of will. That said, the tradition I work doesn't spend much time "doing spells"—it's more about an every day awareness of one's own ethics and how we choose to act in any given situation. I know, it doesn't sound as cool as standing over a bubbling cauldron, but rest assured, we do that from time to time as well. Sometimes I describe spells as "prayer with props"—we use tools to help us focus and concentrate, and some tools have specific meanings/properties that assist in the work we want to accomplish. For example (a very simplified one): you want to bring love into your life. Light a pink candle and have a rose quartz with it (the color pink and rose quartz are associated with emotional healing and love) and a magnet to draw love to you. Burn the candle and send out a call to the spirits/universe/Goddess/God/whatever to bring you a healthy love relationship. Prayer with props.

Witches are **heretics**. We commune with gods and spirits without the middleman of a priest or church telling us we can't, and telling us what those gods and spirits are saying…which often turns out to be what said middleman wants it to be. This is very freeing, but it comes with responsibility, because now we have to make our own choices.

People often want to know about what is commonly called "dark magic" but what might be better called "harmful magic." This magic is based in **intent** . It is work you feel you ought to keep hidden rather than, as an ethical person, are proud to do in the light of day and in public. Essentially, this magic *works on someone else's free will or works to give you power over someone else* . Our tradition feels this is unethical, and we won't do it. We typically don't call what we do "white magic" (although some people do). I'd prefer calling what we practice "ethical magic" vs. "unethical magic." Some people call it "low" magic as opposed to "high" magic–but then some consider ceremonial magic "high" and all other practices "low" regardless of intent!

You might ask, "what's so wrong with making him fall in love with me/making her move away/breaking up that couple/getting him fired?" So many things. First, it's unethical. Second, once you open that door by working that way, you have created a pathway *that goes both ways* . You are now open and vulnerable to the same kind of work to be done against you. We have met folks who work this way, and they have become slaves to the candles and the jars and the pictures and the poppets: slaves to the spells they've done, because if they let up on their attacking energy, it can come back at them. They spend a third of their time on the offense and the other two-thirds on defense against those they've thrown a whammy at. Is that really the kind of coin you want to pay? Over and over and over and over and over? And third, it's unethical. Oh, did I say that already? Good.

Also, you know the phrase "Be careful what you wish for"? Boy, can that apply here. We've seen love spells aimed toward specific people produce not lovers, but stalkers. And undoing a spell is *much* harder than doing one! This time you might be wondering, "Well then, what good is magic? What *can* I use it for?" You can use it to give a boost to things in your life you are already working on: prosperity, love (but not aimed at a specific person), getting a job (but not getting someone else fired), boosting your career (ditto), court justice, house blessing, general uncrossing, etc., not to mention the personal work that helps your spirit evolve. Magic doesn't have to be spells. Magic is also communing with the spirits. Talking with nature. Getting messages from spirit guides, patron deities, archangels, whatever entities you work with. Learning and growing.

Why aren't all witches rich? Besides mundane reasons, it's about what you put in the center of your universe—what rules you. Our tradition puts self-evolving, not money, in the center. That's not to say we wouldn't do a prosperity working, but it's often for someone else's benefit.

I was raised completely atheist, and felt there was nothing past this world. Eventually I started being interested in witchcraft, crystals, alternative healing modalities, etc. Scared the shit outta me sometimes. I took classes in Wicca and other types of alternative spiritualities. Wicca, by the way, is a religion. Not all witches are Wiccans, by any stretch, and not all Wiccans practice witchcraft. Some are there only for the Goddess worship. I am not Wiccan. But I digress. I started having experiences and getting messages that I could ascribe only to something other: other than my conscious self. Okay, so maybe I was tapping into my subconscious. But then I started seeing some spirits (ghosts) and one day a sentence popped out of my mouth, *in another voice* . Yes, that was weird, but by that time I wasn't afraid. I had accepted that spirits/deities/archetypes/ancestors/however they manifest and whatever you want to call them could be contacted, and sometimes they contact you if they feel you aren't paying attention.

I work with a Welsh deity, who seems to delight in kicking me in the ass. She helps me not be a doormat. She is, in our tradition, Dame Fate, and she will spin fate according to your actions, not by any whim of her own. I honor and work with many other deities, but she's my Patroness.

Side note: deity—since it's not religion, we in Traditional Craft don't look at deity as all-powerful creatures whom we worship. We have a working relationship with them; we are partners. We honor, but we don't worship and we don't give up our own power to them. You can visit The Green Man Store for more information.

Exercise 5D: Journal Reflection

What types of accusations are employed in your culture? How are these used to control people's behavior?

Exercise 5E: Study Guide

*Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms **in your own words**:*

- Imitative magic
- Contagious magic
- Divination
- Witchcraft in pop culture
- Witchcraft as spirituality
- The witchcraft accusation
- Sorcery
- Azande
- Evil Eye
- Antisocial behavior
- Social mobility
- Mobility Theory
- Performance of maleficium
- Diabolism
- "The Malleus"
- Heretics
- Wicca
- Traditional Witchcraft
- Intent

Briefly describe the arguments and contributions of the following social scientists:

- E.E. Evans-Pritchard
- James Brain

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6: Rituals



Rock Maze by Ashley Batz. Available for use through Unsplash license.

Chapter 6 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Classify rituals and identify their functions.
- Differentiate elements of rituals using an anthropological perspective.
- Identify stages of rites of passage and identify examples of rites of passage in your own life.

6.1 Introducing Rituals

Rituals can reveal a great deal about a community's worldview, belief systems, and lived experiences. However, like the term "religion," "ritual" can be hard to define because what we think of as a ritual can vary widely and can be understood differently in different contexts.



Pledge of Allegiance by TheeErin, Flickr 2008

In this course, we begin by defining **rituals** as an act or series of regularly repeated acts that embody the beliefs of a group of people and create a sense of continuity and belonging (Davis-Floyd 2003,8). They also feature a sequence of activities, involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a specific place or time, and according to a set order (Stein and Stein 2010, 77).

6.2 Who Conducts Rituals?

Any one instance of a ritual might be performed by a large group or by a single individual. Rituals undertaken by groups or communities usually build a sense of cultural continuity. For example, if you were baptized in a church, and your parents and grandparents were also baptized, then it likely holds a great deal of meaning when you also baptize your children. This generational baptism links all of the family together and reinforces the family's commitment to a certain set of values.

Here are some other examples of religious rituals and the means by which they foster a sense of community:

- **Takuhatsu** : Takuhatsu is the word used to refer to almsgiving among Zen Buddhist monks (other Buddhist groups use different words). In most Buddhist traditions, the monks are believed to be servants of the community-at-large. In order to maintain their residency in a local monastery, the monks are expected to conduct religious ceremonies for the community, offer teachings, and serve. It is traditional for Buddhist monks to walk through the community and to beg for food (Carney 2016). This tradition allows the local community to earn good karma by giving a donation to the monks. Furthermore, this tradition maintains a relationship between the monks and the community because, if the monks aren't serving the community properly, they will not receive any donations. This covenant between the religious leaders and the community is maintained where both rely on and support each other. In many modern American temples today, online fundraisers serve the same function whereby members are likely to give to a temple that is better serving the community.
- **Hare Krishna Mantra** : The International Society for Krishna Consciousness is a modern religious movement that believes in the God Krishna's power. This religion is quite popular in the United States and has a big following in Los Angeles, specifically. Members of this religious group put their faith in Krishna for salvation and usually live communally. This group believes that they can achieve enlightenment through a variety of lifestyle changes and rituals and they believe that their religious chant that starts with, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare…" can be chanted in order to elevate the mind. Members of this community further believe that one can help others by chanting outside; the belief is that all people and animals who hear the chant will be blessed. So, you may see members of this group walking outside in their peach robes and chanting and now you can understand that they are seeking to help you achieve spiritual transcendence.
- **Mortuary Temple Worship in Ancient Egypt:** Ancient Egyptians had a similar creation myth as the Judeo-Christian Genesis myth in that darkness and chaos turned into life through the emergence of the "Island of Creation" from the primordial waters. This set the stage for mortuary temples, whose function was to provide a home for a deity and perform daily rituals and offerings to the deity so that the king (pharaoh) would have eternal life, and so that Egypt and its people would have prosperity (David 1998, 139). The ritual included taking the deity's statue, washing and clothing it, and giving it food three times per day. In this case, we see how a society's creation myth directly impacted daily rituals in the religious community.

6.3 Secular and Religious Rituals



Communion Elements with Candles by Lars Hammar, Flickr, 2007

Rituals can be religious or they can be **secular** (non-religious). Religious rituals directly involve the supernatural, whereas secular rituals do not. In both cases, these rituals commit people to a shared identity, reflect the community's value systems, and create a sense of meaning and a sense of control. Here are some examples of each:

- "The Pledge of Allegiance" is a secular ritual. This American tradition asks participants to verbally recommit themselves to serve the United States each time they participate in the ritual.
- Weddings and funerals can be either religious *or* secular. Some weddings and funerals involve both secular and religious elements. Depending upon the particular details of each and the participant's goals, these rituals can include religious elements or they can have no religious elements. For example, a Christian wedding often takes place in a church, and the ceremony – a religious ritual – is conducted by a minister or a priest. At the reception, however, it is not unusual for the new couple to cut the cake together – a well-known secular ritual.
- A graduation ceremony is typically a secular ritual. During this ritual (which we will discuss at length in a moment) participants receive a new social status based on academic achievement.

Some rituals are inherently religious whereas other rituals are entirely secular. Still others blend religious and secular traditions or change their focus and form depending upon the particular situation.

6.4 What Rituals Do

Cultural anthropologists examine rituals because they reveal the following:

- Rituals embody the worldview, beliefs, passions of the group (Davis-Floyd 1992, 10). In other words, the motivating factors behind cultural traditions can be understood by examining ritual. Does the community value patriotism and allegiance? Does the community value self-sacrifice? Does the community value self-reliance, etc.?
- People conduct rituals to achieve different cultural outcomes. Whereas one community might engage in a ritual that enhances the worship of a god, another community might engage in a ritual that reinforces a commitment to science.
- Rituals demonstrate the structure and order of things within a particular worldview. For example, a society that doesn't believe that women are equal to men will likely not allow women to lead rituals. The hierarchy of gender, as well as relationships between humans and animals or between humans and gods is reproduced in the symbolism of rituals (Stein and Stein 2017).

Rituals also present economic and political opportunities that participants can use to their advantage. In this sense, rituals aren't just passive "reflections" of culture, demonstrating people's values and revealing how cultural insiders make sense of the world around them. People also *actively use rituals* in order to make statements about themselves, to pursue social status or wealth, and to create or alter their relationships with others.

Exercise 6A

Watch a Balinese ritual in the 1951 film titled, "Trance and Dance in Bali" (from anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson).

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Can you identify themes of motherhood in the ritual? What do these representations reveal about this culture's values? What is revealed about gender roles?
2. The witch is portrayed very specifically. Across cultures, witches are represented as people who embody culturally-specific undesirable characteristics and this witch is no exception. Which characteristics are you seeing in this ritual?
3. While in a state of trance, the performers are believed to not have control over their actions (indeed, the power of their performance relies on their complete lack of control). How does the community prevent this from causing injury?
4. Which symbols are present in this ritual performance?

6.5 Political and Economic Roles of Ritual

Rituals can be solitary events, but as we have already noted, they often involve large groups of people. Consider holidays, marriages, funerals, or other important moments in a person's life that involve taking on a new social role; in most cultures, people mark all of these events by planning and conducting rituals.

Rituals like the ones mentioned above can be exciting or even stressful for participants. Many of the attendees at a wedding or a funeral might not have seen each other recently, or might not have ever met before. And many of them don't usually get to spend time together in one big gathering. For all of these reasons, the large social gatherings that often are part of rituals represent an opportunity in many cultures. More specifically, they represent an opportunity to "make an impression" on a lot of people.

The 18th and 19th century Tolowa people of northern California provide a particularly vivid example. Tolowa village leaders would sponsor Flower Dances, celebrating a young girl's entry into womanhood. They also held feasts to celebrate the completion of large canoes. Referring to the Tolowa leaders who organized and sponsored these events, ethnographer **Richard Gould** wrote:

> These dances were both a display of his "treasures" as well as a feast for the villagers, with the food being provided entirely by the wealthy man's household. The strings of dentalia [exotic shell ornaments that were imported from hundreds of miles away], woodpecker scalp headdresses, obsidian blades, dance aprons, and other regalia needed for the dances were loaned to any dancers who did not own these items who […] virtually served as manikins to show off the wealth of the [leader] sponsoring the dance. (Gould 1966, 86).

To be clear, it was so important for a leader to impress attendees from other villages that he would dress up his family members and other followers like "manikins," covering them with fancy clothing or other rare and valuable goods. In Gould's view, Tolowa

leaders did this to prove their effectiveness as leaders and to "show off" their wealth (to demonstrate the same qualities, they also offered guests enormous quantities of food).

Because these rituals featured large groups of people from far and wide coming together to celebrate, they provided a larger audience than a village leader was likely to encounter under normal circumstances. Leaders worked particularly hard to show off their wealth and prestige at these events, since doing so might attract considerable prestige and even new supporters or allies in the event of future conflict or hardship. We can think of this as an example of the political role that ritual plays, not only among the 18th and 19th century Tolowa, but in many cultures.

In addition to the connection between ritual and politics in many societies, it is important to acknowledge an important economic role of ritual as well. As you may know from personal experience, rituals can be quite expensive to undertake. Yet despite their costs, social conventions in many cultures dictate that people must conduct rituals in order to enjoy the rights that come with having completed them, or just in order to be seen as a responsible and morally upstanding member of society.

For example, in many societies, the expensive gifts that a bride or groom is expected to give their spouse's family in exchange for the right to marry – known as a **"dowry "or "brideprice"** – create a tremendous burden for young people who wish to start families (e.g., Meillassoux 1981). Funerals can also be expensive (for more on this topic, see Chapter 11). Each of these types of rituals (marriages and funerals), while expensive, can also be extremely important for cultural and religious reasons.

Rituals, it would seem, are connected to a culture's economy and its politics. In this sense, we can also see the benefits of employing a holistic perspective. As discussed in Chapter 1, holism refers to an approach that examines "parts" of a culture with the assumption that they both affect and are affected by other practices, beliefs, systems, and institutions within that culture (as rituals most certainly are). Here, we used a holistic lens to better understand the way that people's actions at rituals affect the rest of their lives and their societies (and how their lives outside of ritual events affect their behaviors and their goals at these events).

6.6 Rituals Establish Generational Continuity

Sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that rituals build solidarity across generations (Durkheim 1915; cited in Summers-Effler, 135). In Durkheim's view, when multiple generations re-commit themselves to their society's values through prescribed ritual, the community's identity is maintained.

Let's examine 4th of July celebrations in the United States and apply Durkheim's ideas to this national holiday. Take a moment and search the internet for 4th of July posters from one hundred years ago (consider searching for the year 1918). Looking at these images, you can see many of the same elements that Americans incorporate into Fourth of July celebrations today, over 100 years later. You can see red, white, and blue coloring. Stars and stripes evoke the flag. You can see "Uncle Sam" (a personification of the nation), fireworks (or, perhaps, explosions) and, often, guns. All of these symbols incorporate key American values: power, independence, patriotism. You might notice that, in many, violent imagery is central to American national identity. Each year, Americans come together by wearing red, white, and blue, spending the day celebrating liberty and community. Some Americans celebrate in a more sarcastic tone while others celebrate quite genuinely, but in all of these cases, the themes are the same and Americans recommit themselves to an idea of a national identity together on an annual basis.

In his 1867 book *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (or *Das Kapital* in German, the original language of the book [Marx and Engels 1867]), social scientist and political philosopher Karl Marx described a process that he called **social reproduction** (for more on Karl Marx, revisit Chapter 3). The broad concept of social reproduction is relevant to the example outlined above, but also to how we understand where culture comes from more broadly.

Marx defined social reproduction as a process that reproduces the relationships that make up a given society (Marx and Engels 1867). It also includes the process by which people learn to *accept* these relationships and even come to take them for granted.

Marx was particularly focused on how people produced (and reproduced) class identities that existed in capitalist societies of his time. In these societies, he observed that a small group held considerable power over the work that others did. At the same time, many had no way of exerting control over their own workplaces and no power to determine the eventual uses of the goods they produced at work. In Marx's eyes, these powerless workers had been reduced to sources of labor for the powerful to exploit. Marx used the social reproduction concept to describe the processes that produced and reproduced both the uneven distribution of power he saw and its acceptance.

Today, many scholars have expanded the social reproduction concept beyond the study of how we replicate the relationship between 'workers' and 'owners' in capitalist societies. We now use this concept to better understand how people learn about and enter into many different types of relationships and roles that exist within a culture.

Here, we are particularly interested in how *rituals* aid in social reproduction. In examining American culture, we might for example consider how Americans use rituals to reproduce their culture's ideas about what is 'masculine' and what is 'feminine.' Or we could just as well consider how they construct and spread ideas about national, racial, and geographic identities, such as what they believe it means to be American, and/or Black, and/or "a superfan."

If you were ever a young American attending an Independence Day celebration on the Fourth of July, you may be able to recall social reproduction occurring during these ritual events. Consider for a moment whether your older relatives asked you questions or provided advice about school, or college plans, or your future career? When we are exposed to these questions repeatedly, they can easily reinforce a set of ideas about what it means to be successful, they can encourage us to desire specific social roles for ourselves, and they can teach us deference for others who have achieved these roles. Similarly, the gossiping that takes place at a ritual like a 4th of July family celebration might reproduce cultural beliefs that certain traits, identities, or achievements are undesirable.

In one way or another, anthropologists who examine rituals are constantly returning to the questions "Does this ritual reproduce parts of the culture under study here? What elements of that culture does this ritual reproduce? What specific behaviors within the ritual are contributing to cultural reproduction, and how?" We encourage you to return to these questions as you encounter rituals in your own culture; you will almost certainly find cultural reproduction occurring in surprising places.

6.7 "Too Costly to Fake"

Anthropologist **Richard Sosis** is an American/Israeli anthropologist who is interested in examining rituals that are dangerous, painful, or costly to a community. Sosis was inspired to study these elements of ritual while observing Orthodox Jewish people praying at a holy site called the Wailing Wall. During Sosis' observations, the climate near the Wailing Wall is hot and sunny, and the Orthodox Jewish people he observed there wore thick black clothing from head to toe. And yet, in spite of the risk of heatstroke, they continued to pray for hours on end at the religious site. Sosis asked himself: why do many groups engage in such difficult and/or costly ritual practices?

Sosis begins his response to this question by explaining the concept of a 'free rider.' To illustrate the concept, consider this: in every society, it is in the best interest of the general population if all members contribute equally to the well-being of the society. On the other hand, it is in any individual's best interest not to contribute if they can still benefit from the contributions from the rest of the community while avoiding doing the extra work themself. In other words, if everyone contributes, then everyone needs to contribute slightly less. When one or a few members refuse to contribute, the remaining contributors must do more work.

A **free rider** is someone who benefits from contributions of the community without contributing themself. It's important to note that the term "free rider" is often used politically to blame one group or another for the problems of larger society. So, when you hear this term being thrown around, look deeply into the speaker's motivations and question the assumptions before buying into their claim. Consider the way that "productivity" is defined differently within different contexts and that not all people are in agreement about which contributions are necessary to keep society afloat.

In Sosis' view, communities often establish rituals that are extremely costly in order to identify which community members are genuinely prepared to contribute equally to collective tasks required for the community's survival and which are liable to become free riders. He also notes that they may be particularly important in communities that lack surplus resources, since these communities are least likely to be able to support the added burden created by free riders. Sosis suggests that the Orthodox Jewish people he observed are a minority group who possess limited resources. For this reason, the free rider problem is a particularly important one for them to address. According to Sosis, they do so in part by creating and undertaking such costly rituals.

Other costly rituals might include monetary cost, health cost, a time cost, or a dignity cost. Together, these costly rituals are a way to demonstrate that one's commitment to the group is greater than commitment than personal preservation. Sosis argues that costly rituals are a common way that human societies deter would-be free riders, as this is a risk most societies face.

6.8 Sensing the Sacred in Ritual: Aesthetics and Cosmology

Studying rituals cross-culturally involves paying attention to how religious meanings take shape through embodied action and sensory perception. Such an approach to religion allows us to see how religious cosmologies (culturally specific views of reality and the universe) connect to culturally specific aesthetics (principles of beauty or "rightness"). Ritual use of the senses gives participants a concrete experience of the sacred, connected to the particular symbolic meaning and cosmology embodied in the ritual. In this way, "sensing the sacred" helps to make a particular worldview or religious cosmology real for the participant,

connecting sensory experience to emotions in a way that establishes “moods and motivations” that feel absolutely real to members of a religious group, as Clifford Geertz (1973) mentioned in his discussion of religion as a cultural system.

6.9 Visual perception in Hindu worship

The ways in which religious practitioners engage the senses in ritual vary widely, as do the meanings that participants assign to sensory experience. One example, in Hindu worship, visual perception of sacred images (*darsan*) is already a form of worship, and is thought of as a kind of touching (Eck 1998). Thus, sacred images can cue multiple senses as they are used in worship (*puja*). Sacred Hindu images are not fully “active” until their eyes, and particularly the pupils, have been painted. The unveiling of a newly painted sacred image in a temple is a momentous occasion, particularly the very moment that the gaze of the deity falls upon the worshipper. In this way, the visual aesthetic of Hindu worship is dynamic, polysensory, and multidirectional (Eck 1998).

6.10 Sensory deprivation and sacred pain

Often the most impactful experience of the senses in religious practice is one of deprivation. Ritual seclusion, where an initiate is kept out of the sight of others, or the experience of fasting from food and/or water are also sensory experiences. In some traditions, such as Orthodox Christianity, , fasting is framed as a way to “cleanse the senses” to increase perception of the sacred. Likewise, pain may be part of a transformative religious experience. In Sun Dance ceremonies among Native American Plains nations, participants may pierce their skin or muscle tissue (on the chest for men; on the wrists for women) with hooks attached to ropes that are tied to the central pole of the Sun Dance lodge. Since Sun Dancers consider themselves to be dancing for someone else, typically for healing purposes, the pain they incur has a sacrificial meaning, and is also connected to altered states of consciousness achieved through fasting, dancing, and singing over a period of several days.

6.11 Rites of Passage

French sociologist **Arnold van Gennep** first examined a particular type of ritual called a rite of passage (Van Gennep 2019; Welsch and Vivanco 2019, 348). A **rite of passage** is a ritual that moves a person from one life stage to another life stage. Consider the following examples:

- A graduation ceremony signifies that a person is no longer a student and is now a graduate, usually holding a degree that is intended to elevate professional status.
- A wedding ceremony moves a couple from the status of “dating” to the status of “married;” this rite of passage forms a new family.
- A funeral helps the community accept that a person is no longer a living member of a community and moves the passed-on individual into their new social status as deceased.



Wedding ceremony by MIKI Yoshihito, Flickr 2011

Van Gennep identified three stages of a rite of passage. These three stages were expanded upon by anthropologist **Victor Turner**, who described the stages as follows:

1. **Separation** : The phase in each rite of passage where the person going through a change is moved into a location away from the community (Turner 2017, 94).
2. **Liminality:** The middle phase where the ritual is taking place. In the liminal phase, a person is no longer a member of their old identity, but they are also not yet a member of their new identity; they exist between two states. The liminal phase is usually

signified through some kind of dress that removes the person's individual identity. For example, people in the liminal phase usually all wear the same clothing and remove personalized symbols (Turner 2017, 94-95).

3. **Reincorporation** : After the initiate has completed the required ritual actions, they are allowed to return to society with their new status. In this phase, they are recognized as having a new identity and role in society Turner 2017, 94).

For example: in a conventional North American wedding ceremony, when a couple is preparing for the event, they typically wait for the ceremony to begin away from the guests who are arriving at their wedding or, in other words, they are separated from the community. Most cultures prescribe some kind of clothing that couples are expected to wear during the wedding ceremony. This establishes a sort of liminality during the actual ceremony whereby the couple exists in a space where they are no longer engaged but are also not yet married. Finally, after being pronounced married, the couple then celebrates with their guests in attendance as they are reincorporated and recognized as a new family unit.

We can analyze a conventional North American graduation ceremony in the same way:

1. First, the people graduating are separated from their friends and family; they typically sit in the center of the ceremony space and listen to an address.
2. During the ceremony, all participants wear the same cap and gown which creates a sense of liminality.
3. Finally, the participants are handed a diploma and are declared "graduates" and return to the community to be congratulated and recognized as having a new social position.

Exercise 6B: Journal Reflection

Reflect on rites of passages that you've completed in your life. Which have been "too costly to fake?" Have you joined a club, sorority, or fraternity that demanded an extreme ritual for membership? Has your religious institution required intensive study or fasting to prepare for a new life stage? Have you joined a military organization or paid a large financial sum to join a group? Has your school or employer asked you to signal a commitment to the group? Do you need to complete any tasks to gain or maintain your citizenship?

After you've identified a "too costly to fake" ritual, ask yourself, "Why does this group require this ritual?" How is solidarity formed through this demonstration of commitment?

Exercise 6C

Watch this National Geographic video about an Apache rite of passage titled, "Girl's Rite of Passage."

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What symbols are used in this ritual? What do these symbols mean to the community?
2. How are the values of the culture encapsulated in this ritual?
3. What is the relationship between individual and community in this culture? What obligations are placed upon the shoulders of young women?
4. How is this connected to Richard Sosis' arguments that some rituals are "too costly to fake"?

Then, watch this National Geographic video about a Xhosa rite of passage titled, "Circumcision."

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What is liminal about this practice? Consider appearance, loss of material comforts, and camaraderie in your answer.
2. What is the relationship between individual and community in this culture? What obligations are placed upon the shoulders of young men?
3. What elements of drama make this ritual more meaningful?
4. How is this connected to Richard Sosis' arguments that some rituals are "too costly to fake"?

6.12 Revisiting Victor Turner

In addition to building on Arnold van Gennep's three stages of rites of passage, Victor Turner (discussed in the previous section) also observed that the power of a ritual comes from its drama (Davis-Floyd 2003, 14). You may already understand this argument because, probably, the more dramatic a ritual feels to you, the more meaningful it feels. For example, if you sit in the back of a church, temple, mosque, or any other venue where rituals occur, and roll your eyes during ceremonies while texting on a phone, then those rituals probably don't mean very much to you. But, if you attend a ritual at one of these venues during a time of personal

crisis or loss, you may find a great deal of meaning in it. And on this occasion, you may cry and feel more connected to your religious beliefs. Human beings strive to create meaning through ritual, and the power of the ritual comes from the drama.

Exercise 6D: Journal Reflection

What is a rite of passage in your community? Did you participate in that ritual? How does the ritual feel to participants? What does it mean to participants?

6.13 Characteristics of Turner's Rites of Passage and the Liminal Phase

Turner proposed that as a person experiences the liminal phase of a rite of passage, they take on the following characteristics:

- Necessarily ambiguous,
- "Betwixt and between" identities,
- "Neither here nor there,"
- No status, no insignias,
- Seems to possess nothing; naked,
- Groups become homogenized, builds camaraderie (Turner 2017, 96).

Perhaps you can recall rites of passage in your own life. We encourage you to take a moment to do so, and try to identify the liminal phase within the broader event, using the attributes listed above. After all, if rites of passage are common in most societies as a way of marking when a person changes their social role, it is very likely that your society features them too, particularly since there exist so many social roles that a person can have over the course of their life!

Turner also argued that challenging rituals serve the function of building "communitas" within a group (Turner 2017). We define **communitas** as the feeling of camaraderie that binds together people after going through a trial or tribulation. If you have ever worked in retail, for example, then you are familiar with the way that the stress of working through the holiday season can bond coworkers together on an unexpected level. This is a feeling that often manifests through sleep-away camp or military training. By struggling together, people feel a stronger bond.

6.14 Coming-of-Age Rituals for Bemba Women (Zambia)

Anthropologist **Audrey Richards** wrote about women's rites of passage among the Bemba people of Zambia. Her work focused on a coming-of-age rite of passage called Chisungu, during which girls performed 18 different ceremonies in order to move themselves from childhood into adulthood (Guest 2018). This ritual takes place after the girls' first menstrual cycle and is intended to prepare her for marriage.

Throughout **Chisungu**, young initiates are taught the sacred stories and songs of their culture by elder women, which allows the young girls to carry on the cultural traditions for their communities (Ibid). Alongside this cultural knowledge, the girls are also expected to demonstrate prowess in hoeing, sowing, and gathering firewood, as these are all tasks that fall on the shoulders of women in Bemba society (Lancy 2016, 334).

The Chisungu ritual is largely designed to move the young girl into a stage of womanhood so that she can become eligible for marriage and sex. As a result, the rituals incorporate a variety of sexual symbols (Lancy 2016, 311). The young women who are transformed in this community engage with the powerful cultural symbols that encompass their culture's larger value systems (Turner 2017, 103).

6.15 Birth as Ritual

Birth is a rite of passage for both parent and child as, from a cultural perspective, all parties enter new life stages and new social statuses upon completion of the birth.

American Anthropologist **Robbie E. Davis-Floyd** examined the ritualistic elements of pregnancy and childbirth in the United States in her book titled, *Birth As An American Rite of Passage* (2003 [1992]) . Davis-Floyd argues that our belief systems are reinforced through rituals and the symbols they involve, and that symbolic rituals translate a society's value systems into an emotional reality for the people who participate in these rituals. In other words, we *feel* the value system of our society when we engage in ritual.

Davis-Floyd observes that pregnant women are expected to attend and cooperate with highly ritualized obstetrics-gynecology (OB-GYN) appointments; in these appointments, women are expected to sit in a particular chair and to wear a hospital gown. This posture and the clothing serve to enculturate the pregnant woman into a larger parenting and body ritual value system of American culture. Davis-Floyd further explains that effective rituals need to convey one simple message and they do this by repeatedly conveying the messaging over and over again (Davis-Floyd, 10). She highlights that rhythmicity, redundancy, and repetition are key elements in an effective ritual.

Furthermore, Davis-Floyd asserts that rituals form a certain perception of reality for all participants to accept and then requires that all participants reason within that specific concept of reality. This is achieved in order to assure that the diversity of intelligence and experience does not cause the individual participants to question the logic behind the ritual (Davis-Floyd 1992, 11-12). In order to achieve a unified and simplistic worldview throughout, the ritual participants re-construct their world in a binary sense (black and white, either/or) so that it can be similarly grasped by people of all levels of intelligence.

Davis-Floyd makes the point that medical training is, itself, a ritualistic process whereby doctors are put through strenuous training and rote memorization designed to prevent them from questioning the medical structures within which they work. At the same time, women in labor are reduced to a vulnerable state during which the pain prevents critical thinking. These two elements combined rely on the comfort and control that ritualized practice can offer.

Finally, Davis-Floyd makes an argument similar to the one we explored earlier in a discussion of Bronislaw Malinowski's Functionalist approach to beliefs in magic in the Trobriand Islands (see Chapter 3). She suggests that in contemporary American culture, pregnancy and birth *need* to be "ritualized" and "medicalized" (treated as rituals and as rigid medical procedures) in order to construct a sense of control over a natural process that is, in reality, often outside of our control.

6.16 Pilgrimage Rituals

What is a pilgrimage? We might think of **pilgrimage** as a sacred journey, sometimes (but not always) connected with world religions such as Hinduism and the pilgrimage to the River Ganges, or Islam and the Hajj (discussed above). The journey itself is meant to be transformational; it allows its participants to come close to the sacred, to connect with a larger community, to break from the humdrum routine of everyday life, and to obtain deeper knowledge of the self. The destinations of pilgrimages are imbued with meaning. A destination of a pilgrimage may be a place long understood as holy in a particular religious tradition, and/or it may have powers of healing.

The destination of a pilgrimage may draw its meaning from a national narrative, from an event that occurred there, or from a person who resided there. Indeed, the destination does not actually have to be religious at all in the usual sense of being situated in the sacred narratives of an organized religion, as anthropologists Raymond Michalowski and Jill Dubisch tell us in their ethnography of veterans' journeys on motorcycles to the Wall, the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001). While a pilgrimage usually involves a physical journey, typically a symbolic and spiritual journey that entails transformation is at least as important.

Pilgrimages are highly symbolic and follow the structure of a rite of passage (Turner and Turner 2011). The first phase is marked by separation, both physical (by physically removing oneself from a location) and symbolic (by acquiring a piece of cultural knowledge that now 'separates' you from others), from one's usual place in the social structure. Once the pilgrim embarks on the journey, she enters into a space and time of fluidity and flux, of the loss of previous social identities, of rolelessness and transformation.

This correlates with the transitional period of a rite of passage, and the "betwixt and between" period is called liminality.



Palm Sunday Filipino Pilgrimage by Darren Glanville, Flickr 2014

When people are in a state of liminality together, as pilgrims often are, they may experience the deep sense of union and connection between fellow human beings that Victor Turner referred to as communitas (see above). This period of transition in pilgrimage, together with the experiences of liminality and communitas, may last up to the arrival at the sacred destination, and even peak at that place. Afterwards, pilgrims return home in the stage of a rite of passage called reaggregation. Newly transformed, they may take on a new position in the social structure upon their return.

6.17 Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela

The Camino de Santiago de Compostela is a famous Catholic pilgrimage that originated in the medieval era and continues to this day, although the passage of centuries has witnessed transformations both in pilgrimage and the people who undertake pilgrimage to Santiago. Every year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, the majority on foot, make their way to Santiago de Compostela, a medieval pilgrimage destination in northwestern Spain. Others travel by bicycle, and some by horseback or wheelchair.

Catedral de Santiago de Compostela agosto 2018 by stephenD

There are a number of routes to Santiago, but the most popular is the French Route, which traverses northern Spain from the French border, passing through the Pyrenees, over the high, flat meseta of central northern Spain, and, finally, over a mountain pass to reach the verdant region of Galicia and the city of Santiago de Compostela. Along the route, the pilgrim encounters tiny hamlets, towns, and large cities; grand cathedrals and tiny chapels and monasteries, old pilgrims' hospitals and modern refuges. The journey on foot from the French border is approximately 750 kilometers, and takes about a month of steady walking to complete.

The roots of the pilgrimage are old and are shrouded in myth and legend and can be traced back to the origins of Christianity and stories of the religion's spread throughout Europe.

James (Santiago in Spanish) was a follower of Christ who, according to the New Testament of the Christian bible, was beheaded in Jerusalem in the year 44 CE. Nowhere in the New Testament is the Iberian Peninsula mentioned, but centuries later, in the 8th and 9th centuries CE, documents circulated that claimed that Jesus had sent James to the Iberian peninsula and to convert the people he encountered there to Christianity. Legend holds that after his death, James miraculously returned to the Iberian Peninsula, specifically to the spot where the city of Santiago is today.

The legends continue from there: a bright star allowed for the discovery of James' tomb in the 9th century and the Bishop of Santiago ordered a chapel to be built on the site. The first pilgrims began to make their way to Santiago shortly thereafter.

Pilgrims range in their intent for undertaking the pilgrimage: from devout Catholics to those in search of a spiritual awakening to those in search of a psychologically and physically demanding adventure. Pilgrims come from many dozens of countries to travel to Santiago, from across Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa, although nearly half hail from Spain. There are about equal numbers of men and women.

As soon as pilgrims begin to walk, they enter into a liminal state: they are geographically between starting point and destination, the usual signs of social status (age, gender, socioeconomic status) begin to drop away. Many pilgrims discuss pilgrimage as an escape from the dulling effects of the daily routine of work, as a site of healing from traumatic experiences such as the death of a loved one, as a way to fulfill a promise or a vow, or, somewhat less commonly, from difficult situations such as drug abuse or hard living. In the latter case, pilgrimage, and the difficult journey it entails, is a mode of purification.

Pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela often experience communitas as they form intimate ties with the other pilgrims with whom they walk, share meals, and sleep alongside, and also with those unknown masses of pilgrims who have traveled the Camino before them. As they walk, pilgrims seek out an unmediated experience of nature and face-to-face encounters with fellow pilgrims, punctuated by periods of solitude and contemplation; in sum, a return to a simpler, slower pace of life.

The everyday experience of pilgrimage is characterized by the rhythms of a repetitive, stripped-down routine: waking up, often before dawn, breakfast and packing up; walking with a break for a small snack or cup of coffee at a village bar; reaching a refuge, eating, resting, showering, eating again, and sleeping. Pilgrims become keenly aware of the basic needs of every human being: water, food, and shelter, alongside the need for human connection and relief from the bodily injuries and pain that can arise after long days of walking.

The slow, unmediated journey to Santiago de Compostela ideally sparks an interior journey that carries with it the possibility of transformation: being touched by the sacred (understood as closeness to God, or for some, forms of New Age spirituality often described in terms of energy concentrated in particular locales) or achieving a deeper knowledge of the self. Interestingly, a number of pilgrims do not stop at the cathedral in Santiago and visit the relics of St. James in the cathedral's crypt as their ultimate destination. Some pilgrims continue on after reaching Santiago either by bus or on foot to Finisterre, a small fishing village on the Galician coast whose name means "Land's End." Attracted by the idea of reaching what seems to be the absolute end. Here, some pilgrims engage in what they understand to be pre-Christian, even Celtic rites of death and rebirth. After sundown, they build a fire, burn objects associated with the Camino (clothes, boots, walking stick). Pilgrims sometimes undress and plunge into the cold waters of the Atlantic: a rite of purification, of symbolic death and rebirth before the return home.

6.18 The Roles Bedouin Women Play on Pilgrimages to Holy Sites in Southern Jordan

In much of the Islamic world, sacred places have defined the religious and spiritual landscape for worship. Many of these shrines are tombs of important religious and historical figures, but still, the majority of these sacred spaces are dedicated to the ancestors of local families or tribes. These tombs function as a religious center of the community, providing avenues for community worship, but, also, private visitation for individuals who seek council. While women partake in public displays of veneration, the private and independent prayer that takes place at these central shrines are traditionally and frequently sought by women.

In Jordan, the wealth of holy sites, shrines, and tombs of tribal ancestors is vast. These sites are frequently and regularly visited by the descendants of these tribal leaders. The most prominent holy site, the shrine of Harun, or biblical Aaron, is visited on an annual cycle, but also on an individual basis. Located on a mountaintop, this shrine is visible from afar. Women are permitted to partake in pilgrimages to the shrine of Aaron. However, it is difficult to reach, given the rugged terrain and its mountaintop location. As a consequence, women are more likely to visit holy shrines within the confines of their villages or towns rather than the shrine of Aaron. Many such shrines are located along water sources, allowing more effective accessibility for women to visit (Miettunen 2018).

While many important celebrations take place annually to commemorate and venerate shrines of tribal ancestors in which women are permitted to participate, males and females are not treated equally during the course of the celebration. Women are most likely the ones unable to disengage themselves from their duties at home; indeed, they continue cooking, cleaning, and childrearing during these events. Women are also expected to prepare food for feasting during the celebration. Finally, during public pilgrimages, women are stringently controlled by their family and friends for fear of contact with strangers over the course of these celebrations. This strict control over women is stemmed by fears of inappropriate behavior or promiscuity on the part of the woman during public gatherings (Miettunen 2018).

As a consequence, women infrequently participate directly in these celebrations, instead preferring independent spiritual journeys. Throughout the year, these women visit shrines or tombs individually or in small groups, and organize female-centric public pilgrimages to overcome these challenges. One such example is the Rain Mother ritual, where women participate in a pilgrimage that involves singing and dancing to honor the Rain Mother. Although these types of pilgrimages occur, younger women rarely engage in them because many believe that these are pagan in nature and women are now commonly able to obtain jobs and educational pursuits outside of the household (Miettunen 2018).

6.19 Possession in Voodoo

To better understand the term "**altered state of consciousness**," please read Biswas-Diener and Teeny's article on the topic.

Haitian Voodoo ceremonies are highly secretive and are typically not open to outsiders of the religion. While there is no central authority who defines or regulates the religion, the word "Bembe" is often used to refer to a religious service performed to connect with the loas (Brown 2010). Loas are divine spirits that are human-like with human tendencies, and are interested in human affairs. Bembes are led by the religious leaders (oungan/priest or manbo/priestess) whereby the leader ritually invites a loa to join the ceremony. The group will always offer the loa's favorite items (including food, drink, tobacco, perfume, etc.) as a ritual sacrifice to them.

Houngan ceremony ritual by Anthony Karen

Practitioners of Haitian Voodoo know that the loa is present in the ceremony when the leader of the ceremony changes her or his behaviors and starts to behave like the loa. It's believed that the loas possess the bodies of the participants and, as a result, the possessed person will start to exhibit the behaviors that each particular loa is known for (Brown 2010). This change, where a participant adopts a new pattern of perception in order to experience the ritual in a spiritual manner, is a great example of an altered state of consciousness.

There are stories of Voodoo priests or priestesses who, for example, have ingested excessive amounts of alcohol during the ceremony when possessed by a loa who likes to drink. But, in spite of taking in so much alcohol, they report feeling completely sober after the loa has left their body (Brown 2010).

Exercise 6E

Altered states of consciousness manifest in a wide variety of ways. Learn about Lurancy Vennum and reflect on how her seizures were bringing her into an altered state of consciousness. Remember that, as anthropologists, we are not interested in the "truth" or "falsity" of a spiritual belief but, rather, in the way the events impact a person's understanding of reality. Remember, also, that religious experiences are frequently created by the brain and that we are apt to use our own culturally-specific ideas in order to explain the confusing phenomenon.

Listen to Aaron Mahnke's episode of Lore titled, "Mary, Mary." Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What type of altered state of consciousness was present in this event? (You may want to review Biswas-Diener and Teeny's article before answering this question).
2. What was the spiritual worldview of the time? How might this have influenced the people's interpretation of the events?
3. What was the scientific worldview of the time? How might this have influenced the people's interpretation of the events?
4. How was possession used to explain misfortune?
5. How was spirituality used to explain illness?

Note: this story is not based on anthropological research; the story may be exaggerated for impact.

6.20 Ayahuasca

Ayahuasca, also called la purga, is a brew made from the ayahuasca vine, chacruna leaves and the leaves of various plants and shrubs indigenous to the Amazon region of South America. It is a hallucinogen that has been used for attaining ASC during healing rituals in various indigenous Amazonian cultures. It is a very potent hallucinogenic with evidence of healing qualities (but note that inappropriate use of ayahuasca can cause severe psychological side effects and in some cases even death).



Preparación de ayahuasca con chacruna by Jairo Galvis Henao, Flickr 2014

Use of ayahuasca has migrated out of the Amazonian cultures over time to various religious communities in Brazil and South America, such as the Santo Daime followers in Brazil. Increasingly, there are also people traveling from North America, Europe and Australia to South American countries like Peru to ritually consume the drug, where the use of the ayahuasca brew for healing is still practiced. This is becoming problematic, since the plant is over-harvested and is destabilizing the fragile Amazonian ecosystem. There are also reports that ayahuasca tourism is becoming a driver of trade of jaguar body parts, since they are being sold to tourists to supposedly enhance the ayahuasca experience.

Another major problem with ayahuasca tourism surrounds the guidance of appropriate consumption of the substance. Religious specialists guide the use of ayahuasca and other powerful substances to ensure a proper and safe experience for the believer taking part in the ritual. Increasingly, more tour guides have completed short programs for distributing ayahuasca. This is problematic, since the skills passed down to religious specialists over multiple generations are bypassed for a quick lesson and can lead to more people becoming sick from the substance and even dying. The podcast in the optional resources section discusses some of these issues surrounding ayahuasca tourism.

6.21 Case Study: Body Rituals Among the Nacirema

The following article was written by anthropologist Horace Miner in 1956. The text discusses the ritualistic practices and worldviews of a community that Miner calls "the Nacirema." Closely read this text and take notes on the rituals that are described. Then, answer the related questions.

The anthropologist has become so familiar with the diversity of ways in which different people behave in similar situations that he is not apt to be surprised by even the most exotic customs. In fact, if all of the logically possible combinations of behavior have not been found somewhere in the world, he is apt to suspect that they must be present in some yet undescribed tribe. The point has, in fact, been expressed with respect to clan organization by Murdock[1]. In this light, the magical beliefs and practices of the Nacirema present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go.

Professor Linton[2] first brought the ritual of the Nacirema to the attention of anthropologists twenty years ago, but the culture of this people is still very poorly understood. They are a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles. Little is known of their origin, although tradition states that they came from the east. According to Nacirema mythology, their nation was originated by a culture hero, Notgnihsaw, who is otherwise known for two great feats of strength—the throwing of a piece of wampum across the river Pa-To-Mac and the chopping down of a cherry tree in which the Spirit of Truth resided.

Nacirema culture is characterized by a highly developed market economy which has evolved in a rich natural habitat. While much of the people's time is devoted to economic pursuits, a large part of the fruits of these labors and a considerable portion of the day are spent in ritual activity. The focus of this activity is the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant

concern in the ethos of the people. While such a concern is certainly not unusual, its ceremonial aspects and associated philosophy are unique.

The fundamental belief underlying the whole system appears to be that the human body is ugly and that its natural tendency is to debility and disease. Incarcerated in such a body, man's only hope is to avert these characteristics through the use of ritual and ceremony. Every household has one or more shrines devoted to this purpose. The more powerful individuals in the society have several shrines in their houses and, in fact, the opulence of a house is often referred to in terms of the number of such ritual centers it possesses. Most houses are of wattle and daub construction, but the shrine rooms of the more wealthy are walled with stone. Poorer families imitate the rich by applying pottery plaques to their shrine walls.

While each family has at least one such shrine, the rituals associated with it are not family ceremonies but are private and secret. The rites are normally only discussed with children, and then only during the period when they are being initiated into these mysteries. I was able, however, to establish sufficient rapport with the natives to examine these shrines and to have the rituals described to me.

The focal point of the shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept the many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. The most powerful of these are the medicine men, whose assistance must be rewarded with substantial gifts. However, the medicine men do not provide the curative potions for their clients, but decide what the ingredients should be and then write them down in an ancient and secret language. This writing is understood only by the medicine men and by the herbalists who, for another gift, provide the required charm.

The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charmbox of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again. While the natives are very vague on this point, we can only assume that the idea in retaining all the old magical materials is that their presence in the charm-box, before which the body rituals are conducted, will in some way protect the worshiper.

Beneath the charm-box is a small font. Each day every member of the family, in succession, enters the shrine room, bows his head before the charm-box, mingles different sorts of holy water in the font, and proceeds with a brief rite of ablution[3]. The holy waters are secured from the Water Temple of the community, where the priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the liquid ritually pure.

In the hierarchy of magical practitioners, and below the medicine men in prestige, are specialists whose designation is best translated as "holy-mouth-men." The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. They also believe that a strong relationship exists between oral and moral characteristics. For example, there is a ritual ablution of the mouth for children which is supposed to improve their moral fiber.

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious[4] about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures[5].

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these items in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client's mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations[6] is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

It is to be hoped that, when a thorough study of the Nacirema is made, there will be careful inquiry into the personality structure of these people. One has but to watch the gleam in the eye of a holy-mouth-man, as he jabs an awl into an exposed nerve, to suspect that a certain amount of sadism is involved. If this can be established, a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily

body ritual which is performed only by men. This part of the rite includes scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Special women's rites are performed only four times during each lunar month, but what they lack in frequency is made up in barbarity. As part of this ceremony, women bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour. The theoretically interesting point is that what seems to be a preponderantly masochistic people have developed sadistic specialists.

The medicine men have an imposing temple, or *latipso*, in every community of any size. The more elaborate ceremonies required to treat very sick patients can only be performed at this temple. These ceremonies involve not only the thaumaturge[7] but a permanent group of vestal maidens who move sedately about the temple chambers in distinctive costume and headdress.

The *latipso* ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover. Small children whose indoctrination is still incomplete have been known to resist attempts to take them to the temple because "that is where you go to die." Despite this fact, sick adults are not only willing but eager to undergo the protracted ritual purification, if they can afford to do so. No matter how ill the supplicant or how grave the emergency, the guardians of many temples will not admit a client if he cannot give a rich gift to the custodian. Even after one has gained and survived the ceremonies, the guardians will not permit the neophyte to leave until he makes still another gift.

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes. In everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the *latipso*. A man, whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client's sickness. Female clients, on the other hand, find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation and prodding of the medicine men.

Few supplicants in the temple are well enough to do anything but lie on their hard beds. The daily ceremonies, like the rites of the holy-mouth-men, involve discomfort and torture. With ritual precision, the vestals awaken their miserable charges each dawn and roll them about on their beds of pain while performing ablutions, in the formal movements of which the maidens are highly trained. At other times they insert magic wands in the supplicant's mouth or force him to eat substances which are supposed to be healing. From time to time the medicine men come to their clients and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. The fact that these temple ceremonies may not cure, and may even kill the neophyte, in no way decreases the people's faith in the medicine men.

There remains one other kind of practitioner, known as a "listener." This witchdoctor has the power to exorcise the devils that lodge in the heads of people who have been bewitched. The Nacirema believe that parents bewitch their own children. Mothers are particularly suspected of putting a curse on children while teaching them the secret body rituals. The counter-magic of the witchdoctor is unusual in its lack of ritual. The patient simply tells the "listener" all his troubles and fears, beginning with the earliest difficulties he can remember. The memory displayed by the Nacirema in these exorcism sessions is truly remarkable. It is not uncommon for the patient to bemoan the rejection he felt upon being weaned as a babe, and a few individuals even see their troubles going back to the traumatic effects of their own birth.

In conclusion, mention must be made of certain practices which have their base in native esthetics but which depend upon the pervasive aversion to the natural body and its functions. There are ritual fasts to make fat people thin and ceremonial feasts to make thin people fat. Still other rites are used to make women's breasts larger if they are small, and smaller if they are large. General dissatisfaction with breast shape is symbolized in the fact that the ideal form is virtually outside the range of human variation. A few women afflicted with almost inhuman hyper-mammary development are so idolized that they make a handsome living by simply going from village to village and permitting the natives to stare at them for a fee.

Reference has already been made to the fact that excretory functions are ritualized, routinized, and relegated to secrecy. Natural reproductive functions are similarly distorted. Intercourse is taboo as a topic and scheduled as an act. Efforts are made to avoid pregnancy by the use of magical materials or by limiting intercourse to certain phases of the moon. Conception is actually very infrequent. When pregnant, women dress so as to hide their condition. Parturition takes place in secret, without friends or relatives to assist, and the majority of women do not nurse their infants.

Our review of the ritual life of the Nacirema has certainly shown them to be a magic-ridden people. It is hard to understand how they have managed to exist so long under the burdens which they have imposed upon themselves. But even such exotic customs as these take on real meaning when they are viewed with the insight provided by Malinowski[8] when he wrote:

> "Looking from far and above, from our high places of safety in the developed civilization, it is easy to see all the crudity and irrelevance of magic. But without its power and guidance early man could not have mastered his practical difficulties as

he has done, nor could man have advanced to the higher stages of civilization."

Footnotes

1. *Murdock, George P. 1949. Social Structure. NY: The Macmillan Co., page 71. George Peter Murdock (1897–1996 [?]) is a famous ethnographer.*
2. *L inton, Ralph. 1936. The Study of Man. NY: D. Appleton-Century Co. page 326. Ralph Linton (1893–1953) is best known for studies of enculturation (maintaining that all culture is learned rather than inherited; the process by which a society's culture is transmitted from one generation to the next), claiming culture is humanity's "social heredity.*
3. *A washing or cleansing of the body or a part of the body. From the Latin abluere, to wash away*
4. *Marked by precise observance of the finer points of etiquette and formal conduct*
5. *It is worthy of note that since Prof. Miner's original research was conducted, the Nacirema have almost universally abandoned the natural bristles of their private mouth-rite in favor of oil-based polymerized synthetics. Additionally, the powders associated with this ritual have generally been semi-liquefied. Other updates to the Nacirema culture shall be eschewed in this document for the sake of parsimony.*
6. *Tending to religious or other important functions*
7. *A miracle-worker.*
8. *Malinowski, Bronislaw. Magic, Science, and Religion. Glencoe: The Free Press, page 70. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) is a famous cultural anthropologist best known for his argument that people everywhere share common biological and psychological needs and that the function of all cultural institutions is to fulfill such needs; the nature of the institution is determined by its function.*

Exercise 6F

After reading, "Body Rituals Among the Nacirema" discuss the article with your instructor. Ensure that you understand who the Nacirema are and ensure that you are able to correctly answer the following:

1. What is the Nacirema worldview?
2. What is the ritual shrine in Nacirema homes? What happens in this shrine? How do the shrine rituals reflect the value system of Nacirema culture?
3. Who are the holy mouth men and listeners? What would you call them?
4. What is the latipso? What would you call this?
5. How and why do the Nacirema demand changes to the human body? How do they perform these physical changes?

After reviewing the answers to the above questions with your instructor, please write your own unique observation of the Nacirema. Be sure to follow Horace Miner's writing style and "make the familiar strange." Refer to the people as "The Nacirema."

To come up with ideas for your original observations: look around your own community and try to explore the "mundane imponderabilia." What activities or beliefs seem "normal" to you that might seem quite strange to an outsider? What sort of "rituals" do you regularly engage in? For this assignment, you should *not* summarize Miner's work. Instead, please look around Nacirema society and *report on your own observations.*

Exercise 6G: Study Guide

Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms ***in your own words****:*

- Rituals
- Takuhatsu
- Hare Krishna Mantra
- Mortuary Temple Worship of Ancient Egypt
- Secular
- Dowry/Brideprice
- Sacrifice
- Social Reproduction
- Free Rider
- "Too Costly To Fake"

- Rite of Passage
- Separation
- Liminality
- Reincorporation
- The Hajj
- Pilgrimage
- “Ritual as drama”
- Communitas
- Chisungu
- Pilgrimage
- Nacirema
- Altered States of Consciousness
- Ayahuasca
- Possession

Briefly describe the arguments and contributions of the following social scientists:

- Richard Gould
- Richard Sosis
- Arnold Van Gennep
- Victor Turner
- Audrey Richards
- Horace Miner
- Robbie E. Davis-Floyd

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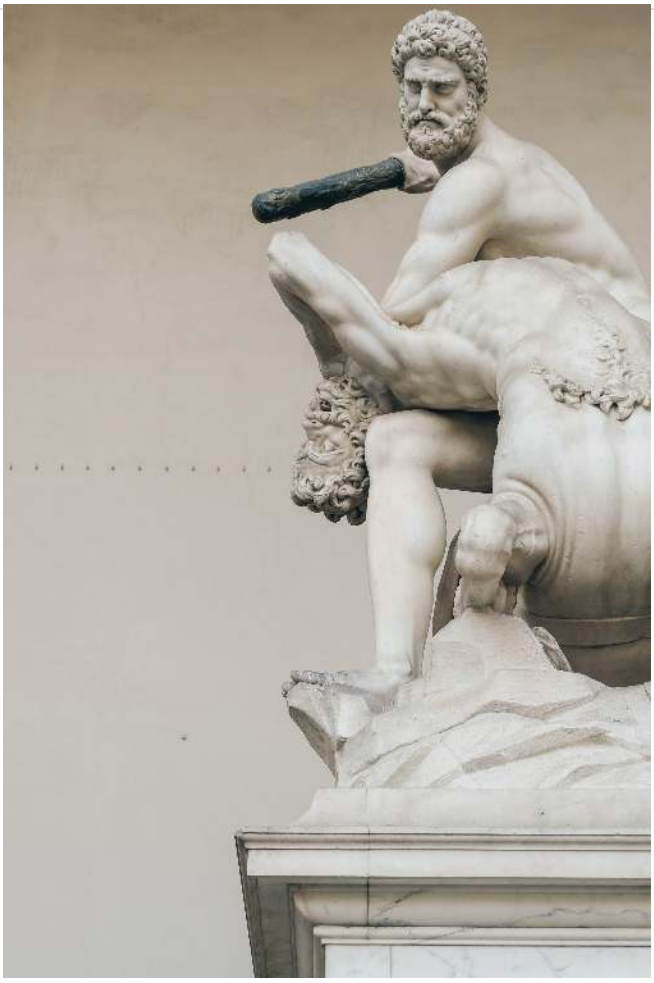
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7: Myths as Sacred Stories



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Chapter 7 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Interpret the meaning behind sacred cultural stories.
- Demonstrate how myths establish and maintain moral values for a cultural group.
- Understand the role of myths in shaping the cultural and religious worldview of a group.

7.1 Types of Myths and Stories

While this course focuses on religion, witchcraft and magic, for a moment we will diverge and use the term **art**. Anthropologists define "art" as, "symbolic representations of thought, feeling and ideas." Art is central to the foundation, establishment, and maintenance of all human societies. Human societies created visual and verbal arts before the invention of writing (which only occurred around 5,000 years ago). As a result, societies across time have used (and continue to use) art to give meaningful expression to almost every part of their culture. This includes ideas about religion, kinship, and ethnic identity. Therefore, the verbal arts: myths, stories, and folklore, became a form of cultural reinforcement – a way to enculturate the next generation into a religion and dispel morals and values central to cultural survival.

The verbal arts include myths, folklore, narratives, dramas, poetry, incantations, proverbs riddles, word-games, even things like naming procedures, compliments and insults! As you know, the United States has historically been a society made up from people originating in many different lands, all with their unique set of myths and traditions. When they settled in the United States, they settled in cultural enclaves, which enabled them to preserve much of their culture and this included their verbal arts, myths and

stories. However, this would begin to change during the 19th century as the industrial revolution triggered dramatic changes in the national culture and changed the way of life for most people. As young people moved away from home to work in factories and mills, they left their cultural enclaves and much of the folk myths and stories began to vanish without a trace. Alarmed at this Anthropologists began the work of attempting to write down these previously unwritten myths and stories. In so doing, Anthropologists coined the word **'folklore'** – since these had been traditional oral traditions passed down from generation to generation.

7.2 What is a "myth"?

The word **myth** is derived from the Greek word: *mythos* , meaning speech or story. A myth is a *sacred story* that reflects and reinforces a community's worldview. Myths explain the fundamentals of human existence, explain where everything we know comes from, why we are here, where we are going, and even our existential purpose. It's important to understand that when the term "myth" is used, it is not to imply that the narrative is false, but rather to indicate that the narrative is sacred.

Myths provide the rationale for religious beliefs and practices and sets cultural standards for appropriate behavior. Myths often reflect a society's values, from the concepts of gender (are women considered wise or foolish in a story? Are men considered brave or weak?). These values are the ideals that people should strive to emulate.

Traditional myths, as long as they are believed, are accepted and perpetuated in a culture and then expressed as part of a people's traditional worldview. They also sanction certain attitudes and behaviors. They are a product of creative imagination and works of art, as well as potentially religious or ideological statements.

Malinowski wrote the following about myths,

> "Myth fulfills…an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of [humanity]. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force. "

What Malinowski is saying is that we turn to our sacred stories as a moral compass for behavior. We reflect on the variety of stories that we tell to help shape our understanding of good behavior and bad behavior. Please note that not all myths are religious. There are a variety of sacred, cultural stories that we tell. For example, we like to say that George Washington chopped down his father's cherry tree but that he was such an honest young man that he immediately confessed to his crime. It's unlikely that this actually happened, but we tell the story because we like to steep our nation's founding in the inherent value of genuine honesty.

Anthropologists like to study myths because they reveal a great deal about a culture. Myths provide insight into:

- Cultural practices
- Values and ethical codes
- Hierarchy of humans and animals
- Humanity's relationship with the Gods
- Relationship between humans and nature

7.3 The Power of Story-Telling

American Anthropologist **Keith Basso** specifically examined a particular style of myth called
"Placemaking" whereby the story-telling connects their cultural stories to a physical location that can be visited. Basso explained,

"Place-making involves multiple acts of remembering and imagining which inform each other in complex ways" (Basso 2010, 5).

Let's pause for a moment here to recognize the universality of Basso's claim. Human memory is not perfect. If you were asked to recall exactly what happened to you yesterday, you would likely be able to recall about 50% of what happened in your day. If you were asked to recall what happened to you 2 weeks ago, maybe you could only recall about 20% of the day. If you were asked to recall what happened to you five years ago, you would likely be able to recall less than 1% of your day with any kind of accuracy. Recall the last time that you had an argument with a loved one; it's likely that you both recalled the conflict differently. So, what happens when the human mind cannot remember what "actually happened"? We fill in the gaps of our memory with imagination. Perhaps we remember ourselves as better than we actually were, and we remember our enemies as worse than they actually were.

Some research shows that couples in relationships tend to share similar memories but that, when they break up or divorce, they start to remember the same stories differently. So, in lieu of perfect memory we often defer to those around us to help us remember what has happened.

Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot similarly commented on human story-telling in the following way,

"Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus, they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are abased could be proved correct" (Trouillot 1995, 6).

What Trouillot is saying is that we are not fictional characters who are living a life that is written by a singular author. Life does not have an inherent plot structure; the traditional plot structure that we use for storytelling was constructed by the human mind. Rather, we are all imagining our life story as if it is following a plot structure that does not inherently exist. For example: you are certainly the protagonist in your story although you are certainly the antagonist and at least one person's story. We often tell ourselves things like, "If that person hadn't broken my heart, I never would have met this better person, or I never would have had this new job." We make sense of misfortune, and confusing events by assigning a traditional plot structure and logic to our imagined life.

7.4 Coyote

Among Native Americans, Coyote is a central figure of creation, sometimes seen as both creator and trickster, both malevolent and good. As a shape-shifter, Coyote, like man, is both foolish and wise and humans learn from his actions. Flathead elder Joe Cullooyah says, "Everything you need to know about life is in the coyote stories – if you just listen carefully."



Coyote by Pat Gaines, Flickr 2010

The Salish-speaking people of Spokane, Washington have many coyote stories. Below is the story of Beaver Steals Fire, as told by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

> "A long time ago, the only animals who had fire lived in the sky. The earth animals wanted fire to keep warm, and decided that whoever sang the best song would be the leader into the sky to steal fire. Beaver and the animals tried to sing, but they were not satisfied. Then they heard Coyote sing and all the animals began to dance and named Coyote the leader.

"Wren, Coyote's friend, shot arrows into the sky world, creating a ladder. Wren climbed up the ladder and dropped a rope for the animals to climb up. Curlew, the guardian of fire, was at the river watching his fish traps and the animals followed him back to his camp, where the fire was kept.

"Beaver pretended he was dead, floating in the river, and Curlew grabbed him and wanted to skin him and dry his hide. Suddenly, Eagle landed on Curlew's house and he ran outside to catch him. That is when Beaver stole the fire. Beaver took the fire and swam down the river, climbed back down the rope. That is how the animals brought fire to us." (Southwick)

According to the Salish and Kootenai tribes, they explain that "Coyote and other animal-people taught the Salish about spirituality, subsistence, and social organization. These teachings were centered on a relationship with the land and all living creatures. There was no concept of land ownership; it was the land, water, and sun that owned the people" (S&K Technologies).

Embedded in the Salish oral traditions are references to the 'long bitter cold' which is a reference to the last Ice Age. Archaeologists have documented sites within the Salish aboriginal territory that correlate to their traditional stories and therefore reflect a continuous tribal occupancy reaching back to the time of the last Ice Age. For people without a writing system, oral tradition becomes a fundamental way of cultural transmission that provides both practical information and cultural continuity.

7.8 Placemaking Myths

Myths among some Apache groups are a unique type of storytelling that we call, "**placemaking.**" The Apache are a Native American group in the Southwest United States and, since the Apache people have lived in this part of the world for a long time, their origin stories, sacred myths, and histories literally happened in the land that surrounds them.This is unlike those Americans who believe in Biblical stories because the majority of Christianity happened in the Middle East. If you are a Christian, imagine how it would feel to be able to look outside your kitchen window and literally see the entrance to the Garden of Eden. Every time

you saw this place you would remember the important Christian themes that are taught through that story: ideas about original sin, women's role in humanity's downfall, the desire to ultimately return to paradise. If you saw this place every single day, it's possible that the story surrounding it would have even greater power in your life.

Many of the Apache stories literally happened in the physical environment within which they live today. The result is that they can tell sacred stories in times of crisis *and* they can look around their physical environment to remember their cultural values.

Placemaking stories:

- Recall history
- Build community
- Explore ethical questions
- Recall the Earth's original and ever-changing appearance
- Remind the listeners that change is inevitable

7.6 "Water Lies With Mud In Open Container"

Something that stands out in Ketih Basso's research is the way that he amplifies the voices of the community that he is studying. Rather than exclusively summarizing their beliefs or stories, he records the stories verbatim for the reader to experience first-hand.Here is the placemaing story titled, "Water Lies With Mud In Open Container" directly from Basso's book. Please take notes on the themes.

"They came to this country long ago, our ancestors did. They hadn't seen it before, they knew nothing about it. Everything was unfamiliar to them.

They were very poor, they had a few possessions and surviving was difficult for them. They were looking for a good place to settle, a safe place without enemies. They were searching. They were traveling all over, stop here and there, noticing everything, looking at the land. They knew nothing about it and didn't know what they would find.

None of these places had names then, none of them did, and as the people went about they thought about this. "How shall we speak about this land? "They said. "How shall we speak about where we have been and where we want to go? "

Now they are coming! They are walking upstream from down below now they are arriving here, looking all about them, noticing everything about this place. It looked to them as it looks to us now. We know that from its name – it's name gives a picture of it, just as it was a long time ago.

Now they are happy, "this looks like a good place, "they are saying to each other. Now they are noticing the plants that live around here. "Some of these plants are unknown to us. Maybe they are good for something. Maybe they are useful as medicines. "Now they are saying, "this is a good place for hunting. Deer and turkey come here to eat and drink. We can wait for them here, hidden close by. "They are saying that they are noticing everything and talking about it together. They like what they see about this place. They are excited!

Now their leader is thinking, "this place may help us survive. If we settle in this country we must be able to speak about this place and remember it clearly and well. We must give it a name."

So they named it "Water Lies With Mud In Open Container. They made a picture of it with words. Now they could speak about it and remember it clearly in a well. Now they had a picture they could carry in their minds. You can see for yourself. It looks like its name."

Placemaking stories are told in the present tense rather than the past tense. This is a unique element of placemaking stories and it creates a feeling of permanence when one reads, hears, or tells the stories. By telling the story in the present tense while literally standing upon the land where the event is believed to have happened, we feel like the lessons remain continuously relevant to modern lives.

This story reflects the idea that the ancestors are hugely important to the Apache. The belief that the ancestors are the ones who discovered fertile land, settled, and created a society for future generations. This community greatly values ancestors and elders and the story reinforces that value system.

Another common theme in place making stories emphasizes that the Earth provides. Although the Earth is always changing, the story reminds us that this land was fertile, full of water and animals, and that the landscape is essential part of this community's survival.

7.7 Native American Creation Myths

Many Native American peoples share a belief that they emerged from the Earth. The Hopi, the westernmost group of Pueblo Indians, is one of these peoples. The Hopi origin story has it that Hopis used to live beneath the earth. When it came time to emerge into the world, Hopi met Maasaw, Caretaker and Creator of the Earth, and promised him they would help take care of the world as a trade-off for staying. The sacred story of Hopi origins includes a covenant that Hopi peoples will be stewards of the earth. After making this promise, Pueblo Indians began a sacred quest, under Maasaw's order, to find "center spaces" and settle, and populations marked their settlements with spiral insignia as they found them. This is in direct contrast to the Judeo-Christian creation myth (see below), in which mankind is given "dominion" over the earth and its lifeforms. Here we see humanity in control of nature instead of man living in balance with nature. If, as anthropologists, we are to examine these particular myths, one might look at these details and conclude that these groups of people recognize a kinship among all living things. They are given their role or purpose as caretaker of the world. They see their 'creator' as a being that is part of the natural world – not a being that is in a human form. Therefore, they do not see 'god' in themselves, but that humans are dwarfed by nature – nature being more powerful than humans. We are here to serve and be caretakers, not to dominate or control.

The idea of closeness among all living things led the Hopi and the Salish to show special respect to the animals they hunted in order to sustain their own lives. In addition, the corn cultivated by the Hopi is seen as a sacred element in their culture – given to them as a gift.

7.8 Judeo-Christian Creation Myth

Reflect on the Hopi creation myth and compare it to the familiar Judeo-Christian creation myth of Adam and Eve. God (the creator) creates man (in His own image). Therefore, man sees God as he sees himself (as a man). Women are created as helpers to Man. Man is assigned dominion and controller of nature. Woman (Eve) is foolish and listens to nature (i.e., the serpent). Then humans are punished and set to toil the earth. Work is seen as a punishment to man. What values do you see that differ between Native American creation myths and Judeo-Christian creation myths?

As discussed above, emergence is one common theme in creation myths. For example, the ancient Egyptians believed that the world was at first simply dark chaos. Then, the "Island of Creation" emerged from the primordial waters and began creating life and gods (David 115). Other themes of creation myths include birth, hold beings that create things, and the idea of darkness turning into light or chaos turning into order (Stein and Stein 2017, 29-55).

7.9 Control Through Story-Telling

Anthropologist Keith Basso lived for a long time among the Apache of Cibecue, Arizona. During his time living with this community, he mapped 296 important cultural locations and worked to record information about their importance. Specifically, Basso discussed the way that this community connected storytelling to the land and to behavior. This particular community uses their culturally specific stories to help reinforce behavioral norms from generation to generation (Basso 2010).Basso describes storytelling in the following way,"For what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of society and inhabitants of the Earth, and while the two activities may be separable in principle, they are deeply joined in practice (Basso 7)."

Here, Basso is explaining that our very logic is largely connected to our physical environments.

Comparatively, British Anthropologist **Mary Douglas** argued that human beings strive to control our environments and physical spaces in order to create a sense of the world that we prefer. So we, on the one hand are deeply influenced by our physical spaces and we also strive to reflect our cultural values upon our physical spaces. This is what Basso studied among the Apache.

Before we begin discussing Keith Basso's work, We should pause and take a moment to highlight the microscopic sampling that he examined. Please note that the words that we now use to refer to native American groups do not necessarily reflect the way the native American groups identified themselves historically. The word Apache is a broad brush used to refer to a group of people who share the similar Athabascan language. All people who identify as Apache are not the same, they are a diverse group like any other. Keith Basso specifically studied one group of Apache people who live in Cibecue, Arizona.

7.10 Wisdom Through Story-Telling

During his fieldwork, Basso had many informants. He conducted both formal interviews and informal interviews. One of his primary informants was an older woman named Ruth who inspired the title of his book, "Wisdom Sits In Places." Ask yourself how you define "wisdom" and consider that no two people define wisdom in the exact same way:

- Some believe that wisdom can be learned while others believe that wisdom is something that you are born with
- Some believe that wisdom only comes from life experience while others believe that wisdom can be gained through academia and/or reading
- Some believe that wisdom comes through age while others believe that children are, actually, the wisest of us all

Basso's informant, Ruth, defined wisdom as akin to water and that placemaking stories are like wells of wisdom that you can draw from whenever you need it. According to Ruth, the well of wisdom comes from a lifetime of knowledge and training, is passed on from generation to generation, is attached to the physical space (or, literally, sits in places as the book title references), and strengthens the community by leading to safety and prosperity.

In response to Ruth's definition, Basso writes that he knows he'll never be able to fully understand Ruth's explanation of the intricacies of her storytelling purely because he wasn't raised in this culture's specific logic. This is one of Basso's greatest strengths in his ethnography.

Basso:

- Willingly admits what he doesn't understand about the culture he is studying
- Notes that he will never be able to full grasp the people's cultural **idioms**
- Does not assume that his idea of "common sense" will be applied by everyone; he knows that common sense is culturally specific

Good anthropologists recognize the limitations of their own culturally specific logic and make room for informants and other anthropologists to make corrections. If you don't fully understand the culture that you are studying then you should recognize that and know that you are, actually, on the right track.

Exercise 7A

Did you know that some religious texts were altered throughout history to maintain colonial power? Listen to NPR's story titled, " Slave Bible From The 1800s Omitted Key Passages That Could Incite Rebellion " to learn more.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What types of content were removed from this Bible? Which portions were left in? What does this tell you about the way that religious worldview was used to shape behavior in the colonies?
2. Have you seen something like this in your own life? How do people include or exclude religious excerpts in order to meet a political agenda today?

7.11 Myths In the Modern World

Bronislaw Malinowski wrote,"… we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly material, partly human, and partly spiritual, by which [hu]man[ity] is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems…" (Malinowski 1944, 36)

Many myths and legends involve taking journeys. We call this the "**Hero Myth"** or "Hero's Journey". It involves a regular person leaving home, encountering something or someone who unlocks or teaches them a secret power, that "hero" fighting and triumphing over evil, and then returning home to be welcomed as the hero. Think of some of these and compare and contrast the central ideas with the Hopi Origin story. (Some examples are the legends from Joseph Campbell's "The Hero of a Thousand Faces", the Star Wars films, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, etc.)

As mentioned before, traditional myths, as long as they are believed, are accepted and perpetuated in a culture and then expressed a part of a peoples' traditional worldview. But what if you don't believe the myth to be factual? What if you don't believe that a boy named Luke Skywalker who came from a planet called Tatooine really grew up to be a Jedi Knight to fight with the resistance, only to realize that his archenemy was really his father? What happens if you don't believe that any of that *really happened*? Is it still a myth? Can it really still influence a culture? Are we still being enculturated by the stories that permeate our culture?

7.12 Myths and Jediism

In 2012, The Telegraph reported that "172,632 people in England and Wales identify themselves as Jedi Knights making it the most popular faith in the 'Other Religions' category on the Census and the
seventh most popular faith overall."In fact, **Jediism** is now considered a new alternative religion with basic tenets. The Jedi of the Temple of the Jedi Order follows the "16 teachings" based on the presentation of the fictional Jedi from the films, such as "Jedi are

mindful of the negative emotions which lead to the Dark Side" and "Jedi are guardians of peace and justice". Adherents also follow "21 maxims One might argue that our modern fandom can be classified into other verbal art categories such as legends and tales (recognized as fiction for entertainment but having a moral or practical lesson). However, it may be argued that in Western society, with the rise of secularism, there is a gravitation toward the ideology of superheroes who take the place of traditional religious icons.While *most* fans understand that Star Wars, the Hunger Games and Marvel Superheroes were created for entertainment, there is an intense sociological need in Western society for moral touchstones. Figures that defy the odds, uphold morality, teach valuable lessons, and those that fight evil. As audiences, people in Western society do *believe in* what is being taught by the characters being portrayed on film. Films like those mentioned above spread ideas that value ideas like equality, independence, concepts of justice, bravery and idealism. Audiences believe in the characters because they believe in the ideas perpetuated on film. These films and stories then enculturate the next generation into believing in those same values. These are the foundation of common cultural values in Western society. These values then become the values that people in the U.S. believe they are willing to fight for.In many respects, the myths stated above become a sort of pseudo-sacred narrative. Go to any fandom site and you will see these stories and films dissected with religious fervor intense devotion to character and theme. There is an intense devotion to these larger themes that have replaced the religious themes of earlier generations.The characteristics of these types of myths are that the unknown is simplified and explained in terms of the known. The analysis of myths is an arduous one – and a profession all of its own! Myth-making and the perpetuation of myth are extremely significant parts of the human condition. Studying myths of a culture can give valuable clues to the way people perceive and think about their world.

The most powerful people control the storytelling in any given society, and the "winners" of history write the history books. These are principles that you may already understand, but Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that writing history is actually a form of making history.Haitian anthropologist **Michel-Rolph Trouillot** reminds readers of the important intersection between history and storytelling: only the most powerful get to write the history stories. As we already know, human life does not actually follow the structured and clear plot formulas that we assign to it, and, there is no one, unified understanding of any given event. So, who decides how we remember our history? In Trouillot's view, the historical erasure of the experiences of less powerful groups serves the function of shaping our global culture and global mentality in favor of the most powerful (Trouillot 1995).

Trouillot similarly argues that human beings can tell stories in a way that helps achieve our own political or cultural goals. Trouillot refers to the Battle of the Alamo as an example. As you may already know, from 1835-1836 colonists living in Texas rebelled simultaneously from the United States and from Mexico in an attempt to establish itself as its own country (the Republic of Texas). The Battle of the Alamo took place in February 1836 whereby a group of Texans tried to occupy the Alamo mission, but they were instead slaughtered by a Mexican general who was on a campaign to take the Mexican land back. This event was a defeat for the colonizers, but the story was used to recruit massive numbers of colonists into the army by using the phrase "Remember the Alamo!" This slogan was used as a powerful rallying cry that motivated more people to fight and, ultimately, fueled the defeat of Mexico in favor of the Republic of Texas (Trouillot 1995). This idea and the emotions it elicits are at the heart of Texan identity and help demonstrate the unique Texan view that Texas is a unique "nation" of its own that values independence above all else.

Trouillot's piece works through a variety of historical stories that are central to our national and global identities in order to illustrate how historical story-telling shapes our understanding of the world. In fact, Trouillot argues that writing history is, itself, a form of *making* history. In other words, the way that we recall our collective pasts can directly shape our belief systems in the present and future choices.

7.14 Creation Myths in Ancient Egypt

Creation myths are central to cultures and religions because they explain the origin of the universe and how living things came to be. They also give the culture its worldview and help explain and give order and meaning to reality. There are several creation myths in ancient Egyptian cultures, but the three main myth established in the Old Kingdom (2575-2150 BCE) all centered around an island (or primordial mound) that emerged from the waters. At this point, called the "First Occurance," light and land were created and the first god, in bird form, landed on the island. From here there are several different myths, depending on the geographic location of the peoples (David 1998, 115-117).

Heliopolis



Heliopolis (Sun City), Baalbek, Lebanon by -Reji, Flickr 2009

This myth says that out of darkness and endless water (represented by the divine entity of Nun) emerged a mound of fertile land. This represents order emerging out of chaos, or light emerging out of the dark. The solar god Atum, known as the "All" and also as Re-Atum, appeared on the mound and spit out other deities called Shu (air), Tefnut (moisture), a female-male pair that could procreate and give rise to Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). Finally, Geb and Nut procreated to create Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys, which made the Ennead or "group of nine" gods. This myth is found in the Pyramid texts, one of the greatest sources of knowledge for ancient Egypt (Oakes & Gahlin 2015, 300-301).

Memphis

Re-Atum had a rival called Ptah, who was the supreme creator god at Memphis. At this location, Ptah was self-engendered and outranked Re-Atum and was credited with creating the world, the gods, their religious centers, food, drink, and basically anything needed to create and sustain life. This was a localized myth that did not gain popularity elsewhere (David 1998, 115-117).

Hermopolitan

At the location of Hermopolis existed a cult center dedicated to the god Thoth, who is the god of wisdom. An ibis representing Thoth (or Thoth himself, in some accounts) placed an egg on the mound, which cracked and became the sun. Here there are eight main gods (known as the Ogdoad): Nin (primordial waters), Huh (eternity), Kuk (darkness), Amun (air) (all male and frog-headed) and the female serpent-headed goddesses Naunet, Hauhet, Kauket and Amaunet who created the world right after the First Occurrence. After these deities died, they took their place in the underworld and were responsible for making the Nile flow so that life could continue above (David 1998, 115-117; Oakes & Gahlin 2015, 300-301).

While there is much variation in creation myths in this ancient civilization, common themes include order from chaos, lightness from darkness, emergence of earth from primordial "nothingness," creator beings in the form of gods (who are both human and animal in form), and the attribution of characteristics to each god or goddess (e.g., what each is responsible for creating or maintaining). This gives explanation for how life arose and also which deities to worship and rely upon.

Osiris Myth

There is some debate as to whether Osiris was in fact a god, or just a very powerful king (which parallels the Christian versus non-Christian view of Jesus). Osiris was an actual human king, who is credited with bringing civilization to a very ancient Egypt.

Similar to the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, Osiris was murdered by his jealous brother Seth, who dismembered him and scattered his body parts throughout the land. Osiris' sister/wife, Isis, searched and gathered his body and then magically conceived a son with Osiris' body. This son was Horus.

Horus vowed vengeance on his murderous uncle through battle. Eventually the conflict was brought before a tribunal of gods, who ruled in Horus' favor. Osiris was resurrected and became king of the underworld, where he was responsible for judging the dead; Horus became king of the living, and Seth was branded the "Evil One" and was exiled (David 1998, 103-104).

This myth had a lasting effect on religion in Egypt. It provides the basis for mummification, with the belief that people (starting with royalty and then later spreading to everyone) could be resurrected after death and given eternal life. The possibility of obtaining eternal life would depend upon having lived a virtuous life, since after death a person would be judged by Maat, who would weigh their heart next to a feather (conducted by jackal-headed Anubis). If their heart was free of sin it would be lighter than a feather, granting them eternal life. If it was heavier, they would be fed to the crocodile/monster Ammit (David 1998, 103-104).

The similarities to later Christian mythology are apparent: the idea of a king becoming a god (Jesus); the slaying of one virtuous brother by a jealous one (Cain and Abel); the idea that the god suffered a painful death but also achieved resurrection and eternal afterlife (Jesus); the idea of resurrection being achievable by following that god (Christians following Jesus); and the idea of successfully entering an eternal resting place based on how a person lived their life, according to the god's teachings.

7.15 Armenian Origin Myth

Myth and symbols representing ethnic origin and territory of the community are used as foundations for the creation and preservation of national identity. These myths and symbols consist of notions that are considered fundamental truths in society. They include perceptions of a homeland, common lineage and ancestry, a sacred language, and national heroes. These symbols create the notion of a collective identity for the individuals within the community, which are then utilized by the state and intellectuals for the construction of national belonging (Smith 1991). Myths of a deep ethnic origin are vital for a resilient and profound sense of belonging to the nation. "The reasons for the durability and strength of national identities can be understood only by exploring the collective beliefs and sentiments about the 'sacred foundations' of the nation and by considering their relationship to the older beliefs, symbols, and rituals of traditional religions" (Smith 2004, 3 – 4). The Armenian genesis myth of "Hayk Nahapet"(Hayk the Patriarch), as told by fifth-century Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi, created a multifaceted sense of ethnic belonging and supported the construction and restructuring of Armenian society. The story reflects Bruce Lincoln's description of the four levels of social construction and cohesion through narrative. The primordial level of unity in the narrative is in the descent of Hayk from Noah, who was also the ancestor of Hayk's adversary Bel. According to the myth, the descendants of Noah, which included the human race and the giants, were engaged in intense conflict. This chaos allowed the Titan Bel to authenticate his power over the land and the people. When Hayk refused to submit to Bel, the Titan garnered his army against the hero. This marks what Lincoln (1989) considers to be the initial episode of rivalry. Hayk defeats Bel in battle and establishes his rule over the land of Ararat. According to Movses Khorenatsi, the hero and his descendants spread across the land of Hayk, establishing their definitive rule and naming Armenian provinces and landscapes after themselves. The historian states, "Now our country is called Hayk' after the name of our ancestor Hayk" (Khorenatsi 1978, 88).



Hayk Nahapet by Madlen Avetyan

The second episode of rivalry, common in myths, is represented by Hayk's descendant Aram's battle with the Medes and the Assyrians, which allowed him to expand the borders of Armenia. Khorenatsi describes Aram as industrious and patriotic, willing to die for his fatherland to protect its sovereignty against foreign rule. According to Khorenatsi the name of Armenia came to be known by foreigners from Aram's name.

The enduring social division of Armenians from their neighbors takes place with the death of Ara Geghetsik (Ara the Beautiful). Ara is Aram's son, whose rule over his father's lands occurs a few years before the death of Assyrian king Ninos. During his rule, Ninos's wife, queen Semiramis, becomes infatuated with Ara's beauty. . Upon her husband's death, Semiramis continuously proposes to Ara, who denies her advances. Semiramis becomes increasingly enraged by the rejection. Resentment eventually motivates Semiramis to command her army to Armenia, however, she carefully instructs her soldiers not to kill Ara with the hope that he will satisfy her desires. To her dismay, Ara dies in battle, Semiramis attempts to revive him through sorcery and magic but fails to achieve this task.

Armenian ethnologist **Aram Petrosyan** has argued that the story of the Armenian primordial ancestor closely parallels the Indo-European "basic myth", which involves the thunder god defeating his adversary, the serpent. Petrosyan argues that the site of the battle between Hayk and Bel, which is in the south of historic Armenia, located between the Taurus and Zagros mountains, is a derivative of the origin myth. Taurus, symbolizing the bull that is the zoomorphic symbol of the thunder god, broke Zagros's horns with his stroke, creating the mountains of Masius and Masis with the horns, and the Zab River and Lake Van with his blood. Additionally, the description of Hayk corresponds with the constellation of Orion, who was a giant hunter, also known as a "dog strangler." These features of the myths illustrate that Hayk was likely the chief god of the pagan Armenian pantheon. The ethnogonic creation myth of Hayk has cosmogonic character. Petrosyan (2002) states that cosmogenic creation myths arise at the dawn of time. They take place in the center of the cosmos that is represented by the site of a victory over the monster, who is characterized by the initial sacrifice. This framework is adapted for ethnogonic myths where the geographic landscape and the tribe become the celestial model, while the lands of foreign tribes that are unknown are populated by monsters. Hayk establishes his rule over the land of Ararat, which becomes the sacred land for his descendants and the Armenian people. He slays the Titan Bel, symbolizing the monster of the foreign land, establishing sovereignty for the people of Hayk.

Hayk Nahapet's story, as told by Khorenatsi, is the historicized version of the cosmogenic creation myth. Hayk, Aram and their descendants are the epicized figures of Armenian gods, representing Theogony; the geographic landscape features and settlements are named after Hayk and his descendants, representing cosmogony; Armenian ethnonyms stem from the central hero, Hayk, and his second incarnation, Aram, representing ethnogony; the descendants of Hayk are forbearers of aristocratic houses, representing dynastic saga; and finally, Hayk's family reflects the Armenian family pantheon and patriarchy, representing sociogony (Petrosyan 2002, 2009). In this myth, Hayk represents the beginning of time, with the divine line ending in the death of Ara Geghetsik, who represents the last divine patriarch. The death of Ara also represents what Mircea Eliade has referred to as the end of the sacred time and the origin of the profane era.

Bruce Lincoln argues that in times of social disorder, the lineages (in this case the ethnos) invoke the primordial ancestor through "allusions, gestures and narratives" (1989, 20). This process restructures society through sentiments of internal affinity and external estrangement. The story of Hayk and his descendants has been part of this process among Armenians for centuries. It has given a sense of alterity for the Armenian people, especially when faced with the threat of annihilation or assimilation into more powerful ruling cultures.

7.16 Haiti's Makandal and National Liberation

All nations hinge their modern identity and value systems upon origin stories and these origin stories focus on historical heroes. Americans, for example, tell the story of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and – due to his inherently honest nature – immediately confessing his sin to his father. This story reflects the American ideal that the US was built upon honesty and integrity. The people of Haiti have their own stories that serve the same function.One such story is the story of Makandal, and it is tied, directly, to both the origin of Haitian voodoo and to the Haitian Revolution. Makandal is believed to have been an African-born, enslaved man on the island who suffered brutality as a slave, researched the herbs and natural forces on the island and, ultimately concluded that "combining black and white religion together" would generate the greatest power.

Using symbolic anthropology, we can unveil national ideologies by examining the story of Makandal. Consider the following:

- Makandal was African born which reflects the people's strong connection to their African heritage.
- Makandal lost an arm during his time working on a plantation which reflects his empathy with the suffering of his fellow citizens and his resilience in the face of enormous brutality. Both of these are central Haitian values.
- It was believed that Makandal performed powerful magic that allowed him to turn himself into a mosquito. Mosquito-borne diseases played a role in defeating the French during the Haitian Revolution.

Anthropologists examine the stories that people tell in order to better understand their worldview, value systems, and sense of self. Here, we read the story of Makandal told by anthropologist Wade Davis,

> "It happened on a plantation near Limbé in the year 1740. At first even the man himself did not notice the iron rollers of the cane press flush crimson with his own blood. By the time the child's scream alerted the driver to slice the leather traces connecting the horse to the shaft of the mill, the arm was crushed to the shoulder and the blood mixed freely with the sweet sap of the cane. Pain was not new to the slave, and what he felt now was numbed by the rage of an intolerable impotence. His free hand flailed at the press and with all the force of a sinuous body pulled back reversing the rollers withdrawing fragments of his mangled arm. Delirium took him, leading him back on a hallucinatory passage to the land of his birth to the kingdoms of Fula and Mandingo, To the great cities of Guinea, the fortresses in vast markets that drew traders from an entire continent and beyond, the temples that made a mockery of the paltry buildings in which the French worshipped their God. He never noticed the rope tourniquet placed around his shoulder to stem the flow of blood, nor did he hear the call for the machete that would complete the crude work on the press. He felt only the beginnings of the sound, of a single syllable rising from the base of his blood-stained legs, recoiling through the hollow of his gut until what left his lips was no longer his. It was the rattle call of crystallized hatred, a cry of vengeance, not for himself, but for an entire people stolen from Africa and dragged in chains to the Americas to work on land stolen from the Indians.
>
> François Makandal should have died, but the Mandingue slave was no ordinary man. Even before the accident he was a leader among the slaves of the Northern District around Limbé. By day, they had watched him enjoy the cruelties of the overseers within difference, his blood shot eyes casting scorn at the whips of not a cord, or the stretched and dried penis of a bull. By night he had calmed the people with his eloquence, spinning tales of Guinea that had emboldened even the most spirited of men. When he spoke, people considered it an honor to sit by his side and as he slept the women vied for the chance to share his bed, for his dreams for revelations that allowed him and those by him to see into the future. But it was

> the fearless way he endured the accident in the mill that confirmed what the people had always suspected. Only the whites could fail to note that Makandal was immortal, an envoy of the gods who would never be vanquished.
>
> The accident freed Makandal to wander. No longer fit to work in the fields, he was made a herder and sent out each day break to drive the cattle into their mountain pastures. No one knew what he did during the long hours away from the plantation. Some said he discovered the magic and plants, foraging for leaves that mimicked the herbs he had known in Africa. Others said he sought out the old masters who dwelled in caves, whose footsteps caused the earth to tremble. Only Makandal in his wanderings was not alone, for the mountains around Limbé we're one of the refugees of the thousands of Africans who had fled the plantations, runaway slaves with a price on their heads known to the French as maroons." (Davis 189-190)

Makandal's maroon community grew with more and more influence. He led a campaign that poisoned thousands of white slave owners until he was allegedly captured and executed. However, no one in the colony witnessed his execution and many believed that he was never actually killed (the poisoning continued long after) (Davis). Makandal's power, influence, and impact is attributed to his spiritual inventions. It's believed that he was the first to fuse together ideas of West African Spirit Worship, Islam, Christianity, Occultism, and the plants and herbs the Taíno's native land into a new and more powerful religion; the only religion that could move people to begin the world's first, and most effective slave rebellion (Mintz 2010, 91).

7.17 Folktales

Folktales are stories considered to be fictional. They tend to exist outside of time and space and usually begin by indicating this feature. Many stories begin with, "There once was…" or "A long time ago…" An important feature of folktales is that they contain moral lessons but are presented as entertainment for the reader. The characters are purposefully created to warn of dangers for the hero. Many of these characters tend to be anthropomorphic animals, illustrating the supernatural elements of folktales even though the stories are not sacred. Folktales exist in multiple versions and no text is the correct one. However, they all tend to have very specific features present in most versions. One important feature is the poorly developed two-dimensional characters that represent opposites. In the story of *Red Riding Hood* these characters are Little Red Riding Hood, representing innocence, goodness and kindness, who is contrasted with the big bad wolf, representing evil, manipulation and cunningness.

Another important feature in folktales is the simple and repetitive actions within the storyline. Often times in Indo-European folktales these actions tend to occur in threes. This is especially the case in American folklore, as observed by folklorist Alan Dundes (Dundees 1980). We can see this occurring in some of our well-known folklore such as *The Three Little Pigs* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears.* In both these stories there is simple repetitive action that occurs three times. In *The Three Little Pigs* the wolf huffs and puffs and destroys the first house made of straw, then huffs and puffs and destroys the house made of sticks, then huffs and puffs but fails to destroy the house built from bricks. In *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* Goldilocks begins by tasting the food from the first and largest bowl, then moves on to the medium bowl and finally the smallest bowl. The story continues with her trying three different-sized chairs and beds, demonstrating the presence of the three repetitive actions.

The narratives of folktales reflect the worldview of various real-life relationships. One only needs to look at Disney stories to observe this process. The stories in Disney are designed to construct gender and gender roles. Of course, the construction of gender norms has changed in Disney over time and a comparison of the older stories with the more recent ones demonstrates the significant differences. Older Disney stories tend to have princesses who are docile, abused, persecuted, patient, obedient and quiet. Newer Disney princesses are often brave, at times rebellious, and independent. This reflects the shift in American culture's worldview surrounding gender norms.

7.18 Conclusions on Myth

It is hypothesized that humans employ myths (and other verbal arts) as an approach to confront the specific problems that face us. Native Americans refer to myths and stories as 'medicine' – intended to teach us, comfort us, console us, and guide us. How else can we explain the human need to re-read a sacred text on a weekly basis, or watch the Star Wars marathon for the millionth time?

Myths serve to enculturate us and they serve a basic tenet of instructing us on the code of conduct that would enable our survival. They provide a foundation for our worldview and remind us of our purpose.

The hero myth is such a common theme in the most beloved books and movies of our society because it also serves the function to provide hope to all us everyday people. In reality, we do not have superpowers or magic, but if an ordinary person can overcome obstacles and become the hero of the story, then maybe we can overcome the hurdles in our lives and become the heroes of our own stories.

Exercise 7B: Journal Reflection

Write down a sacred story that you were told as a child. What values are reflected in this story? How did this story shape your worldview? Do you tell this story to children now? Why or why not?

Exercise 7C: Study Guide

*Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms **in your own words**:*

- Art
- Folklore
- Myth
- Hero Myth
- Placemaking
- Jediism
- Wisdom
- Idioms

Briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Keith Basso
- Mary Douglas
- Michel-Rolph Trouillot
- Armen Petrosyan

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8: Religion and Syncretism



Receiving force from the fire by Juna Manuel Aguilar. Available for use through Unsplash license.

Chapter 8 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Define and describe examples of "syncretism," "domination," "acculturation" and "assimilation."
- Explain the cultural, religious, and historical influences that fused together to create modern Voodoo.
- Explain the cultural, religious, and historical influences that fused together to create the modern Rastafarian movement.
- Explain the cultural, religious, and historical that fused together to create the Celtic cross.

8.1 Syncretism

When cultural trends and traditions spread or change, they do so within the context of particular power dynamics, and anthropologists strive to understand how these power dynamics impact the evolution, maintenance, or loss of cultural beliefs. Different groups of people bring their own cultural beliefs and practices into an inter-cultural interaction, and the culture of more powerful groups is usually the culture that survives the interaction. The negotiation of power and culture falls upon a spectrum of outcomes that anthropologists examine and, using four different terms to refer to different scenarios, we can more easily discuss how culture and power influence each other.

We use the term "syncretism" to refer to an occasion where more than one cultural force fuses together to create something new that still includes elements from the old cultural forces. Syncretism falls on the middle of the spectrum of power negotiation because both cultural forces maintain some power and cultural identity in the interaction. Then, moving out from each side of the spectrum, one of the groups will lose more and more ability to maintain their cultural identity in the face of the more powerful group's influence.

We can look at Halloween as an example of syncretism. In the United States, people celebrate Halloween at the end of October because it is based loosely on the Christian holiday (All Saints Day/All Souls Day) that celebrates souls that have passed on to the afterlife. Many of the actual traditions come from various Pagan influences. And, at the same time, the holiday is largely defined by the American companies that seek to sell costumes, decorations, and candy.This holiday fuses together multiple cultural influences that then create something unique while still representing the diverse cultural forces that are at play.

On the far other end of the spectrum is "domination." We use the term domination to refer to an occasion where one group's culture is entirely wiped out in the face of a more powerful cultural group. For example, throughout the colonization of North America, the world witnessed rapid and complete loss of many Native American cultures that were systematically wiped out entirely. As a consequence of domination, some of Franz Boas' and A.L. Kroeber's work focused on the rapid collection of artifacts, language recordings, and notes about religious and cultural rituals of some of these Native American communities. Their hope was to preserve some knowledge of these people to survive their tragic elimination from the planet. This type of work is called "salvage anthropology" or "salvage ethnography."

Some salvage anthropology was a success. Today, the handful of fluent Passamaquoddy-speakers of Maine are transcribing the recordings of their native language taken by anthropologist Walter Jesse Fewkes in 1890. The youngest living speaker of the language and Passamaquoddy community leader, Dwayne Tomah explained in a 2019 interview that they are using the recordings to, "be able to revitalize our language and bring it back to life again" (Feinberg 2019).

Along both directions of the spectrum, and with varying degrees of power struggles, are "acculturation" and "assimilation." We use the term assimilation to refer to the event of a less powerful community being forced, through coercion, to entirely lose their cultural identity in the face of a more powerful cultural force. When people are pressured to assimilate, they are typically expected to lose their accent, their native language, their native religion, to cease celebrating their holidays entirely, etc. Although similar to domination, assimilation differs from domination because assimilated people do still exist (but they have undergone intense transformation). Dominated cultures are, tragically, completely lost. A concept that lies between syncretism and assimilation is acculturation. Whereas syncretism equally fuses together multiple influences so that each influence can be adapted to meet ever-changing cultural needs, acculturation reflects more of a power imbalance where the less powerful community quickly integrates the more powerful community's cultural forms without a great deal of context. Research on acculturation typically focuses on the myriad of ways that non-European cultures were forced to quickly adopt European cultural traditions in the face of colonization. European-style dress, marriage traditions, and currency are examples of rapid cultural adoption faced by non-European peoples during early colonial processes.

The reason why we situate syncretism in the center of the spectrum and not on one end as an extreme is because all cultural exchanges happen in both directions, with both parties containing the potential to influence the other. As we move forward through our examination of the development of Haitian Voodoo, we will see examples of syncretism, acculturation, assimilation, and domination, so please keep these terms in mind.

Need help understanding these concepts? Read "Hypothetical Power Scenarios" for more clarification.

Exercise 8A

Salvage Anthropologists worked to collect cultural recordings and materials from communities that are disappearing from the planet. Listen to NPR's, "Historic Recordings Revitalize Language For Passamaquoddy Tribal Members." This story reflects an occasion where salvage anthropology assisted in the preservation of a Native American language.

Then see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How many fluent speakers exist of the Passamaquoddy language? What does this tell you about the tribe's colonial history?
2. How are these recordings being used now?

8.2 A Close Examination of Syncretism: Haitian Voodoo

The following pages will work through the syncretism of multiple cultural factors that resulted in Haitian Voodoo as we know it today. To begin, we'll discuss the history of Haiti to better understand the myriad of cultural influences and events that have shaped the nation's identity. Then, we'll discuss the main characteristics of Haitian Voodoo as it is practiced today to offer students an opportunity to apply anthropological tools.

To begin, let's define "Voodoo." The word " **Voodoo** " (or, "Voodoo") means "spirit" and a **vodouisant** is a person who "serves the spirits" (Desmangles 1992). While predominantly practiced in Haiti, Voodoo is also commonly practiced in other parts of the

world.

8.3 A Brief Background on Haiti

Haiti is a country in the Caribbean. You can reach Haiti in about 40 minutes after taking off in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Haiti is located on the Western half of the island of Hispaniola and is next to the Dominican Republic. Haiti's history is incredibly fascinating, and the culture is rich with community strength, resilience, music, spirituality, and great dignity.

While there is much to know about Haiti, it is important to note that Haiti's existence is the result of a slave rebellion. During the colonial era, Haiti was a highly profitable sugar cane producing colony that enslaved human beings in order to turn a high profit. In the face of extreme brutality, the enslaved people revolted, killed the slave owners, and directly established a country for themselves. This inspiring story is central to their national identity and to the evolution of the local culture.



A view of Delmas 32, a neighborhood in Haiti which many residence are beneficiaries of the PRODEPUR- Habitat project by World Bank Photo Collection, Flickr 2012

Currently, Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas. As a result, many countries around the world are interested in becoming involved in Haiti's affairs. The following will examine Haiti's international relations, religious diversity, economic status, and colonial legacy in order to paint a complete picture of the meaning behind Haiti Voodoo. Through the examination of history and international power relations, we can better practice cultural relativism and we can achieve an intimate knowledge of a religion that is mystifying to the world at large.

8.4 History Shapes Culture

What comes to mind when you think of Voodoo? While we typically discourage our students from focusing on stereotypes, in this particular case, they are interesting and appropriate to examine. The word "Voodoo" conjures up images of skulls, blood, animal sacrifice, dark magic, and all of these are, actually, quite reasonable representations of the religion. It is true that Haitian Voodoo incorporates animal sacrifices, utilizes human skulls in some rituals, and – most importantly – it's true that Haitian Voodoo is feared by most. As Haitian community leader, Willio Deseme, explains,

> "Most people in Haiti fear Voodoo, but most Haitians believe in it. Most Haitians know that Voodoo is not something to mess around – it's not a game and it's dangerous."

It admittedly sounds contradictory to state that Voodoo is central to Haitian culture while also being feared by the majority of people. While many people outside of Haiti fear Voodoo in a frightened or confused way, the Hatian people fear the power of Voodoo out of respect. As Willio further explains, "Haitian people know that in Voodoo there are two faces: a good and a bad. It depends on how you use it and which Spirit you invoke."

It is actually quite easy for Americans to understand how Haitians perceive Voodoo because most Americans understand Voodoo in a similar fashion. Most Americans and most Haitians believe that Voodoo contains some kind of formidable power in which one should not trifle. If you ask the average American to participate in a Voodoo ritual, they will look at you in horror, and refuse (Haitian people express a similar horror, but it is based on your utter lack of understanding inherent in your request).

Consider the following example from Amanda Zunner-Keating,

> "I spent my years in Haiti working with a dozen local organizations including a handful of orphanages. Most orphanages are religiously affiliated and three that I worked with were strictly Protestant. One, the most welcoming and generous, was both Protestant *and* Voodoo. Although this orphanage had the best facilities and supplies, the children from the three strictly Protestant orphanages refused to attend events at the orphanage that embraced both Protestantism and Voodoo. They were not prejudicial to the children or adults at the organization, but they were afraid to step foot on the premises for fear of engaging with spirits that they did not intend to engage with."

The popular adage goes that "70% of Haitians are Protestant, 30% are Catholic, and 100% are Voodoo." This is an important point to highlight. Haiti is a vehemently Christian country: buses and buildings have Bible quotes painted across them and many attend church multiple times each week. It's not difficult to find two churches on each side of a street that compete with each other to hold the loudest – and earliest – church services each weekday. Haiti firmly loves the Bible and worships Christ; but most also believe that spirits surround their everyday lives. These two religions are not mutually exclusive because Voodoo arose from Christianity and each developed within the context of Haiti's self-liberation from colonial powers.

Haiti's history is an incredible story of resilience. The island has witnessed generations of brutality, genocide, and various abuses and yet the people continue to live on with strength and fervor. Haitian Voodoo contains fear,and some violence, not because the people are inherently fearful or violent but, rather, because they have endured and survived generations upon generations of both. This spirituality reflects the world that its adherents have survived.

Cultural anthropologists study religion without any interest in the "truth" or falsity behind the followers' religious beliefs. Instead, we study religion because the endless diversity of ways that spiritual beliefs present themselves are an indicator of what the people's lived experience is, and has been. Structures, traditions, and the moral fabric of our religions directly reflect who we are, and what we have gone through, as people. Haitian Voodoo does include violence and fear, and it does not include any guarantee of fairness or justice. Knowing this, we should not conclude that the hearts of this religion's followers are, themselves, inherently more fearful or violent. But, rather, we must understand that the elements of this religion reflect the generations of brutality that people living on this island have experienced since the 1400's.

When we hear the words, "In 1492…" our brains quickly complete the phrase, "…Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Please pause and remind yourself that Christopher Columbus never reached the shores of the United States. Why, then, is he integral to the US's cultural identity?

Any student educated in the American school system can quickly name the three ships sailed by Columbus: the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa María. In 1492, on Christmas Eve, the Santa María crashed off of the Northern coast of the island that we now call Haiti (Girard 2010, 18). As Columbus and his men offloaded toward land, they were approached by the native **Taíno** people, who were wearing gold jewelry (Rouse 1992, 143). Columbus and his men were deeply interested in stealing gold for the Spanish Crown, and subsequently left a group of Spaniards on the island to establish a settlement (Ibid). Using the remains of the destroyed Santa María, the small group proceeded to build a settlement named Fort Navidad (in honor of the date of the crash). Columbus left the island with plans to return. At some point, the Taíno people became privy to the European's intention to rob their lands of natural resources and promptly killed all of the Spanish settlers. They are described by Irving Rouse as, "adventurers who caused their own demise."

Only moments into the history of the island, we are seeing an attempt to exploit and brutalize a native people and the native people's violent resistance. This is the first event that shaped the tone of this island's interaction with European and other global powers.

The Taíno were a native, Arawak people of the Caribbean who numbered around half-a-million (Girard 19). The Taíno called the island, "Hayiti" which is where we get the creole name "Ayiti" today. But, Columbus named the island "Hispaniola" in honor of the country which sponsored him. When Columbus and his men returned to the island, they enslaved the Taíno to mine the gold out of their land (Mintz 1985, 33). But the Taíno did not only face slavery, they faced brutality in all areas of their lives.

While colonialism was widely practiced by the majority of the European powers, each European country had their own particular style of colonizing native peoples. The French, for example, were particularly interested in turning their colonized subjects into

"French" subjects by spreading their language, culture, and religion. The French colonial law afforded a few more dignities than some of the other colonial powers offered.

On the other hand, the British tended to view native peoples as objects to be utilized or to be overcome. Unlike the French who wanted to spread their culture, the British were known to focus on claiming land and resources to benefit the British crown.

The Spanish, however, were notoriously the most brutal in their colonization techniques. As "conquistadors" they sought to pillage the lands, rape, and eliminate the people in order to fully conquer the parts of the world that they were colonizing. This is why much of the Spanish-speaking world outside of Europe is genetically related to the Spanish in Spain. The Spanish brutalized the people they colonized, and this included the Taíno.

Historian Philippe Girard offers us two stories to illustrate how the Taíno suffered under Spanish colonization. He writes,

"Columbus and later Spanish colonists were not settlers in the traditional sense of the term. They did not intend to acquire land, build a log cabin, and become farmers. They were conquistadors: they were ambitious nobles and merchants who looked down on manual labor and dreamed of conquering a strange civilization, killing its leaders, enslaving its natives, and exploiting a quick windfall of gold and spices. Killing the Taíno leaders…they did: The tragic story of Anacaona Illustrates this well. Anacaona Was a Taíno Haitian princess whom the Spaniards asked to organize a big feast for Governor Nicholas Ovando. When she and the other [leaders] gathered for the festivities, Spanish soldiers set the meeting on fire and wiped out Hispaniola's leadership; Anacaona survived the fire, only to be put on trial and hanged. Taíno commoners were subsequently forced to work on gold mines and plantations.

Hatuey, another Taíno leader, was so revolted by the Spaniards mistreatment of his people that he fled Haiti for Cuba. Led by Diego Velazquez de Cuellar, the persistent Spaniards landed in Cuba to pursue him. And 1512, after years of guerrilla warfare, Hatuey was captured and sentenced to be burned alive. The Franciscan friar suggested that, should he repent and convert to Catholicism, his captors might show mercy and substitute garroting for the agony of death by fire. Plus, the Franciscan added, Hatuey would spend eternity in Heaven. When questioned by Hatuey if Spaniards also went to Paradise, the Franciscan responded that the best Spaniards did. "The best are good for nothing", Hatuey snapped back, "And I will not go to where there is a chance of meeting one of them" (Girard 2010, 20).

Archeologist Irving Rouse points out that not only was Hatuey burned at the stake, but also his followers were burned (Rouse 1992, 156).

Nicholas Ovando, mentioned above, was notorious for his brutality on the island. In 1502, the Spanish unleashed an attack dog to kill a Taíno chief in the southwestern part of the island. The Taíno protested this killing and, in response, Ovando kidnapped seven hundred Taíno and knifed them to death in a hut. He then displayed their bodies publicly as a warning to other Taíno seeking freedom (Rouse 1992, 154).

While working to mine the gold out of their native land, the Taíno were physically brutalized and exposed to diseases (Mintz 2010; 138-139; Rouse 1992, 155). Any Taíno who resisted slavery was killed (Rouse 1992, 151). When the gold mines were not offering enough gold to please the Spanish king and queen, Columbus and his men kidnapped enough Taíno to fill an entire ship. They sold them into slavery for profit. Some Taíno were shipped directly to Spain to serve Spanish households where they died.

The rest of the population was killed, causing the Taíno people to be completely wiped out. No Taíno survived their encounter with the Spanish and we will never again be able to meet a member of this culture. This is an example of domination. While some people in the Caribbean do have partial Taíno heritage, the society – and specifically the traditions on the island of Haiti – was completely eliminated from the face of the earth as a result of colonization (Farmer 2012, 123-124; Girard 2010, 20). The Spanish even burned sacred items from the Taíno religion under the belief that it was a devil-worshipping religion, and very few Taíno artifacts have been found (Rouse 1992).

This was a successful genocide against the Taíno, and the Spanish subsequently drained the island of gold. Throughout the enslavement and killing of Taíno people, more and more Spanish families moved onto the island to continue their colonizing efforts.. Some of these Spanish families brought kidnapped and enslaved Black Africans with them to the island. The Spanish established a hierarchy of enslaved peoples where the Taíno were expected to work in the gold mines, but the Africans were expected to serve the Spanish families. The numbers of kidnapped and enslaved Africans rose rapidly: in 1540, the Taíno were outnumbered by the people brought to and enslaved on the island. In time, when all of the Taíno people were lost, and the island was fully mined of its gold, it was time for European colonial governments to establish a new endeavor on the island. It was around this time that sugar emerged as a popular item for consumption across Europe, and colonial powers sought new climates within

which to establish sugar plantations. But, without any Taíno to force into unpaid labor, Europe looked to the African continent for human beings to force into slavery.

In 1697, Spain handed over the western half of the island to France who renamed it Saint-Domingue. During this time, sugar production was an incredibly valuable industry and the climates in the Caribbean and the American south were conducive to growing sugar. Haiti, as anthropologist Sidney Mintz explains, "was rapidly transformed into the most profitable colony in the history of the New World" (2010: 89). Again, when we examine colonial history, we must examine the process through which Europe was developed at the expense of the colonized lands and people. Through the process of eliminating an entire native people, stripping the island of its natural resources, then enslaving hundreds of thousands of people, France and Spain were able to amass wealth in the form of gold, sugar, and huge profits while the Taíno and enslaved West African communities were torn apart.

8.6 Outcomes From Slavery

There is some debate among historians about which slave-holding colony was the cruelest. As slavery, in all its forms, strives to dehumanize and brutalize human beings, it seems impossible to decide which form of slavery was the most horrible. For example: those who strove to own slaves in the United States were known to separate families and sell children; they even forced reproduction in order to profit more. This is an extremely cruel and brutal way to treat humans: particularly cruel and brutal to the women and children.

Whereas people who were enslaved in colonial Haiti typically did not survive long enough to have children at all (Girard 2010, 26). The violence upon their bodies, diseases in which they were exposed, and extremely difficult climate caused most to die in a short period. As anthropologist Wade Davis writes,

> "Bloated by wealth unlike anything seen since the early days of the conquest, the colonial planter of [Haiti] made an institution of cruelty. Field hands caught eating cane were forced to wear tin muzzles while they worked. Runaways had their hamstrings sliced. Brandings, indiscriminate floggings, rape, and killings were a matter of course, and for the slightest infraction a man was hung from a nail driven through his ear (Davis 2008, 191)".

It may be impossible to decide which form of slavery is crueler, but we do know that the two different manifestations of cruelty led to different cultural adaptations among the people who were captured, moved across the world, and enslaved in each location. Over time, the enslaved people living in the United States' culture became more and more "Americanized" as new generations were born, forced into slavery, and each new generation was more familiar with American culture than the African cultures of their parents and grandparents.

In Haiti, because enslaved people died more quickly, the French replenished the population by capturing and bringing in more and more people from the African continent. France focused primarily on bringing over people from the West. Because people from West Africa were continuously arriving, the enslaved population in Haiti maintained a stronger connection to their African religion, language, and culture more than those living in the United States. Here is where we can start to track syncretism on the island. French law required that enslaved people be baptized and introduced to Christianity while, at the same time, more and more believers in Yoruban religion were arriving. These two cultural forces fused together – along with a few other cultural influences which we will soon discuss – to start to develop the Voodoo religion that we know today.

8.7 Enslaved Populations on The Island

Capturing and enslaving human beings to grow sugar in this region of the world was so profitable that the numbers of people forced into slavery grew rapidly. Historian Phillipe Girard writes, "In 1700, there were…9,000 slaves on [the island]. But, in 1790, at the height of the island's prosperity, the colony imported 48,000 slaves that year alone, and the total slave population topped 500,000″ (Girard 2010, 24). To put this number into perspective, please pause and look up the population of the town where you live. Try to compare the amount of women, children, and men who were forced into brutal slavery during this time to the number of people in your own community.

While there were 500,000 enslaved people on the island, there were only 30,000 free whites. You may now be wondering, if the West African people on the island outnumbered the Europeans, why didn't the enslaved people didn't rebel against slavery? The answer is: they did. They successfully revolted against slavery. And, Voodoo was central to their liberation.



Negre Marron, Haiti by Steve Bennett, Flickr 2014

Over time, enslaved people on the island escaped from plantations and established free communities. Called “maroons”, they would retaliate against plantations in order to liberate other enslaved people and to get supplies (Davis 2008, 192; Girard 2010, 28). It was within these maroon communities that the origin story of modern Haiti took place.

8.8 The Syncretization of Voodoo

Remember, “syncretism” is defined as the event where 2 or more cultural forces fuse together to create a new cultural force that still retains elements of the original cultural influences. Haitian Voodoo is most commonly considered to be a fusion between Christianity and West African religion but, in reality, there were more religious influences at play during the development of Haitian Voodoo. Let’s examine each influence:

First, the people who were captured and enslaved on the island came, primarily, from West Africa. We call the religion “ **West African Spirit Worship** ”, which is a polytheistic religion (a belief in multiple divine beings) that believes in the power of nature. West African Spirit Worship holds an enchanted worldview that believes that divine spirits interact with humans and flow through the natural world.

The following facts are taken from Rebecca and Phillip Stein’s book on the anthropology of magic, witchcraft, and religion: West African Spirit Worship is a term that we use to refer to the religions of the Yoruba, Fon, and Ewe people who lives in the southwestern region of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin (Stein and Stein 2017). The Yoruba:

- Have an ancient culture
- Believe in two sets of divine beings: a major God who exists but is not involved in human affairs and the spirits who are reachable by humans called “ **orisha** ”
- The orisha are human like in form and in emotional range
- The orisha are not inherently good or evil, but are complex like humans

As stated earlier, French law required that enslaved people be baptized in the Catholic tradition, which caused them to be introduced to Christianity (Stein and Stein 232). So, we know that Christianity is central to the development of Haitian culture and religion. However, the priests who led the communities in the colony were not typically the leaders who had excelled in France. Rather, they were members of the clergy who, often, had an ethical or academic lapse in their training. Historian Philippe Girard calls them “renegade priests” and argues that they were a central force in the unique type of Christianity that was presented to enslaved people across the colonies (Girard 2010, 30 and 37).

During this time, West African people living in the French colony were forbidden from practicing the religion of their homeland. As West African Spirit Worship was forbidden, the enslaved people were able to combine the religion with Christianity in order to participate in both religions at the same time. For example,an individual could pray to a Catholic Saint in public and, in their hearts, intend for the prayer to be heard by a West African orisha. Please keep this example in your mind as we will return to it later.

During the time when sugar was rising in demand and France was becoming exceedingly rich, witchcraft, the occult, and sorcery were increasingly popular in Paris. We use the term **occult** to refer to any kind of mysterious and supernatural belief system or practice. Throughout human history and across cultures, we see occultism rising and falling in popularity in a cyclical manner whereby people are sometimes very interested in, for example, astrology, psychics, or tarot card readings. You only need to visit Urban Outfitters to see how trendy the occult is today, and, during Haiti’s colonization, the occult was similarly in vogue for the wealthy and powerful of Paris. Naturally, the less powerful colonial French people living in Haiti wanted to emulate the trends of Paris and, as a consequence, they engaged in occultism. They would, for example, perform a spell to ensure a good crop and, as

you can imagine, they would require an enslaved person to assist in this magical ritual (Girard 2010, 30). When we examine Voodoo rituals, we can see the presence of magical rituals in the religion.

Before West African people were captured and transported across the globe to work for European colonies, communities were heavily influenced – and many converted to – Islam. In West Africa at the time, it was common to combine the Islamic traditions with West African Spirit Worship, and some leaders of the Haitian Revolution identified as Muslim throughout the revolution. Islam held a unique view toward racism and slavery at the time ;in his final speech, Islam's Prophet Muhammad stated, "There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, or of a non-Arab over an Arab, and no superiority of a white person over a black person or of a black person over a white person, except on the basis of personal piety and righteousness (Afsaruddin 2020). Islamic tradition tells the story of "Bilal" a Black enslaved African who was freed by the prophet Muhammad's friend Abu Bakr and then offered a position of prestige within the new Muslim community (Afsaruddin 2020). It's reasonable to assume that such stories pushing for racial equality were well known to many toiling under a race-based system of slavery in the European colonies.

So, at this point, it's important to understand that multiple spiritual beliefs were present in the colony: Christianity, West African Spirit Worship, Occultism, and Islam.

8.9 The Loas of Voodoo

Remember that religion reflects the lived experiences of a people; religion evolves to meet the specific needs of each community. Reflecting briefly on the violent and brutal nature of Haiti's colonization, you can clearly understand how the religion has earned a bloody, mysterious, and powerful reputation. Voodoo was born as resistance to oppression and reflects the reality endured by its followers.

Let's briefly pause the telling of Haiti's history to look over the basic structure of Haitian Voodoo. Voodoo believes in a major god or "Bon Dieu" who is not particularly involved in human affairs (Girard 2010, 31). Rather, the followers direct their prayers to the **loas** (spelled "lwa" in Haitian Creole) who are divine spirits and are much more human-like and who are interested in human affairs. Loas often have very human tendencies: many like to curse, make dirty jokes, and may be alcoholics.



Vodou Altar in Tropenmuseum by Jeremy Burgin, 2008

As mentioned earlier, under colonial rule, practitioners of Voodoo were not allowed to worship the Gods from West Africa and, rather, would combine their faith with Christianity. Over time, each West African Spirit was syncretized with a Catholic saint in the belief that they were one in the same (Stein and Stein 2017, 233-234). Here are some examples of loas in Voodoo and their corresponding Catholic saints:

- **Papa Legba** is believed to be the keeper of the underworld. He stands at the crossroads of this world and the next and must first be addressed before one can attempt any Voodoo ceremony (Stein and Stein 2017, 234). Papa Legba is believed to speak all of the world's languages so that he can understand the prayers of all people. Papa Legba is associated with Saint Peter because, in Catholicism, Saint Peter is believed to stand at the gates of heaven.
- **Ogun** is believed to be a loa whose job it is to make the world a nice place for humans to live but that he is still working on this project. He is the loa of war, iron and metallurgy and, because he's often depicted with a sword, he's associated with Saint

James.

- **Damballah** is a serpent loa who is believed to have created the Earth by using his coils to shape it and by shedding his skin to create rivers and oceans. Voodoo ceremonies are often performed around a pole that will have Damballah painted or carved onto it. Damballah is associated with Saint Patrick who is frequently drawn with snakes in Catholicism.
- Erzulie Danto is the spirit of fertility and motherhood. She's specifically seen as the saint of single mothers, working mothers, and battered women (she's usually shown as having a wound on her face). Erzulie Danto is associated with Mary.

8.10 The Haitian Revolution

All nations tell an epic origin story and Haiti's Revolution is a story that intertwines the work of maroons, Islam, the emergence of Voodoo, and the fight against colonialism. The story begins in a Haitian forest called "Bwa Kayiman" which translates to "forest near the Imam's house." It was named this because it was a location where Muslim prayers and preaching regularly took place. According to legend, a group of leaders met and held a Voodoo ritual that asked Ogun if they should rebel against the white slaveowners. The ritual led to a positive sign from the divine powers and, therefore, the Haitian people revolted against slavery.

The whites on the island were outnumbered twenty to one (Girard 2010, 41). After a long struggle for freedom, the rebellion burned plantations and killed all the white people who enslaved them (Mintz 2010, 91). This revolution is the only instance in human history where enslaved people rebelled and directly caused their own emancipation and Voodoo was a formative cultural force in this success.

8.11 The Haitian Origin of Zombies

It may surprise you to learn that Haitian culture invented the zombie (Davis 1985). While the zombies in American popular culture are re-animated corpses seeking to sustain themselves on living flesh, the Haitian concept of the zombie manifests in a very different, and much more terrifying, way.

In the Haitian Voodoo tradition, a zombie (spelled "Zombi" in Haitian Creole) is a person who has been fed a potion from a Voodoo priest-for-hire (or a "Bòkò") that makes the victim's heart appear to stop beating and causes them to present as dead (Davis 1985). After being buried, the person wakes up from their death-like sleep and they are suddenly mindless, compliant, and will do whatever they are told to do (Davis 1985). If you are turned into a zombie, you are essentially enslaved by the person who hired the Bòkò and you will spend the rest of your days doing whatever they tell you to do (Girard 32; W. Deseme, personal communication, July 2020).

Becoming a zombie is the greatest horror in Haitian culture. An interview with Haitian community leader, Willio Deseme explains,

"The real death is when you die and your body and soul are free. But, when you are a zombie you are not alive, but you are not dead. It's bad because you'll become a slave and they will sell you. You will be forced to work for the rest of your time until the Bòkò who zombified you is dead. So, you could be a zombie for more than 20 years, and they will use you for a variety of things."

Zombification in Haiti is often described in the following way, "Slavery is a fate worse than death." From this belief in and fear of zombification, we can understand that the Haitian people see the human spirit as inherently free and the greatest tragedy is to be enslaved. They would, understandably, rather be dead than a slave.

The fear of zombification is ever-present for two reasons. First, as any fan of Haitian culture knows, there are two documented cases of Haitian people being zombified. The first was Clairvius Narcisse who was pronounced dead by two doctors (including an American doctor) and was buried after multiple days. Eighteen years later (1980), Narcisse returned home and explained to his family that he had been living under the spell of zombification (Davis 1985). Second, a similar event took place in 1979 when Francina Illeus was found alive in a marketplace after having been pronounced dead and buried 3 years earlier (Ibid).

Those two extreme cases aside, the Haitian person similarly lives under constant threat of exploitation from the global economy and international development sector which seeks to mold and "improve" them (or, in other words, to make them do whatever you say).

Exercise 8B

Learn more about the origin of zombies with this episode of Throughline. For more details, read NPR's article titled, "Tracing The History Of 'Zombie' From Haiti To The CDC."

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What, in your view, is the function of the belief in zombies? What mysteries are solved by believing in and talking about zombies?
2. How has the concept of the zombie changed over time? What does this tell you about our ever-changing changing societal, economic, and political climate?

8.12 Ghosts versus Zombies

If, as anthropologists, we ask the question, “what is a ghost?” we will discover that there is no one, singular definition of “ghost” that is common across all cultures. In the United States, a common definition of “ghost” is “a disembodied soul”. But, even that particular definition of ghost is not universal when we start to ask clarifying questions such as, “Where does the soul reside?”, or “How big is the soul?”, or, even “How many souls do we have?” In the U.S. we don’t often talk about death, dying, or the soul. Most Americans have an idea, but these ideas are usually personal and not universal. For many, we form an idea that makes sense to us but we rarely discuss or even reflect on further. For instance, consider the belief that your soul is the size of your entire body and resides in all the tissues. If this is the case, if you cut your hair or nails, does part of your soul go away? What about as you grow, do you somehow have more soul than an infant? What about if you donate an organ to another, does part of your soul go with it? These are all subjective questions to which one is likely to get as many answers as there are people answering them.



Zombie walk by Gianluca Ramalho Misiti, Flickr 2012

In the United States, ghosts and zombies are usually considered to be souls without bodies and bodies without souls, respectively. Thus, they are essentially opposites. For many, ghosts are more fear inducing than the shambling hordes of zombies portrayed on movies and TV (more on that below). But, why are ghosts so frightening? Consider the earlier point that ghosts are defined in unclear terms. If ghosts do not follow clear, universal rules then we feel that we are facing an unknown threat whenever we perceive of ghosts! The old adage, “we fear what we do not understand” is precisely what is at play with this particular fear . Consider the following unknown rules surrounding ghosts: Can ghosts move objects as well as move through objects? Are they tied to a certain place, or can they move around freely? Are they trapped or are they angry? Why are they in a certain place and not others? Where is a safe place? Can they hurt us? Obviously, we have more questions than answers (assuming ghosts exist at all). Furthermore, there is not much agreement on what ghosts can do because whatever “evidence” of ghosts exists are usually a singular, eyewitness accounts that may be are inaccurate at best or completely fabricated at worst. There is no way to scientifically examine the existence of ghosts because there is no objective, measurable evidence available.

On the other hand, zombies are believed to follow a more clear cut, universal, and reliable set of rules. . The word “zombie” derives from Central or West African and Haitian culture and refers to the concept of a human body acting outside of it’s normal, biological control. Haiti, in particular, has a very complex history involving slavery, revolution, and a cruel cash crop industry of sugar cane. The harvesting of which was very difficult and deadly work in the hot, humid, and malaria ridden tropics. It was here that the concept evolved into the Voudou version we associate it with today. What many don’t realize is just how much of American zombie lore directly stems from mass media and in particular George Romero and his modern reinvention of what a zombie is. Prior to the “Night of the Living Dead” (an independent film that burst on the scene in 1968, just in time for Halloween) the predominant ideas of a zombie were much more in line with the traditional sense of the word. A zombie was essentially a mindless worker, created through the magic of Voudou, who would slave away at the behest of the controller/ creator (a sorcerer called a Bokor), with an overt master/ slave association, to work their “lives” away in the sugar fields. To get a much better idea of the more traditional use of the term see “The Serpent in the Rainbow” or even “White Zombie”. In these instances, the zombie itself was not the scary part, becoming a victim of a Bokor and being turned into a zombie was the most terrifying aspect!

In the post-Romero sense of the zombie, we now see the shuffling hordes of the virus induced dead bodies that slowly ramble around looking for brains of living beings to feed on. The emphasis has shifted from an evil sorcerer to a scientific/ governmental

mistake becoming the creator and the zombies themselves becoming the villains. These slow-moving, dim-witted, and easy to evade predators are given the quite impossible task of somehow biting through the skull to consume brains as their primary mission. They can only be stopped by severing the brain, which has ostensibly been "hijacked" and is mechanically controlling the movements of these creatures (supposedly a more believable scenario to modern audiences than one involving magic). These still retain a hint of the traditional fear in that, if bitten, one becomes infected and thus becomes a zombie themselves; however, this aspect has been usurped in a large part by the more mundane fear of being eaten alive. All of this is eclipsed by the idea that anyone can survive an encounter through quick thinking and action. This is probably one of the most comfortable apocalyptic scenarios for most people (which likely explains its popularity) because most of us assume that we could survive it. The "Romero zombies" have shifted the monster away from the creator/ controller of the zombies, to the zombies themselves.

In conclusion, the unknown nature of "ghosts" sets them apart as a unique belief system that is not as universally defined as the concept of the "zombie" which has been more clearly defined by Hollywood influences. While some might believe in the existence of both ghosts and zombies, the more predictable nature of zombies allows individuals to feel a sense of control and – therefore – survivability when encountering a zombie.

Exercise 8C

Ghost stories reflect a great deal about our worldview. Listen to NPR's story titled, "The Truth That Creeps Beneath Our Spooky Ghost Stories."

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Which senses are discussed in these stories? (Smell, sight, touch, taste, sound)
2. Are the spirits in these stories considered to be malevolent? Or benevolent? In which circumstances? How do you know?
3. In your view, do the tellers of these stories believe in souls? Why or why not?

8.13 Voodoo in the United States

The Haitian slave revolt in the late 18th and early 19th centuries had created fears in the United States, where slavery was still practiced, so the goal was to politically isolate Haiti. During the slave revolt, the U.S. government, under the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, provided aid to the French colonists fighting against the slaves to suppress the revolt and reinstate slavery in Haiti. Jefferson was a supporter of the French Revolution and its ideals, but opposed the freedom of slaves in Haiti since he and many of his supporters were slave owners. Despite the success of the slave revolt overthrowing the French colonial rule and creating an independent state, Haiti was not recognized by US as an independent country until 1865, 61 years after its independence. The thirteen-year slave revolution in Haiti led to large numbers of Haitians migrating to the United States, due to turmoil on the island. Many of the refugees arrived in Louisiana, bringing along their culture and religion. This was the first exposure Americans had to Voodoo.

An important syncretic revivalist movement that occurred in the Caribbean was the Jamaican Rastafari movement. **Revivalist movements** are attempts to revive a past golden age, with the belief that ancient customs represent the noble features and legitimacy of the repressed culture. The movement was in response to slavery that existed on the island. Very early history of Jamaican slavery is similar to Haiti. Enslaved people were transported to the island by Spanish colonizers from West Africa. Under Spanish rule, enslaved people were forced to learn and convert to Christianity. During this period there were indigenous populations on the island, who were almost completely wiped out by disease and violence from contact with the Europeans shortly after the transport of enslaved people from West Africa. As a result, the transported enslaved West African people did not have much contact with the indigenous population. The transport of enslaved people to the island coincided with European Jews travelling to Jamaica around this time to work in sugar production as indentured servants, who later became owners of sugar plantations. Many fled Spain during early expeditions as a result of the Spanish Inquisition. This resulted in increasing contact between European Jews and enslaved West African people, which played a role in the development of the Rastafari movement later in history.

English forces took over the island in 1655. The English plantation owners prevented enslaved people from learning Christianity, because they feared that Christian teachings would encourage the slaves to revolt. This means that enslaved people and formerly enslaved people continued practicing African religions, because they were not forced to convert to Christianity. Slavery was abolished in 1838 in Jamaica. This was followed by the Christian evangelical movement of the Great Awakening, which swept through North America during the 1860s. This movement led to black churches being formed in Jamaica, where thousands of ex-slaves converted to Protestant Christianity.

Jamaica remained under British colonial rule until 1962. During this period a small white elite population ruled the island, with a small black elite community and a large impoverished black population. The socio-economic conditions of the island resulted in the development of Rasta ideology among the working class and poor black population.

Marcus Garvey (1887 – 1940) was an important figure among the working-class black people of Jamaica. He was a political activist, journalist and publisher. Garvey was born in Jamaica to a working-class family. His family was considered to be on the lowest end of Jamaican social hierarchy, which was based on skin color. In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). His goal was to create a worldwide fraternity of Black people and promote race pride to restore their lost dignity. Garvey believed that Africa was a place for repatriation for black people and predicted that a "black king" would one day be crowned in Africa. This prediction was followed by an event in Ethiopia that confirmed Garvey's argument for many of his followers.

In 1930 Prince Ras Tafari was crowned as the king of Ethiopia. Upon his crowning Ras Tafari claimed himself as Emperor Haile Selassie, which means "Mighty of the Trinity". Haile Selassie's crowning as emperor was seen as fulfillment of Marcus Garvey's prophecy in the Americas, especially in Jamaica.

During this period the Rastafarian movement begins and gains followers. Haile Selassie gives himself the titles of King of Juda and the King of Kings of Ethiopia and Elect of God, linking his lineage to Solomon and Sheba. These events and titles are perceived by the Rastas as confirmation of Selassie being the messiah prophesized in the Old Testament.

Leonard Howell (1898 – 1981) aka The Gong was one of the first Jamaican preachers of the Rastafarian movement. In the 1930s, shortly after Ras Tafari became the emperor of Ethiopia, Howell preached that Haile Selassie was "the Messiah returned to earth" and Ethiopia was the promised and idealized land. Howell was arrested and jailed for two years for expressing hatred and contempt for the Jamaican government in his preaching. Upon Howell's arrest his Rastafari followers withdrew to rural Jamaica and formed the Pinnacle Commune.

8.15 Examining the sociocultural context as a revivalist movement through symbols



Rastafarian on a Rock by Chris Martino, Flickr 2004

Modern Jamaican society was borne out of slavery. Jamaican Black people lived in the periphery of the colonial world. They were economically depressed, dominated by a small elite white population and a British colony until 1962. Starting in the 1930s and intensifying in the 1960s there was a rise of Black nationalism in Jamaica in response to these conditions. The rising Black nationalism was a resistance to globalization and British Protestant rule. The resistance to British Protestant rule is apparent in many of the important Rasta symbols.

- The " **Lion of Judah** " is one of the most important Rasta symbols, which represents the maleness of the movement. Rastafari is a male dominant movement and women are typically in the periphery.
- History plays an important role in the Rastafari movement, making it another important symbol. African history is considered to be deeper than Christianity and older than Judaism. This revivalist movement connected itself to African history, which predated the history of slavery and domination by Europeans, as a response to European colonialism.
- **Sins of Babylon** – Babylon is considered to be the place of bondage, which represents the white imperialistic political power structure exploiting and holding people, especially Black people, back for centuries.

- **Zion** is the counter to Babylon in Rastafari, a utopian place where there is unity, peace and freedom. Ethiopia is considered to be the Zion for the Rastafari movement, believed to be the original birthplace of humanity. The only path to redemption from Babylon is repatriation to Ethiopia.
- **Jah** is the Rastafarian name for God and is the symbol of triumph over tribulations of everyday life.
- **The Holy Herb** – **Ganja** – is not smoked recreationally in Rastafari, contrary to popular belief. It is ritually smoked for spiritual reasons and medicinal purposes. Use of Ganja is based on several passages from the Bible that are embraced by Rastas as reasons for use of the herb. These include: *"…thou shall eat the herb of the field."* (Genesis 3:18), *"He causeth the grass for the cattle, and herb for the service of man."* (Psalms 104:14)
- **Dreadlocks** are another important symbol of the Rastafari. This is a type of hairstyle where hair is twisted into locs or braided. Dreadlocks symbolize Rasta roots and are a symbol of the Lion of Judah, because their form resembles a lion's mane. This hairstyle is a rebellion of the system and the "proper" way to wear hair according to the white elites of the society, so they are a sign of resistance and outsider status.

8.16 Exodus and Jamaican Rasta Captivity

Early Jewish and West African people's interaction during the early history of Jamaica has had an important influence on the beliefs and symbols of Rastafarians. **Exodus** is one of the most prominent beliefs that illustrates Jewish influence. Rastafarians in Jamaica identified with the captivity of Jewish slaves in Egypt and Babylon due to their history of slavery, bondage and domination by European colonialists. As a result, Exodus has become a central Biblical myth for Rastafarians with a call for freedom from oppression in Jamaica**.** Popular Jamaican reggae artist Bob Marley's song *Exodus* revolves around this Biblical story.

When tracing the history and rise of Rastafari as a revivalist movement we understand how it has become a religion of resistance to domination and slavery, similar to several other syncretic Afro-Caribbean religions in neighboring islands. However, its form is different from the other syncretic religions and this is due to the British colonial rule in Jamaica. Many syncretic Afro-Caribbean religions incorporate numerous elements of Christian symbols and beliefs. These groups were originally ruled by Catholic colonial powers, whether it was Spanish, Portuguese or French. Catholicism is more fluid and accepting of modifications of symbols, allowing different cultures to adopt many of its elements and adjust them to their indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Jamaica, however, was dominated by Protestant British rule that prevented the slave population from learning Christian teachings. Conversion to Christianity happened much later and they were through Evangelical Christian teachings. Unlike Catholicism, Protestant and Evangelical Christianity do not allow for modifications, not leaving much room for fusion of old religious symbols and traditions with the new religion.

The revivalist movement of Rastafari that developed later directly challenged Protestant and Evangelical Christian religious ideals. This was done to restore the lost racial dignity of the black population that according to Rasta beliefs was lost during European domination.

8.17 Syncretism in the Celtic World

Why does a Celtic cross (found in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) look different from a traditional Christian cross that we see elsewhere in the world? The people of the United Kingdom are primarily Christian, so why are their symbols of worship different? Christianity in the British Isles is usually attributed to Saint Patrick who ostensibly introduced it to the Celts in the 4 th or 5 th century (Flechner 2019). The Celtic cross (along with many other symbols) is a classic example of syncretism of the Christian and Celtic faiths. As we have seen, syncretism is the blending of separate belief systems in an effort to assimilate a group of people into a different religion.

Celtic cross, iona by Brian Gratwicke

The Celtic cross is one of the most obvious symbols of the syncretism between the druidic Celts and the incoming Christians. First, it's important to realize that the Celts didn't have a single, unified culture. They were a diverse group with similar but varied beliefs. The Druids were akin to a priesthood from different sects. Furthermore, they were not writing things down so observations

(and assumptions) by the incoming colonists are all that modern historians have to go on. What we do know is that the Celts were primarily an agricultural culture thus their beliefs were closely tied in with natural phenomena (such as weather and seasons) as well as death, birth, prosperity and fertility. The Celtic cross is the merging of a Christian symbol (the Cross) and a Celtic one (the Sun Disc) which we see often in Pre-Christian art (Timberlake 2006).

Some of the other, less prominent syncretic symbols from the Celtic world include: the Shamrock (cloverleaf), the Gaelic Festival Knot (St. Brigid's Cross) and the Carolingian or Maltese Cross. Let's take a closer look at some of these.



Grass Clover by Vitaliy Green

First, the cloverleaf (suggested by St. Patrick to be a symbol of the holy trinity) is associated with two Celtic symbols and likely at least one Norse one (the Triquetra, the Triskele and the Norse Valknut). All of these symbols are essentially a triangle representing three of a kind. The meanings shift from culture to culture but fundamentally the meanings are associated with fertility; life changes (e.g.; the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone); the elements (e.g.; earth, fire, water), life, death, rebirth, etc. Since this is a generalized "rule of threes" it was not a big leap for the missionaries to associate it with their Holy Trinity.

Saint Brigid's cross by Culnacreann

Next, the Gaelic Festival Knot / St. Brigid's Cross is depicted as a square, woven from natural sticks or reeds with arms protruding from the four corners. In Christian doctrine, it is a cross used to bless a person or place from evil. The Celtic dogma associates this symbol with the four major festivals marking different seasons (Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasadh).

Carolingian Cross by Tomruen

Finally, the Maltese or Carolingian Cross, not surprisingly the Christians consider this to be yet another crucifix (they are fairly open with the acceptable shape), but to the Celts this is one of their most ancient symbols. While the original Gaelic name of this is lost, most call this the Eternity Knot or the Quaternary Knot representing eternity or everlasting love.

This is not an exhaustive list of all of the syncretic symbols, festivals or even gods shared between these distinct cultures. When people move around the world and meet others, they often try to find common ground and syncretism is often a major aspect of that. Here is a final thought: the Celtic goddess of fertility is Ēostre (Sumerian: Ishtar), her symbols include the rabbit and eggs (both of which symbolize fertility) and her festival is in the Spring, sound familiar? Here's a hint: Easter isn't exclusively about the resurrection of Jesus!

Exercise 8D: Journal Reflection

Closely examine your cultural and religious identities and try to trace the global influences (migration, colonialism, power dynamics) that have shaped how you engage with your cultural identity and religious practices. Recall the concepts

"syncretism," "domination," "assimilation," and "acculturation" and try to use at least one of these terms in your response.

Exercise 8E: Study Guide

Before moving on, ensure that you can define the following terms ***in your own words****:*

- Syncretism
- Domination
- Salvage Anthropology
- Assimilation
- Acculturation
- Voodoo
- Vodouisant
- Taíno
- West African Spirit Worship
- Orisha
- Loas
- Papa Legba
- Ogun
- Damballah
- Erzulie Danto
- Revivalist movements
- Lion of Judah
- Sins of Babylon
- Zion
- Jah
- The Holy Herb/Ganja
- Dreadlocks
- Exodus
- The Celtic cross

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9: Supernatural Beliefs about Health and the Role of Religious Specialists in Healing



Sanghyang Djaran by Joshua Newton. Available for use through Unsplash license.

Chapter 9 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Examine the roles and responsibilities of religious specialists across cultures.
- Define "medical anthropology" and examine culturally-specific ailments using anthropological tools.

9.1 Religious Specialists

As you have learned in previous chapters, reinforcement of a society's beliefs in the forms of its rituals and practices offer cohesiveness and guidance and solidify community bonds. Therefore, prescribed rituals and practices often require the leadership and authority of those who are willing and able to guide the community and its willing participants. Because the beliefs and ceremonies of religions will vary considerably from society to society and culture to culture, so do the people that guide others in the religious rituals.

All societies include people who guide and nurture the religious practices of others, people who are sought after for guidance and reassurance in an ever-changing world. Anthropologists call these people "**religious specialists**" and this category includes religious devotees, priests, rabbis, imams, monks, nuns, religious teachers, shamans, tarot card readers and self-help gurus, etc; all of these individuals are those that are people who seek them out for a sense of spiritual nourishment and reassurance.

These individuals are seen as being highly skilled and/or learned professionals who are experts in contacting and/or influencing supernatural beings and manipulating and connecting to supernatural forces. They are also seen as being able to convey messages to or from the supernatural being to assist their human clients. These 'religious specialists' may often display certain distinctive personality traits that make them well suited to offer guidance and perform the prescribed task or ritual.

We refer to people who define and/or lead a religious community as "religious specialists." A religious specialist is typically viewed as an authority on religious and/or spiritual life. In many cases, a religious specialist is a gatekeeper to the religious community or, in other words, the religious specialist is someone who defines religious practice and spiritual life.

This can be a contentious area within the cultural realm as religious specialists might have more power than their followers to define morality, to establish facts/truths, and to decide who belongs (and doesn't belong) to the religious identity.

As we discussed in the beginning of the semester, anthropologists use the term "enculturation" to refer to the process through which we learn our cultures. Religious specialists play a huge role in enculturation: they inform the public about "right vs wrong," often share knowledge of the divine and the people's history and shape the community's overall worldview.

So, who, exactly, is a religious specialist? Religious specialists exist with great diversity. Some religious specialists hold a professional role in society while others may define a more unique path for themselves. And, as societies and religions evolve, new forms of religious specialists are emerging (we will examine some of these cases).

As is explained in "The Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft" by Rebecca and Phillip Stein,

A religious specialist may:

- Receive their power directly from the divine (for example: through visions, from spirits, from direct messages from God)
- Receive their power from a formal institution (for example: Rabbinical school, the Vatican, etc.)
- Have a respected status in their society
- Be viewed as dangerous, too powerful, engaging with dark forces, or mentally ill
- Exclusively work in religious leadership; be a full-time religious specialist. This is typically true in a society where religious life is clearly defined as separate from secular life.
- Engage in religious rituals on the side; be a part-time religious specialist. This is typically true in a society where religious life is not clearly separated from other parts of life.
- Be viewed as acting on behalf of the divine.
- Perform prescribed rituals for the community at pre-determined points throughout the year.
- Perform unique rituals as-needed based on demand from the community.
- Be responsible for moral guidance for the community; may be considered to personify the ideal type of person.
- Need to memorize vast amounts of knowledge and religious texts.

In anthropological work, we often use 4 different terms to refer to different kinds of religious specialists including:

- **Healer**: Usually a religious specialist who is asked to cure illness or injury.
- **Herbalist**: Specialists in the use of plants and other materials as cures.
- **Diviner**: Someone who practices divination to gain knowledge of the future, supernatural, etc. Usually focusing on practical questions.
- **Prophets**: Considered to be a mouthpiece for the divine. Their role is to share the words and will of the divine to her or his community.

Please note that these terms are not mutually exclusive. For example, a person can be an herbalist and a healer at the same time.

9.2 Religious Specialists as Healers

It is not uncommon for religious specialists to be called upon to address the ailments of an individual or of an entire community. In this chapter, we pay particular attention to the cases where the lines between the role of "religious specialist" and "medical specialist" are blurred.

Understanding how ideologies and belief systems construct our concepts of health, sickness, and healing is important. Medical anthropology research shows that using medical pluralism and cultural relativity when treating patients from different cultures will improve their health outcomes. It builds trust and respect between the provider and the patient which increases the patient's confidence in the healer and treatment, and this can increase the effectiveness of the care. It is a holistic approach to healing that attends to the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of health.

Keep this in mind as you work through this chapter and explore the myriad of ways that religious specialists serve their communities. Then, as you learn more about culturally-specific ailments, consider the importance of culturally appropriate treatment (especially in the cases of ailments that are believed to be supernaturally-caused).

9.3 Who should we call a "Shaman?"

Tuvan shaman by Saryglar Ay-Kherel, 2017

The term “shaman” is a term – and concept – that is widely misappropriated. To be perfectly accurate, the word “shaman” is the culturally specific word used in the Tungus culture of Central Siberia to refer to their spiritual leaders (Stein and Stein 2017, 120). Shamans are Siberian healers who utilize drums and reach out to the spirit realm in order to achieve good health, knowledge, and luck for the community.

A variety of other world religions and cultures also have religious specialists with similar characteristics to the shamanistic tradition of Central Siberia which has led to the term “shaman” being widely applied to many religious specialists who don’t belong to an organized/formalized religion. For accuracy, however it’s important, however, to understand that each culture has its own word to reflect spiritual leaders and that broadly calling them all “shamans” is not an accurate reflection of the diversity and reality of spiritual leadership across the world.

Exercise 9A

Being a “shaman” can be dangerous business as Michael Fobes Brown explains in his article titled, “Dark Side of the Shaman” (access article 9.18 via Canvas Commons). Read his work and take notes on the expectations placed on the shaman.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How does the shaman in this article risk his life? How are others’ lives hanging in the balance of his work?
2. What is the role of the shaman in the society discussed in the article?
3. How does the New Age religious movement in the US approach Shamanism? What elements are culturally misappropriated?

9.4 Full-Time Religious Specialists

Societies that are stratified with craft specialization are typically those that have the resources to support a full-time religious specialist, such as – for example – a priest or a priestess. These **full-time religious specialists** have the role of guiding members through religious practices and influencing a supernatural being or beings.



Meeting the Priest
, Tigray by Rod Waddington

Full-time religious specialists go through a period of specialized learning before being socially initiated into society and then formally recognized by a community. They are formally accepted by the chosen religious organization and the community that embraces its practices. They are bestowed by an authority with a rank and a function that will belong to him or her as the holder of that position that others have held before and will be expected to perform a set of duties. The sources of power rest with the society and the institution within which the full-time specialist functions.

9.5 The Voodoo Priestess

An example of a contemporary religion that has priestesses is the Voodoo religion of Haiti and Benin. Religious specialists in the Voodoo tradition are not always full-time religious specialists; their professional and time commitments vary as some, for example, run secular businesses to make ends meet (Schwartz 2010). A Voodoo priestess is called a **mambo** . Voodoo priestesses are called upon to perform rituals, hold social standing in society and also can perform rituals where a participant is ceremoniously married to their loas *or* goddess of choice. Haitian Voodoo's conceptions of priesthood stem from the religious practices of enslaved people from Dahomey, in what is today Benin.

Typically, there is no hierarchy among mambos and **houngans** (male Voodoo religious specialists). These religious specialists serve as the heads of autonomous religious groups and exert their authority over the devotees or spiritual servants in their *hounfo* (temples). Mambos and houngans are called into power via spirit possession or through the revelations they receive in dreams. They go through a period of learning where they perform initiation rituals and training exercises before becoming qualified. They then can perform healing work and guide others during complex rituals. This form of female leadership is common in urban cities such Port a Prince (the capital of Haiti).

The role of the mambos is to mediate between the physical and spiritual realms. They use sacred information to call upon the spirits through song, dance, prayer, offerings, and/or the drawing of spiritual symbols, which are then interpreted. During these rituals, mambos may either be possessed by spirits or may oversee the spirit possession of other devotees. Spirit possession plays an important role in Voodoo because it establishes a connection between human beings and the Voodoo deities and spirits. It is believed that a spirit can "mount" whomever they choose, but the Voodoo religious specialists must serve as the vehicle for this possession, since those outside of the leadership role are not considered qualified to initiate possession. This is because the human body is merely flesh, which the spirits can borrow to reveal themselves via possession. Mambos, however, can speak to and hear from the Voodoo spirits. They can interpret the advice or warnings sent by a spirit to specific individuals or communities.



Priestess Miriam – Voodoo Spiritual Temple – New Orleans by David Berkowitz, Flickr 2012

Famous Voodoo priestesses include Cecile Fatiman, who was a Haitian mambo known for sacrificing a black pig in August of 1791 that initiated the Haitain Revolution. In the US, notable mambos include Marie Laveau (1801-1888), for example, who gained fame in New Orleans, Louisiana for her Voodoo practices and is known as Louisiana's "Voodoo queen." In American popular culture her legacy has been depicted in the American television series *American Horror Story: Coven (2013)* .

Another prominent mambo and Voodoo spiritual leader in the United States is Mama Lola. She rose to fame after the publication of anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Voodoo Priestess in Brooklyn*, published in 1991. Mama Lola's success provided her with a platform to challenge Western misconceptions of Haitian Voodoo and make television appearances.

9.6 Hijras and Divine Gender Fluidity

Hindu culture views the divine as both male and female at the same time. So, in order to become close to the nature of the divine, a person can engage in both male and female characteristics. **Hijras** are a third gender in Hindu society who embrace both sets of characteristics, they typically perform at auspicious occasions/celebrations as good luck in order to bring blessings to the community. Hijras fulfill the role of religious specialist at these events.

Hijras of Panscheel Park II, New Delhi, India, 1994 by R Barraez D´Lucca, Flickr 2008

The special religious role of Hijras in India and a number of other countries in Southeast Asia can be traced to the writings in various important texts of Hinduism, including the *Kama Sutra*, *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. There are a number of stories in the sacred texts of Hinduism that depict the divine as androgynous, such as the story of Ardhanari. One of the principal Hindu deities, Shiva, merged with his wife Parvati and became Ardhanari, who is depicted as half male and half female. This is one of several stories in Hindu texts where a deity changes gender or takes on characteristics of both genders. These stories bestow a sacred quality to individuals that identify as a third gender in India and other countries in Southeast Asia. While there are several types of third gender groups, hijras are typically males that dress in feminine ways and often undergo castration.

Hijras are gender non-conforming individuals, who are most often assigned male at birth. Like all gender groups, Hijras are diverse. Consider some of the characteristics found among this group:

- Sometimes Hijras are born intersexed (a person who is born with neither/both male or female characteristics).

- Sometimes Hijras become eunuchs. This surgery is completed to varying degrees, there are many types of surgeries that a Hijra might opt for while some don't have any surgery at all.
- Sometimes Hijras have no genital variation at all, there is no genital requirement to be a member of this community

Culturally, Hijras are viewed as neither male nor female but, rather, as their own, third gender. Anthropologists use the term "**third gender**" to refer to a cultural view of a gender that is not part of the Euro-American binary construct. In other words, we use the term "third gender" when more than two genders exist in a culture.

Hijras will sometimes exaggerate their behaviors by acting "extra" feminine (swaying walk, burlesque performances). When employed, hijras are able to take jobs held by both males and females without being restricted to the jobs of only one gender. And, hijras will typically change their names to a female name.

One cannot simply become a Hijra since this is a religious specialist role and requires ritual adoption into the community after a lengthy process. The first step is removing oneself from the larger society and following a guru to learn the hijra ways of life. These teachings include the blessing rituals, songs and dances for weddings and births. Several months or even years of training by a guru give the initiated hijra the status of a type of a religious specialist.

Hijras are considered to have religious power due to their third gender, but more importantly because they have sacrificed their procreative abilities to the goddess. This sacrifice gives them the power to bestow blessings of fertility and prosperity to newlyweds and a long life to newborns. Along with their power to bless, hijras possess the capacity to curse those who disrespect them or refuse to pay for their services. These capabilities are taken very seriously by most people in these societies and they will often pay for the hijra blessings and performances, even if hijras were not invited to perform these rituals at their events and they attended unannounced.

9.7 Religious Specialists and Altered States of Consciousness

Through prayer, meditation, fasting, pilgrimage, the use of substances, etc religious devotees are able to enter altered states of consciousness. Religious leaders will often lead religious devotees into these altered states or, in other cases, might enter the altered state of consciousness on behalf of a community.

These religious practices are based on the belief that a concealed reality exists alongside human reality. Certain religious leaders are able to connect to this hidden reality and then ascribe meaning to their experiences. These religious specialists pass through stages of learning that encompasses many years. Often, this knowledge includes extensive awareness of the natural world and the supernatural world including vast expertise of plants (those used for medicine and those used as hallucinogens), knowledge of religious texts and rituals (all used to reach an altered state of consciousness).

9.8 Studying Healing Across Spiritual and Cultural Contexts

Religious specialists are quite frequently called upon to care for the sick as healers. As illness and medicine changes from culture to culture, these concepts are closely examined by anthropologists to better understand the evolution and diversity of human culture and spirituality. It's within this realm that science and spirituality often meet while people work to reconcile both arenas of the human experience.

There are many ways that culture and belief systems are connected to health, sickness, and healing. Understanding how culture is connected to the construction of health and sickness helps one see these from a culturally relative perspective when looking at cultures different from our own. As Peter Brown explains,

> "I hope that these cultural approaches, particularly because of their cross-cultural comparisons, challenge most students' beliefs about medical systems in the United States and other countries. The selections should also challenge ethnocentric assumptions that the U.S. biomedical system is the correct or the best system. Culture is all around us, like the water in a goldfish bowl. If we were the goldfish in the bowl, it would be hard, if not impossible, for us to be aware of the water. But by taking a step back, often through cross-cultural comparison, we can come to see the wider context and to recognize our own cultural blinders (1998:8-9)."

We are all embedded in our culture, including researchers, and we are often unaware of it. The job of anthropology is pull back the curtain and give us a glimpse of our cultural filters that shape our understanding of the world so that we can set aside our etic view of another culture's practices and beliefs so that we can see the culturally relative, emic view of another person's cultural space. This helps us grow, appreciate and value not only our cultural practices and beliefs, but those of others as well, even if we don't agree with, or practice, them.

9.9 Medical Anthropology

Medical anthropologists often study the socio-cultural connection of health and sickness including the effects of politics, economics, gender, and beliefs. Having a holistic view of sickness and healing means that beliefs of all types must be included in the investigation of this topic. This includes beliefs about what makes someone sick, stress, witchcraft, changes in diet, poverty, being exposed to a biological health threat such as a virus or bacteria, etcetera. Beliefs about what makes one sick are also tied to beliefs about what will make one better, such as a cleansing, reparations, rituals, medication, surgery, rest, specific food, avoiding some behavior or item, etcetera. These tie to beliefs about who can help a sick person get better, a diviner, a shaman, a healer, a priest, a biomedical doctor, a medicine person or a combination of these. Even though being sick, physically, and mentally, may appear to be linked to our bodies and minds in an organic way, there are many cultural aspects to these that must be considered to reduce illness and disease; thus, we need to understand the cultural context of sickness, health, and healing. Medical anthropology helps us do this **.**

Medical systems studied by medical anthropologists are defined as "the cultural beliefs and practices that are learned and shared by a group of people" that explain and deal with sickness and death (Brown 1998:6). They are considered to be a " cultural universal" , meaning that all cultural groups have beliefs and practices surrounding sickness and death. Traditionally, medical anthropology defined disease and illness differently than the way Western culture typically uses these terms. Disease was usually used to refer to biological health threats that made the body sick due to entities like bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites, or other pathogens. Illness was usually used to refer to mental illness or the individual's perception of feeling ill or unwell. In the case where disease and illness are often seen as two separate items, many cultures do not separate these and treat them simultaneously; thus, if someone was sick with physical symptoms, they would heal their mind, body, and spirit together. This is based on a belief that when your body is sick, so is your spirit and/or mind (or at least there are spiritual or mental components of being sick that are connected to the physical symptoms) and vice versa. Many cultural groups separate most treatment along these lines. For example, if you are physically sick, you might go to a medical doctor for treatment, if you have a mental ailment you go to a psychiatrist or psychologist. Recent research is making links between our emotional/mental health and our physical well-being , especially with studies on stress. Stress is often seen as a mental or emotional disorder, but it causes bodily sickness as well. For instance, long term stress damages the immune system and makes people vulnerable to the pathogens that make us physically sick. This is also connected to the concept of embodiment where one's body and mind are viewed as interconnected in such a way that one's physical status as healthy or sick is connected to their embodiment of various cultural and psychological factors like emotion, pain, poverty, oppression, or other situations and/or experiences.

9.10 Cultural Construction of Sickness and Healing

Cross-cultural research on health shows that illnesses and diseases are culturally constructed. People construct their ideologies about what is "good" health and what is "bad" health. Even within your own culture these ideas are constantly changing; what is healthy and what is bad for your body changes over time. What is considered healthy in one culture may be deemed a disease or illness in another. **Ideologies** about what being healthy means, what causes people to get sick and what will cure or heal them are also part of culture.

Understanding what people believe is important because it impacts a person's experience of sickness, health, and healing. Several examples in this chapter will explore this connection further. Recent research on cultural healing practices and beliefs indicates that people who trust their practitioner and the treatment they are undergoing will have more positive outcomes with fewer complications than those who do not have faith in their medical provider and/or their treatment. One reason for this may be that patients are more likely to complete their treatment if they believe that it is going to heal them. Additionally, people may stop the treatment earlier if they don't believe it is working thus lowering its efficacy (see for example Harvey 2013), or not go to the doctor at all The beliefs about what is making someone sick also dictates what will make them better, so it is important to understand these beliefs in a cross-cultural context.

9.11 Pregnancy, belief systems, and avoiding medical treatment in Mozambique

We can consider the research of feminist, anti-racist anthropologist **Rachel R. Chapman** as an example of this type of research. Chapman closely examines the lack of quality healthcare that is available to Black women across the world. In some cases, the lack of healthcare is due to social pressures or obligations and, in other cases, the problem is due to a lack of resources. Chapman aptly situates these social factors within the historical framework of colonial exploitation in order to demonstrate the way that power impacts human health.

Specifically, Chapman focuses on the cost and accessibility – both financial and social – of healthcare for the African and African Diasporic communities. Chapman's work centers on the inequalities between colonial forces and communities of color.

Dr. Chapman's 2010 book, "Family Secrets," opens with her being implored to help a laboring mother in Mozambique. She is taken to a house where the mother and two attending women are in distress. Not being a medical professional, she tries to convince nurses from the nearby clinic to come help. They refuse, saying they can only help those who "aren't lazy" (Chapman 2010, 7) and are willing to come into the clinic. Chapman manages to convince the mother to travel to the clinic. Chapman wonders why it was so hard to help this woman which leads her to develop an explanation of the economic and social factors that separate these impoverished and marginalized indigenous women from the mostly poorly equipped but accessible health centers provided by government authorities.

Chapman's research was conducted in Mozambique where international organizations and NGOs have operated for generations but – Chapman finds – these organizations have missed a crucial factor about Mozambican culture: the social vulnerability of being pregnant. In the early stages of her research she would knock on doors to find interview candidates. In this work, she met visibly pregnant women who would flatly deny the pregnancy. Chapman was very intrigued by this cultural tradition of hiding and denying a pregnancy because she believed that this practice of denial must impact the way that pregnant women do not receive necessary healthcare.

Chapman learned that the knowledge of pregnancies are "segredos de casa" or "family secrets" that are traditionally protected in Mozambique. In this culture, exposing a pregnancy creates vulnerabilities that the general Mozambican public believes modern medicine can't handle. They are rooted in social causes that physicians don't address (2010, 125). For example, "feitiço," the term for witchcraft or sorcery, can be used to cause harm to a woman's reproductive health. A pregnancy may elicit jealousy, resentment, or rivalry in other women that leads them to seek the help of a sorcerer to harm the pregnant woman. Angered or disrespected ancestor spirits or disruptions within the family could cause harm to the most vulnerable member, the pregnant woman (Chapman 2010). Visiting the prenatal clinic announces their condition to the community, so women avoid it as long as possible if not entirely. And whether they go to a clinic or not, indigenous healers are also used to increase chances of a positive outcome. These healers have a wide array of specialties and vastly outnumber physicians (Chapman 2010). Women also self-medicate with both folk remedies and modern drugs, or visit Christian churches and healers (Chapman 2010, 29). The plurality of these medical systems help explain why women aren't coming to prenatal clinics; they are seeking treatment elsewhere.

Anthropologist Robbie E. Davis-Floyd examines the medicalization of pregnancy in her book titled, "Birth as an American Rite of Passage." In Davis-Floyd's view, pregnant women in many cultures are pressured to attend numerous, intensive medical appointments in order to develop a sort of "faith" in the medical process through repetition. In contrast to Chapman's community-of-study where women have little to no faith in medical specialists, Davis-Floyd's community-of-study elevates the medical professionals to the level of religious specialist who is expected to control the forces of nature necessary to ensure a healthy birth.

9.12 Supernatural Belief and the Cause of Disease

George Foster (1913-2006), an important anthropologist and one of the founders of medical anthropology, examined beliefs surrounding the causes of disease across cultures. His two-system model of personalistic and naturalistic sources was an attempt to categorize different views of disease causation.

Personalistic refers to an agent like a jealous person, or supernatural entities such as a witch, sorcerer, ghosts, gods, etcetera that caused the disease by magical means such as "sending" it to the person, using evil energy against them, cursing them, etcetera.

Naturalistic refers to impersonal natural forces or conditions such as cold, heat, winds, dampness, or an imbalance within the basic bodily elements that cause disease. For instance, a belief that a balance of hot and cold in the person is needed for good health, thus, some sickness will be categorized as "cold" or "hot" and their corresponding cure will involve bringing those back into balance. So, if a person does not have enough of the "hot" element and has too much "cold" then they will require more heat to bring them back into equilibrium. Different cultures will have different ways of adding more heat or cold to bring balance back. Some examples include eating "hot" or "cold" foods and herbs or using poultices that will draw out excessive heat or cold to bring about balance again. Foster pushed for more culturally relative presentations of these beliefs and the terms used to describe them. Additionally, he acknowledged that this dual model was not comprehensive since it left out other types of healing and these two categories can overlap with each other, but it was a initial attempt at exploring these cultural conceptions (Foster in Moro 2013:236-237).

9.13 Susto and Curanderos

One type of cultural construction of health and illness is called **culture-bound syndromes**(also sometimes referred to as "folk illnesses"). Culture-bound syndromes refers to sicknesses that are only found in a particular culture or a limited number of cultures. If the signs and symptoms are seen in another culture they may be diagnosed as a different ailment or not viewed as an ailment at all. This impacts how that sickness would be treated; if it is labeled as something else, then a different treatment may be seen as appropriate in the other culture or if it is not seen as an ailment, then it may not be treated at all. This can cause problems with curing a person. Let's look at the example of *susto* to understand this better.

Susto is a culture-bound syndrome that is found in various cultures throughout Latin America and in the US-Mexico Border region. This is the belief that the soul has become detached from the body causing illness. The symptoms vary somewhat in different cultures that have *susto* , however, common ones include exhaustion, absentmindedness, distraction, listlessness, loss of appetite, no interest in one's appearance (i.e., not bathing, changing clothes, washing hair, etcetera), weakness, and introversion (isolating oneself from others).



Susto by Gustavo Facci, Flickr 2014

In the U.S., for example, these symptoms would be diagnosed as depression with the belief that it is the result of various factors such as hormone imbalances, sleep disturbances, vitamin D deficiency or stress for instance. Thus, in the U.S. depression is treated with medication, talk therapy, more sunshine or light therapy, exercise and/or meditation (stress relievers), etcetera. However, cultures that diagnose these symptoms as *susto* believe that the most common cause is a fright, such as a sudden encounter or accident (like a startling effect or high stress). **Arthur Rubel** was an anthropologist who analyzed specific cases of *susto* in the U.S. – Mexican Border area and found that it only occurred when the patient perceives some situation as stressful. In his work, he shared case studies of people suffering from *susto* due to different traumatic events, such as a woman who became ill with it after her son disappeared for a while and she thought he had drowned in the nearby river. Even though he did not drown, the fright of that possibility caused her to get *susto* . Another story was of a man who had been given money by many of his fellow villagers to go into town to buy supplies and when he was returning the horse pulling the cart tripped as he crossed a river and the cart tipped over tumbling all the goods into the river where they were washed away. Since he could not repay everyone and lost their goods, he became sick with *susto* . It can also be caused by someone not fulfilling their obligations (which again can cause a high stress event), such as when a breadwinner loses his/her job, or someone has an affair.

Once a person is diagnosed with, or is suspected of having *susto* , they will seek a healer called a **curandero or curandera** . Treatments will vary from group to group and healer to healer, but the following provides an example of how a person may be healed. The first step in the treatment is to have a diagnostic session with the curandero/a who will determine what caused the *susto* to occur. Then the healer will attempt to coax the soul back into the body to help the person get well again. To get the soul back, the person may be sweated (like in a sauna), massaged, and/or rubbed with an object to help the soul find the body, or use herbs or other ritual elements to call the soul back. This can take many days, weeks or even longer depending on the person, the situation,

the healer, and the cultural context that surrounds the healing. While the person is being healed the family and the village, neighborhood and/or community comes together to support the person. They will take over any obligations that they had (such as childrearing, cooking, cleaning, working the farm, taking care of animals, etcetera). This makes this cure a social cure since the illness is seen as a social Illness. At the end of the treatment the person is reintegrated back into the family and community. This method of healing works on many levels for people. As humans we are hardwired to need interaction and touch, so massage and social support help the person on biological and cultural level to get better.

Exercise 9B

Learn more about the roles and responsibilities of curanderos in the article titled, "Meet Mexico's Curandero Healers Keeping Indigenous Culture Alive." Take notes on the historical significance of this type of religious specialist.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What types of rituals are described in this article? How are these rituals used to serve the community?
2. How has the role of curanderos changed over time? Why?

9.15 Evil Eye

Evil eye is a widespread belief found in various cultural regions and continents such as the Mediterranean, Africa, Europe, South Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States; thus, it is a culture-bound syndrome that is found in many cultures around the world. The idea of this syndrome is that someone can cause harm to another by looking at them or their property with envy or jealousy. Many cultures believe that "sending" evil eye to someone can be done on purpose like a curse or by accident by envying something someone has, so to avoid the evil eye it is important to avoid feeling envious of other people and causing other people to envy you.If someone has been the victim of evil eye then they can get sick, have misfortune befall them, or even die.



Something's watching... by Vik Walker, Flickr 2010

Depending on theculturethat it is found in, there are many ways to prevent evil eye. Some cultures use charms such as chili peppers, snakeskin, shoes, or horns to distract or absorb the evil. In the Middle East, many people use a blue bead with a painted eye on it or the "*hamza*" also known as the "hand of Fatima," which often has beads and/or an eye symbol on it. Additionally, many people avoid accepting or giving compliments as a way to avoid casting the evil eye on others. Compliments can indicate jealousy or envy since the person may be coveting the praised object. In some cultures, you only give compliments if you touch the person or object that you are complimenting. For instance, in some cultures, it is dangerous to say that a baby is cute, chubby, or healthy without touching the baby since you are alerting evil forces to the fact that there is a healthy, cute, or chubby baby around that they may want for themselves, so the baby could get sick or have some other misfortune happen to it. The evil eye is also seen as an exposing eye and often it is the overly curious person who is suspected of casting the evil eye on someone. It is often linked with fear of the privacy violations, the loss of self-control and security, so if someone is being "nosy" about your business and then something "bad" happens, it could be viewed as the result of evil eye. It is also like the idea of not wanting to "jinx" something good by bragging about it, because bragging could incite jealousy and envy. For example, if someone has a new car and they show it off, others may be envious of it and give the evil eye to it causing it to be stolen or crashed. Thus, the belief in evil eye keeps people equal so that no one thinks they are better than anyone else just because they have a particular item or wealth. In fact, in some cultures if you were to compliment an object like a vase, the owner would give it to you so that you could not envy him having it and thus give him evil eye. In this way, evil eye is an example of a **leveling mechanism**. Leveling mechanisms keep people equal and at the same social status regardless of their economic status.

Symptoms of evil eye vary by cultural group and can include headaches, stomach aches, nausea, and fever. Since these symptoms can be caused by other factors and not evil eye, it is important to diagnose whether they are evil eye or not. Once it is determined through a divination process that it is evil eye, it is seen as a serious illness that can't be cured by biological medicine; it requires a healer and a ritual to treat it. For example, an evil eye headache will not be cured by taking an aspirin because it has a supernatural cause, so it must be cured in a supernatural way. Different cultures have different treatments for evil eye. Many cultures use eggs in various curing rituals to absorb the evil eye from the afflicted person. Once done, the egg is cracked open and if it is black or looks like an eye, then the person should be healed (this can also be part of the divination process to determine if it is evil eye). Some will then take the open egg and put it under the person's bed for a few days to continue to absorb or deflect any remaining evil and help the person get better. Italian Americans often also use olive oil to divine if it is evil eye and then to help cure it by making a cross on the head of the sick person with the olive oil to help them recover. This shows why it is important to examine health, healing, and sickness in a cross-cultural manner so that people can be healed appropriately.

9.16 Medical Pluralism and Native American Healing

Another aspect of treating people in culturally appropriate ways is to combine treatments from their culture with other medical practices. The book "The Scalpel and the Silver Bear: The First Navajo Woman Surgeon Combines Western Medicine and Traditional Healing" by Lori Arviso Alvord, M.D. explores the relationships between biomedical healing and Navajo* healing. Dr. Alvord is the first Navajo woman surgeon. She is a bicultural woman who is part Navajo and part white. Her background in both cultures provides her with insight into healing that is more effective, not just for her Navajo patients, but for all her patients. Providing the best possible care for the Navajo population was her initial goal in becoming a doctor and surgeon.

As she embarks on her medical education, she comes face to face with the differences between biomedical beliefs and practices and her Navajo cultural practices and beliefs. For example, the Navajo codes of behavior are to be humble, don't draw attention to yourself; choose cooperation over competition (don't make yourself "'look better' at another's expense or hurt someone's feelings"), "value silence over words," to respect elders, and to not share one's opinions unless you are asked for them (Alvord 2000, 27). The Navajo's cultural respect for boundaries includes various aspects of behavior. For example, being quiet and not asking too many questions respects the communication boundaries of other people. Personal information is "none of your business" unless the person wants to tell you, so asking too many personal questions is rude and is disrespecting the person's boundaries of information. Lower eye contact is polite and a sign of respecting boundaries as well. One's body is also a boundary, so it is inappropriate to touch another person without permission and surgery is seen as the ultimate boundary crossing since it is going inside a person's body (Ibid). These codes of conduct are different from, for example, those in mainstream U.S. culture and biomedical practices. These caused many challenges for Dr. Alvord as she completed her medical training. Her mentor, Lujan, a Native American doctor, helped her learn vital skills of following appropriate cultural behavior with her Navajo patients and providing high level health care according to medical standards. For example, a critical part of an exam in medicine is taking patient histories. This is often done by a doctor or nurse asking very personal questions which would be rude to do according to Navajo culture; Lujan modeled taking patient histories informally and indirectly through conversations about everyday topics that were appropriate to discuss. This was more effective than asking direct questions which would have been offensive and most likely would result in limited answers, or no answer at all (Alvord 2000).

Her approach uses **medical pluralism** by combining biomedicine and Navajo healing practices and beliefs; thus, it is important to understand the Navajo view of health and healing. One of the most vital aspects of Navajo health is the concept of **tribal belonging** . Dr. Alvord explains that the concept of tribal belonging is important to the Navajo cultural social organization as well as mental, spiritual, and physical health. Tribal belonging is bigger than belonging to a family, it is the "…feeling of inclusion in something larger, of having a set place in the universe where one always belongs. It provides connectedness and a blueprint for how to live" (Alvord 2000, 32). She explains that "A tribe is a community of people connected by blood or heart, by geography and tradition, who help one another and share a belief system" (Alvord 2000, 32). Belonging to the tribe is "a form of preventative medicine" (Ibid).

Another essential aspect of her approach is viewing bodily functions and processes as striving to be in balance and harmony. This mirrors the Navajo concept of balance called "hozho" and "walking in beauty". **Walking in beauty**is living in balance and harmony with yourself and the world "…caring for yourself – mind, body, and spirit – and having the right relationships with your family, community, the animal world, the environment – earth, air and water – our planet and universe" (Ibid, 186). When a person is out of balance, they are vulnerable to being sick. "The stress from disharmony can cause physical sickness, depression, even violence and death" (Ibid, 187). This ties to the concept of embodiment as it recognizes that the larger context of a person's life impacts their health and healing. If one is living in stressful environments or under stressful conditions, then one is vulnerable to

being out of balance and thus, vulnerable to getting sick. This is also connected to healing and helping the person get well. Part of the cure is to regain harmony and balance in their life so that one can be healthy again; therefore, all things are important and interconnected.

One of the traditional ways that Navajo healers, called medicine men, help people get better is to perform rituals called "sings" to restore balance and harmony for the person and their life. Dr. Alvord explains that there is "a spiritual intensity and an energy" surrounding a healing ceremony (Ibid, 100). She describes the power of these singing rituals:

> A song, in physical terms, is an action made of breath and sound. It is made by the vibrations of air across a section of membranes in the throat, which are then shaped by the placement of the tongue and mouth. That is a literal description of singing, but of course there is more, much more. A song is also made from the mind, from memory, from imagination, from community, and from the heart. Like all things, a song may be seen in scientific terms or in spiritual terms. Yet neither one alone is sufficient; they need each other to truly represent the reality of the song. Singing comes from the misty place where human physiology, feeling and spirit collide. It can even be, for some people, a holy act, a religious act, an act with great power (Ibid, 5).

Therefore, songs have the power to heal on many levels – physically, spiritually and mentally. This also ties to the traditional Navajo belief that speaking a thought into the air gives it more power, making songs effective healing instruments.

Ritual songs are used "…to help the patient return to a way of thinking and living in harmony and balance, which helps guide patient's body back to health" (Ibid, 100). The community participates in the ritual which adds further support to the patient's healing. Ritual sings have many health benefits in medical settings; for instance, they help calm people, and some people are 'taught' to control their bleeding through these rituals (Ibid, 113). A few major hospitals treating Native Americans allow medicine men into the hospitals to perform rituals and these patients immediately respond positively with better health outcomes because they believe that the ritual and the medicine man will contribute to their healing. This shows how important health and healing beliefs are in positive health outcomes where patients have fewer complications and heal faster. In support of these rituals, some hospitals have even built ceremonial spaces called *kivas* into them just for these healing rites (Ibid, 77).

The combination of medical techniques like surgery with Navajo healing rituals is an example of medical pluralism. Frequently medicine men recognize the signs and symptoms of "white man's diseases" such as gallstones, gall bladder disease, and diabetes in their patients. They then help them get to clinics for treatment. This is also medical pluralism since the medicine men are contributing traditional healing with the biomedical healing techniques to help their patients heal. Dr. Alvord's medical pluralism approach is weaving these two medical modalities together into a more comprehensive medical system. She wants to teach other doctors to add the philosophical aspects of Navajo healing to the scientific aspects of medicine (Ibid, 113). The concept of walking in beauty helped her "unlearn" many of the concepts that her medical education taught her so that she could be a better doctor. She shares the many lessons that came from her bringing her Navajo cultural healing to her medical training.

> I had learned how to respect my patients and empower them. I had learned how important it is to acknowledge and value each member of the medical team. I had learned that when it comes to treating patients' illness, everything matters: our efforts, their efforts, their spiritual health, the health of their relationships, their comfort with and trust in the procedure they would undergo (Ibid, 188).

Dr. Alvord's view of healing with this pluralistic combination of Navajo healing with biomedical healing can help medicine grow and develop more patient centered techniques that can improve health. It is an integrated, holistic view of health that combines the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the person within their social-cultural context to bring them balance and harmony. It is an exciting approach to health and healing that is currently being incorporated into contemporary medicine more frequently as more research is supporting the view that healing needs to be more holistic and less compartmentalized.

*Note – Navajo people are also known as Dinè, however, since Dr. Alvord uses Navajo, I am following her usage.

9.17 Conclusions on Religious Specialists

Religious specialists vary across cultures and are divided into four categories in Anthropology: healer, herbalist, diviner, and prophet. While they tend to have different terms, they have specific qualities. Religious specialists usually receive their power directly from the divine or from a formal institution. This depends on their position in society, which can also determine whether or not they have a respected status in society. In some societies they are viewed as dangerous, too powerful, engaging with dark forces or mentally ill.

In stratified societies with distinct positions for religious specialists that are separate from secular life, these individuals work full-time as religious specialists. They are expected to memorize vast amounts of religious knowledge and texts and perform prescribed rituals. In societies where religious and secular life are not separate, religious specialists engage in rituals on the side, while also performing jobs outside of this field. They are typically called upon to perform unique and sometimes prescribed rituals when necessary. Oftentimes religious specialists are considered to be the ideal type of person, held to high moral and ethical standards and considered to be the moral guidance for the community.

One of the common features of religious specialists across cultures is that they are often considered to be acting on behalf of the divine. This is one of the reasons why the gender of the divine can determine the gender of the religious specialists in society. While religious specialists may be able to exercise power in their community, this power is also reinforced by the community members, and in the case of formal religious orders by the religious authorities. If the religious specialist fails to live up to the standards of their position in society, they can be removed by community members or religious authorities.

Commonly, religious specialists are asked to heal the sick or cure community ailments. In highly secular societies, medical specialists also embody the characteristics of moral leaders and are expected to control natural forces for the good of community health. Anthropologists examine the intersection of spiritual healing and medical healing across cultures to better understand how individuals and communities navigate an uncertain world.

Exercise 9C: Journal Reflection

How is authority understood in your religious community? How is authority granted to religious leaders in your community and how does the public interact with religious specialists? You may also want to consider how your community interacts with medical specialists.

Exercise 9D: Study Guide

Define the following terms in your own words:

- Religious Specialists
- Shaman
- Healer
- Herbalist
- Diviner
- Prophet
- Full-time religious specialist
- Mambo
- Hougan
- Hijras
- Third gender
- Disease
- Illness
- Embodiment
- Medical racism
- Structural violence
- Structural gender violence
- Ideologies
- Personalistic
- Naturalistic
- Culture-bound syndromes
- Curandero/a
- Evil Eye
- Leveling mechanism
- Medical pluralism
- Tribal belonging
- Walking in beauty

Ensure that you can briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Gayatri Reddy
- Rachel R Chapman
- George Foster

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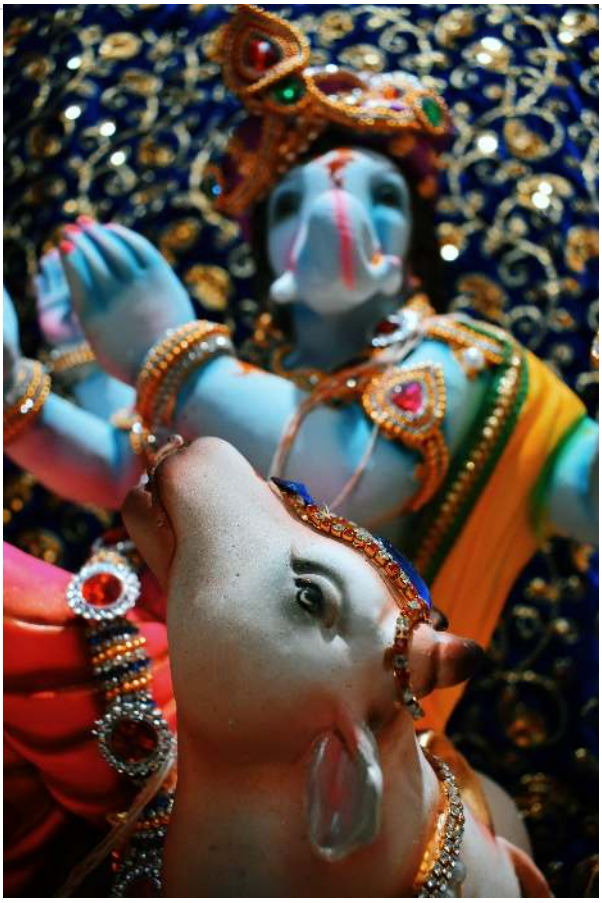
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10: Comparative Religion



Ganapati Bappa Morya by Ashwin Waghela. Available for use through Unsplash license.

Chapter 10 Learning Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Compare and contrast the beliefs of the world's major religions.
- Connect modern religious beliefs with historical and political changes throughout human history.
- Distinguish the terms "religion" and "cult" and critique widespread uses of the "cult" concept.

10.1 Cross-cultural Examination of Religion

A tool that anthropologists use to closely examine cultural adaptations, cultural evolution, and the migration of culture, is the cross-cultural approach. **The cross-cultural approach** compares more than one cultural belief, tradition, or practice in order to identify differences and similarities that exist across groups. As we have seen in this course, anthropologists place no more importance on the major religions of the world today than we do on the ones practiced by small or isolated or even ancient groups. Because we set out to document and understand religious variation among humans, it only makes sense that we would want to examine the full range of that variation, not just a few of the most widespread examples. However, we also recognize that there is some value to singling out the major world religions in order to identify traits they have in common while similarly recognizing the major differences that arose due to environmental factors, historical events, etc. The following chapter will compare and contrast the beliefs, myths, and traditions of the world's major religions in an attempt to offer a holistic picture of the world's dominating belief systems.

Throughout this chapter it's important to be able to separate your own, particularly religious beliefs from the chapter content and to look at religions objectively. Do not apply your own, culturally-specific idea of ultimate "truth" to the other religious belief systems that we will examine here; strive to think like an anthropologist and employ cultural relativism.

10.2 Religions Change Over Time

In “The Essentials of Hinduism,” Swami Bhaskarananda writes,

“Any ancient religion can be compared to the attic of an old home. Unless the attic is regularly cleaned, it gathers dust and cobwebs and eventually becomes unusable. Similarly, if a religion cannot be updated or cleaned from time to time, it loses its usefulness and cannot relate anymore to changed times and people.”

Here, Swami Bhaskarananda is making an important point: religions must adapt to changing times, environments, political events, and social contexts in order to remain relevant in the minds of adherents. This is precisely what we will examine together throughout this chapter. In the case of each major world religion, we will examine the cultural events that shaped the religion as we know it today and we will identify the cultural context that allows the religion to maintain relevance.

Remember that anthropologists embrace two prevailing theoretical approaches towards the development of world religions over time:

- **The evolutionary approach** argues that world religions evolved over time to meet culturally different needs and historical changing needs. The evolutionary approach comes initially from Edward Burnett Tylor, who argued that religions evolve in a linear manner in one inevitable direction. Of course, we know that religions don’t actually evolve in a *linear* manner, but religions do change and adapt over time.
- The other major approach is the **diffusionist approach**. Diffusionists argue that religions spread, or diffuse, across the globe because people spread them. We do so by sharing our beliefs and practices with others, who sometimes adopt those beliefs and practices as their own. We also bring our beliefs and practices with us when we move to new places. Today, diffusion is always happening, and with globalization and mass migration, world religions are spreading more than ever. With technology, we are able to share our religious and spiritual world views more than ever. The diffusionist approach is often criticized because it over-simplifies the way that religions spread. In its extreme form, diffusionism implies that spiritual innovation never happens. Rather, one or two civilizations came up with religious ideas and spread these ideas to everyone else. However, innovation does happen.

Both approaches are true to an extent; religion is ever-changing and is always diffusing across the globe.

10.3 The First Religion

Students often ask, “Who were the first humans to have religion?” But, in fact, religion may *predate* humanity as we know it. How do we know this? Human ancestors are called hominins. Two species, dating back 500,000-30,000 years ago show evidence of intentional burial.

Homo heidelbergensis buried their dead in manually- dug pits with symbolic items such as a pink handaxe that would shatter if used. Neanderthals also buried their dead in specific body positions with symbolic artwork and grave goods. Since these hominins had brains the size of ours (or in some cases, even larger) and the capacity for language and dreams, it is proposed that they also could have had the first ideas of spiritualism or an afterlife. This leads anthropologists to ask: was this burial ritual an early form of religion?

This practice may signify a form of appreciation of their loved ones, or perhaps it reflects an idea that the dead might need items in the afterlife. As you already understand, burial rituals (death rituals) are central to religion and symbolic gestures are a key component of culture. In this way, the argument can be made that religion existed on Earth before the evolution of modern humans.

Exercise 10A

For more on the fascinating burial practices of our human ancestors, read “Who First Buried the Dead?” by Paige Madison.

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Why is it important to understand how human ancestors treated the dead? What does this say about our evolution?
2. What signs do archeologists look for when determining how the dead were treated?

10.4 Animism

In Chapter 3, we learned that Sir Edward Burnett Tylor used the term “animism” to describe what he viewed as a fundamental attribute of all religious belief systems. Tylor adapted the term from the latin word anima, meaning spirit. Broadly speaking, his

animism concept refers to a belief in “souls and other spiritual beings” (Tylor 1889). However, we may actually be able to add a little more detail to that rather broad definition.

To animists, people are more than just our bodies: more than bone, muscle, bacteria, and organic tissue. And to be clear, contemporary scientific perspectives define an individual human being in exactly this way; we are a collection of physical structures connected together to produce our consciousness and to store the information, memories, physical tendencies, tastes, and instincts that make us each who we are. For animists, however, there is a supernatural, immaterial (non-physical) thing that defines each of us.



Untitled by sakulich on Pixabay

And just as importantly, for animists, it’s not necessarily just humans who possess souls or spirits. Animals, plants and other parts of our environment like rocks, trees, lakes, pieces of art, cars, and places might also contain souls or spirits, in which case they are treated not as inanimate things, but as persons. Another way to say this is that animists see **personhood** – the condition of being a person – as something that certain non-human organisms and objects can also have.

To be an animist, then, is to live in a world where not only humans, but other things like animals, trees, rivers, and mountains are also conscious of their surroundings. In this worldview, anything with a soul or spirit can also possess a consciousness, opinions, desires, and even the ability to act according to its own will.

In her discussion of animism in the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology, Katherine Swancutt (2019) provides an example of animist beliefs among Yup’ik groups in the Russian Far East and Alaska:

> “Yup’ik residents of the Bering Sea coast consider that the ocean has eyes, sees everything, and does not like it when persons fail to follow the traditional abstinence practice of avoiding the waterfront after a birth, death, illness, miscarriage, or first menstruation (Fienup-Riordan & Carmack 2011, 269). Since the ocean brings disasters on people when it is upset, Yup’ik consider that it is best to wait until early spring before visiting it after one of these events. Spring is the season when grebes arrive and defecate in the water; it is also when ringed seals come and their blood soaks the ocean as predators attack. According to Yup’ik hunters, these events make ‘the makuat [ocean’s eyes] close and become blind’ so that the hunters can safely approach the waterfront again (Fienup-Riordan & Carmack 2011, 270).”

It is clear from this example that there are important implications of animist beliefs. Yup’ik people do believe that the Bering Sea has a soul, but this also means they view it as able to perceive when they break certain rules. Moreover, it dislikes when people do so, and it has the ability to act if it is offended.

Importantly, animism is not one specific religion. Rather, the term refers to an attribute that many religious traditions share. That being said, animism will manifest in unique ways within the diverse belief systems studied by anthropologists. Ethnographic study has revealed that groups may not agree on exactly what types of entities possess souls or on the specific details of what a soul entails , where it originates , and what it can do within the spirit realm or in reality.

10.5 Mesopotamian Religion and Judaism

When we try to identify the “first” religion, it can be quite challenging since each element of our modern definition of “religion” has evolved differently across cultures and throughout human and pre-human history. For this reason, it makes sense to next focus on the first *written* religion. With the emergence of the first written language, humans began to record their religious stories and ritual guidelines; this written form of religion offers anthropologists and archeologists clear evidence to examine.



Cuneiform Script by Juanjo Ferres, Flickr 2017

The **Mesopotamians** – a civilization that existed within the borders of modern day Iraq – were the first human civilization to develop a written language. It is called "**cuneiform**", and it was developed about 3200 BCE. The clay tablets which contained cuneiform writing are well preserved and are continuously being discovered. Anthropologists and archeologists can read what the ancient Mesopotamians wrote about their spiritual worldviews which offers a helpful insight into the first forms of human religion (Cole 2012, 8).

A major religious text of the ancient Mesopotamians was called the **Enuma Elish**. The Enuma Elish is the creation story of ancient Mesopotamian society and it tells a story about a supreme god who created humans in order to serve the divine (Lambert 2013). Mesopotamian religion was **polythesitic** (the belief in multiple divine beings); the Mesopotamians believed their gods physically lived in **ziggurats**, or large temples that were built by communities. For this reason ziggurats were built to be huge and ornate. See *Western Civilizations Vol. 1 pg 14* for more information on Mesopotamian religion (Cole 2012, 14).

Anthropologists closely examine myths in order to better understand a people's worldview, and we compare and contrast myths in order to identify similarities and differences across cultures. Arguably, the most well-known Mesopotamian myth is " The Epic of Gilgamesh", which was written in 2100 BCE. "The Epic of Gilgamesh" tells many stories about a demigod on great journeys. However, of particular interest, is the great flood story within the epic. The great flood story told in Gilgamesh is nearly identical to the story of Noah's Ark from the ancient Hebrew texts that are now embraced by modern Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Assyriologist Andrew George translated the epic to English and argues that the Mesopotamian flood story is *so identical* to the Biblical story of Noah that we *must* conclude that the two stories are related.

So, how could these two different religious traditions have the exact same myth? The answer is: both religious traditions emerged from the same part of the world at the same time. Let's closely examine this.

We call three of world's major religions – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – the "**Abrahamic religion**s" because they each identify as originating from **Abraham** (a foundational figure from the ancient texts of these religions).

Abraham is believed to have initially founded Judaism by entering his people into a covenant with God. He is believed to have actually existed by some scholars while others believe that he was written as a character to reflect the lives of many people who had lived during his time (Segal 2002). In either case, Abraham's story tells us that he was born in the capital of Mesopotamia in 1700 BCE. So, based on the location and time of his birth, upbringing, and emergence as a religious leader, we can already understand that Abraham's religious ideals were largely shaped by the Ancient Mesopotamian culture within which he was originally from (or, if he is a character written by a group of people, those writers were living near Ancient Mesopotamia at the time of the writing). Whether Abraham was actually one person or if he was written by a collection of people living in the region – the writers of early Hebrew texts would have been upper-class citizens, which means that they would have been well-educated in traditional Mesopotamian stories (Boadt 1984).

This is why Mesopotamian stories are largely identical to the Old Testament of the Bible, the Tanakh, or the Torah (Boadt 1984). There are a lot of similarities when comparing the two religions. Consider that both of these religions each:

- Discuss a "primeval sea" that existed before creation
- Believe that humans were fashioned from clay
- Tell flood story in which the earth and most of humanity is consumed by water
- Tell a plague story



The Tower of Babel
by
Alexander Mikhalchyk

The Judeo-Christain story about the creation of different languages is the “Tower of Babel”. The “Tower of Babel” is based on Mesopotamian ziggurats (citation needed). In the story, people built a tower to reach God in order to complain about the challenges of life. God gets angry at their hubris and destroys the tower . The people fall down from the tower and suddenly speak different languages. This way, they could no longer communicate among themselves to build another tower that would reach God. Mesopotamian scholars think that this was written by the Jews during a time when they were oppressed by Mesopotamian society. At the time, the Jews were a minority religion. They suffered by being marginalized, and their religion was viewed as a cult. The Jews saw the Mesopotamians using money on what they believed to be false gods and false prophets. They wrote the “Tower of Babel” as a form of political commentary of how Ziggurats were an overuse of funds and labor.

Exercise 10B

You can practice cuneiform in the kitchen. View The Getty’s page on cuneiform cookies for step-by-step instructions.

10.6 Hinduism

Hinduism is the only major world religion with no known founder and with no single holy text (Matthews 2007). Unlike Catholicism which has a singular authority (the Vatican) Hinduism is not defined by one ruling organization that defines the religion. In this way, Hinduism is considered to be a particularly adaptable religion whereby different regions of India will recognize, celebrate, and worship the divine in regionally specific ways. Hinduism is the most ancient major religion of the world and is the third largest, today.



Hindu God by Max Pixel

Hindus believe in **reincarnation** (the idea that a soul is reborn into a new life after death) and in **samsara** (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth). During the cycle of life, **karma** determines a person’s next incarnation (this can be a human life or animal life). One’s actions and decisions in their current and even previous lives determines how one will be reborn in the next life. The goal of Hinduism is to free oneself from the cycle of death and rebirth in order to be free from the suffering of life; this goal is called “ **moksha.”**

In Hinduism, religious followers strive to behave in an ethical way throughout their lifetimes and each individual follows the **dharma** , or ultimate cosmic truth. In this religion, different types of people have different types of responsibilities that they must meet in order to be in line with the dharma.

While Hinduism has many religious texts to refer to, the first emerged in 1500 BCE and is called the Rig Veda. The Rig Veda is one of the four traditions of Vedas and consists of mantras and myths about *devas* (gods). It provides information on ritual

procedure by outlining hymns to praise the divine (Sarma 2008).

Another commonly referenced story of Hinduism is called the " **Bhagavad Gita** ". The "Bhagavad Gita", is part of the epic *Mahabharata* and is told as a discourse between prince Arjuna and god Krishna. The story takes place during a war between the Pandava brothers and Kaurava brothers. It begins with Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, dropping his weapon and refusing to fight with his blood relatives (Sarma 2008).

As Arjuna approaches the conflict in his chariot, a major Hindu God, Krishna, appears to him disguised as the charioteer and explains the *dharma* to Arjuna , presenting the argument to engage in battle. While Arjuna expresses that he does not want to kill or hurt anyone, Krishna explains that the balance of the universe requires his action so that it can remain aligned. Krishna goes on to comfort Arjuna by assuring him that all souls live on after death, and that everyone's fate is the result of their karma. Ultimately, the "Bhagavad Gita" is a spiritual dialogue and a conversation between the divine and humanity. Throughout the epic, Krishna tells Arjuna that humans were created to help the gods and that human life is eternal. This is why Krishna tells Arjuna to go to war in order to serve the divine.This story is also told as a lesson to the devotee for the need to uphold the societal structures, despite the personal reservations one may have, since these structures are part of the *dharma* .

Hindus believe in multiple gods and goddesses and these gods and goddesses can appear in different forms. Since Hindus believe that the divine is not limited to one form, Hinduism has been able to show a particular tolerance to other religious deities including the Buddha from Buddhism and Jesus from Christianity.

10.7 Ancient Egypt's Brief Monotheism

The Ancient Egyptians were ruled by pharaohs who were viewed as divine, and therefore served as both political and religious leaders. Ancient Egyptian religion was, traditionally, polytheistic, meaning that they believed in multiple divine beings. However, the most interesting case to examine anthropologically is the case of the pharaoh **Akhenaten** (also known as Amenhotep IV) who temporarily forced Ancient Egypt to become monotheisticduring his reign. And, interestingly enough, some anthropologists and archeologists point to this historical occurrence as the beginning of permanent monotheism in other major world religions.



Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and the Royal Princesses blessed by the Aten by MCAD Library, Flickr 1992

Akhenaten became a pharaoh at a young age after his father died. Before his death, Akhenaten's father led his people in polytheistic worship but held the sun god, **Aten**, as his patron (favorite) deity. This sun god is also known as "*Re*" and was found in the Old Kingdom in cults that worshipped Amen-Re, long before Akhenaten rose to power. After Akhenaten ascended into his role as pharaoh, he outlawed the worship of any deities that were not Aten. Akhenaten destroyed temples and fired priests who served any deity that was not Aten. This is an early example of large-scale monotheism in the Ancient world. This revolution was not met with support from most of Akhenaten's subjects, since it radically affected peasants' and everyday people's culture, religion, customs and wealth. Akhenaten was regarded as a heretic after his death, and under the pharaoh Tutankhamun polytheism and the traditional religious practices were restored.

Interestingly enough, Akhenaten's monotheism may have had an influence upon the monotheism of modern Judaism (and, subsequently, modern Christianity and Islam). **Moses**, a central Biblical figure (important today to the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is believed to have lived in Egypt during or shortly after the reign of Akhenaten. As is true with many religious figures, we are not sure if Moses historically existed as one man or if he was written as a compilation reflecting

many who lived at the same time. In either case, the ideologies that were developed during this time were influenced by Egyptian events.

It's believed that Moses established the 10 Commandments (a set of rules defining ethics and worship in the Abhrahamic religions). It's interesting to note that the first commandment tells followers that there is only one god. As the first commandment, this monotheistic statement largely defined the structure and values of the Abrahamic religions moving forward. The fact that one of the commandments states that "thou shall worship no other gods before me" points to a shift from polytheism to monotheism, suggesting that Moses and the ancient Hebrews accepted polyteistic traditions before this rule was put into place. Scholars have found connections between Egyptian wisdom instructions and the biblical books of Proverbs (from the Instruction of Ptah-hotep), Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Psalms, and Job. For example, there are strong parallels between the Hymn to the Aten and the Psalm 104 in the Bible.

Primary Reading: Psalm 104

He set the earth on its foundations;

it can never be moved.

6 You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

7 But at your rebuke the waters fled,

at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

8 they flowed over the mountains,

they went down into the valleys,

to the place you assigned for them.

9 You set a boundary they cannot cross;

never again will they cover the earth.

10 He makes springs pour water into the ravines;

it flows between the mountains.

11 They give water to all the beasts of the field;

the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

12 The birds of the sky nest by the waters;

they sing among the branches.

13 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;

the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

14 He makes grass grow for the cattle,

and plants for people to cultivate—

bringing forth food from the earth:

15 wine that gladdens human hearts,

oil to make their faces shine,

and bread that sustains their hearts.

16 The trees of the Lord are well watered,

the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

17 There the birds make their nests;

the stork has its home in the junipers.

18 The high mountains belong to the wild goats;

the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

Primary Reading: Hymn to the Aten

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!

They are hidden from the face (of man).

O sole god, like whom there is no other!

Thou didst create the world according to thy desire,

Whilst thou wert alone: All men, cattle, and wild beasts,

Whatever is on Earth, going upon (its) feet,

And what is on high, flying with its wings.

The countries of Syria and Nubia, the land of Egypt,

Thou settest every man in his place,

Thou suppliest their necessities:

Everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned.

Their tongues are separate in speech,

And their natures as well;

Their skins are distinguished,

As thou distinguishest the foreign peoples.

Thou makest a Nile in the underworld,

Thou bringest forth as thou desirest

To maintain the people (of Egypt)

According as thou madest them for thyself,

The lord of all of them, wearying (himself) with them,

The lord of every land, rising for them,

The Aton of the day, great of majesty.[7]

10.8 The Influence of Zoroastrianism

Ancient Persian civilization traded extensively with Ancient Hindu civilizations and, as a result, the two cultures influenced each other to adopt certain practices from the other. Interestingly enough, the philosophies of Ancient Persian society similarly spread across the globe to heavily influence the Abrahamic religions, as well.

In Ancient Persia, around 2000 BCE, a prophet named **Zoroaster** is believed to have been born. The stories surrounding Zoroaster tell us that he was highly critical of inequality in his society and that he advocated for a more egalitarian society (Cole 2012, 50).

Today, Zoroastrianism is a religion that is still practiced; the largest percentage of Zoroastrians live in Iran while the second largest group live and practice in Los Angeles, California. Members of the religion describe the faith as monotheistic because they only worship one divine being: a perfectly good and all-knowing god. However, Zoroastrianism also believes in a very powerful, evil being who is in battle with the all-good divine being. Anthropologists and scholars of religion call this phenomenon **dualism** : a religious tradition that believes in two opposing forces, often cosmic and eternal (Oxtoby 2002).



Zoroastrian Towers of Silence, Yazd by Nick Taylor, Flickr 2008

Zoroastrianism was the first religion to establish the idea of an all-good god and an all-evil being with which the all-good being is at war with. This worldview establishes the idea that human beings are engaged in a cosmic battle between good and evil and that human beings have the responsibility to choose sides.

Religious scholars largely agree that the concept of "Satan" evolved from this Zoroastrian concept (Oxtoby 2002). Biblical texts do not initially mention a devil figure and the idea of a purely evil being who is external from God. Instead, this idea first emerged during a period when Ancient Persian civilizations were influencing Hebrew and Judaic Biblical writings (Cole 2012, 51-3).

Interestingly, Zoroastrians believe in the concept of "dharma" similar to the Hindu idea. At the same time, Zoroastrianism calls for morality through action, which is uniquely different from Hinduism.

10.9 Buddhism



Two initiate monks, Sakya Lamdre, Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal by Wonderlane, Flickr 2007

It's believed that the story of the Buddha begins in the year 560 BCE in a region that is now called Nepal, a region that was part of an ancient Hindu society at the time. A figure called Queen Maya was believed to have had a dream of a white elephant informing her that she was pregnant. Upon calling a diviner to interpret the dream, the diviner told her that she would have a son who would either become a great spiritual leader or a great king. As the child's father was already a King, the couple expressed a preference for their child to become a great king. In response, the diviner told the couple that they needed to shield their son from all suffering in order to prevent him from taking the path of spiritual leadership.

Queen Maya gave birth to her son Siddhartha, and shortly after giving birth she died. The king and Siddhartha's adoptive mother raised him to be completely shielded from all types of suffering throughout his young life until, one day, the young boy asked to leave the palace and see the world. His parents allowed him to briefly leave the palace; during this time he witnessed 4 sights:

1. Siddhartha saw a sick person who was suffering. Before this moment, Siddhartha did not know about illness.
2. Siddhartha then saw an old person and was shocked because he had never before realized that people grow weaker as they age.
3. Then, Siddhartha saw a dead body and was horrified because he had not previously been made aware of death.

4. Finally, amidst all of this shock and suffering, Siddhartha witnessed a monk peacefully meditating. Siddhartha resolved to enter a journey of spirituality like this monk in order to find a solution to stop the suffering of people.

So, the story goes, that Siddhartha left the palace and studied a variety of spiritual movements. He first lived the **ascetic** life as a beggar (a strict life with no pleasures or indulgence) and did not reach enlightenment. He then lived a life of extreme indulgence but also could not reach enlightenment. Finally, Siddhartha sat below a Bodhi tree and realized that neither full sacrifice nor full indulgence is the key to enlightenment. Rather, Siddhartha realized " **The Middle Way** " is the path to becoming free from suffering. In this moment, Siddhartha became **The Buddha** , the Enlightened one. Over the course of centuries, followers of the Buddha developed core beliefs for how to achieve Enlightenment along the Middle Way.

The core beliefs of Buddhism include the **Four Noble Truths** , which are:

1. All of life is suffering
2. We suffer because we *desire* and cling to ideas, people, things, etc.
3. Only by extinguishing desire can we stop suffering
4. There are eight ways to end desire, called **The Eightfold Path**

The Eightfold Path encourages:

1. Right understanding
2. Right thought
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

Please note that The Buddha, if he existed as the story is told, never wrote anything down. He similarly never claimed to be a God or divine being. The Buddha's religion, Buddhism, is closely related to Hinduism as Siddhartha was born and raised in the Hindu tradition. Prince Siddhartha was a member of the Kshatriya caste and until leaving the palace he fulfilled his duties according to the Brahmanic custom by being a devout student, then marrying a neighboring princess and having a son (Matthews 2007).

10.10 Christianity

Roughly 560 years after the Buddha is believed to have been born in India, a new religious figure named Jesus is believed to have been born in the year 4 CE in Bethlehem (a city in modern-day Palestine). It's interesting to note that the stories surrounding both Jesus and Buddha originated along **the Silk Road** (a trade route that connects all of Eurasia and played a role in the spread of culture and ideas across cultures).



Cefalù Pantocrator retouched by Andreas Wahra

The story of Jesus tells us that he was born and raised in Palestine under occupation by the Roman Empire. Roman-ruled-Palestine was a territorial society where people often suffered under strict military rule and were stratified into strict class groups. As many

suffered under Roman oppression, Jesus advocated for a more egalitarian society and was executed for undermining the powerful Roman rule.

One of the radical ideas developed during this time was that humans could have a personal relationship with God, and they no longer had to go through temples to reach God. This belief is a defining characteristic of Christianity and was innovated during the time of Jesus. Similarly, believers of this era established the central Christian value of forgiveness: the idea that Jesus died to forgive humanity of their sins and that, therefore, humans should emulate the divine and forgive one another.

In Christianity, the firm belief in maintaining monotheism necessitates that God and Jesus must be the same entity, thus allowing Christians to continue to worship Jesus while still only honoring *one* divine being.

Exercise 10C

For a deeper historical understanding of the culture that developed Christianity, read Bart Erhman's interview that addresses: "If Jesus Never Called Himself God, How Did He Become One?"

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How did the legacy of Jesus change throughout human history? What does this tell us about changing cultural needs?
2. What political and cultural events impacted the evolution of this religion?

10.11 Weber and the Protestant Work Ethic

Religion impacts many facets of a culture and society. Since Anthropology employs a holistic approach to understanding culture, this approach can be used to examine the way that Christianity has impacted other elements of modern Western culture. German Sociologist and economist **Max Weber** (1864 – 1920) argued in 1904 that Protestantism (a mainstream form of Christianity) and capitalism are such uniquely compatible worldviews that each augmented the other's influence upon Euro-American civilization and led to the establishment of each as the dominating characteristics of much of the "western" world (Weber 2001). These arguments are outlined in his work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" and we refer to the idea as the **Protestant Work Ethic** .



Max Weber 1917 by Guttorm Flatabø, Flickr 2007

Before we can work through Weber's arguments, we need to briefly clarify the different sects of Christianity. While the terms " **Catholic** " and " **Christian** " are often colloquially used to refer to different religions, Catholics are, actually, a form of Christianity. And, typically, when people use the term "Christian" in a colloquial sense in the United States, they are usually referring to " **Protestants** ."

Christianity is a major world religion that has three major subgroups: Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox. While Christianity has undergone a variety of transformations throughout history, it's arguable that the greatest transformation followed **Martin Luther** 's 1517 "Ninety-Five Theses." Luther composed his "Ninety-Five Theses" to critique the Catholic Church (the only official form of Christianity at the time). While the Catholic Church has changed a great deal since 1517, Luther's public criticisms at the time centered around:

- The practice of buying divine forgiveness by giving money to the church
- The church's celibacy requirements
- The worshiping of saints as near-gods
- The powerful position held by the Pope

As a result of Luther's popularized demand for change, the 16th century subsequently witnessed a massive **Protestant Reformation** whereby new sects of Christianity emerged in opposition to Papal authority and the misguided beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation directly influenced the continual fracturing of Protestant Christian sects that still exist today, such as: Evangelical Christianity, Baptists, Lutherans, Quakers, Methodists, Anglicans, Non-Denominational Christians, Pentecostal, etc.

In Weber's view, religious life before the Protestant Reformation saw poverty as a moral value. This is true in most religious traditions; Seeking wealth is frequently seen as a form of greed. Since most religions including Christianity discourage greed along a similar system of moral values, greed is viewed as sinful.

But, as Weber explains, the Protestant Reformation to a certain extent democratized how one can experience and connect with God, glorifying all forms of labor as a "calling" from God. In other words, before the Protestant Reformation, only those working in religious roles (priests) were viewed as doing "God's work" but when Christianity started to view faith as more accessible to all types of people, anyone who worked hard was viewed as utilizing their gifts and talents given from God. As a result, making money was increasingly viewed as receiving God's favor. The logic was: if you make a lot of money, then it must be because God favors your hard work.

This worldview became compatible with capitalism which is centered around the idea that, through market competition, the best ideas will always succeed. Capitalism tells workers that hard work will always be rewarded with wealth. Protestant Capitalism therefore asserted that accumulated wealth is a sign of how hardworking a person is, as well as how favored by God they are.

In Weber's view, the cultural transformations within Christianity and the establishment of capitalism as the dominant economic system took a strong hold over Euro-American societies because they were compatible in their common idea that hard work leads to wealth and that wealth is a reflection of goodness. This becomes an incentive for Protestants to work as much as possible to earn as much capital as possible, proving their moral success and God's favor for them.

Sociologist and philosopher Karl Marx argued that religion, as an ideology, maintains this system of inequality. It is here that Marx's ideas are compatible with the arguments of Max Weber. As you already know, Weber argued that Protestantism and capitalism are two compatible ideologies because both view working-for-profit to be an inherent, moral value. In Marx's view, those without wealth or power continue to work for low wages because they have internalized the idea that any type of work is, itself, an inherent moral value. Within a religious, capitalist culture, people work to benefit the rich because they believe that we will be rewarded in the afterlife. To summarize, Weber's argument follows the following steps:

1. Religious devotion usually leads people to reject worldly affairs (wealth, possessions).
2. The Protestant Reformation (16th century, Martin Luther) led to many Christians glorifying their work and their wealth . This social schism rejected traditional ideas surrounding knowledge, power, and spirituality.
    - Hard work was now viewed as "sacred", a divine calling by God for people to fulfill their purpose.
    - Work was also now a dutiful service to society, and anyone not working was not obeying God's will for them.
3. This new attitude allowed a desire for wealth.
4. This idea overcomes previous issues regarding wage and time
    - Pre-capitalist workers were unwilling to work more hours after reaching their desired income.
    - Capitalist workers are willing to work more hours if they are paid a high wage
5. In Weber's view, this was not a uniquely "Western" trend – but the two cultural forces are so compatible that both Protestantism and capitalism flourish. The two established themselves as the dominating forces in both the United States and in Europe.

Christianity is a diverse religion with an enormous global following and there is no singular way to define that religion, much like all other faiths which cannot be simplified. We can, however, point to the rising popularity of " **prosperity preachers** " in Christian spheres to illustrate Weber's points. Prosperity preachers are religious leaders who are, typically, wealthy and who believe that God makes good and pious people wealthy and successful. Within this religious worldview, sick or poor people can overcome their disease and poverty by increasing their faith and that, in exchange, their god will reward them financially and heal them. In some of these movements, followers are told that, if they donate money to the preacher or to the church, then they will be rewarded with more wealth.

10.12 Islam

In Islam, followers believe that God sends signs to humanity intended to remind us of our obligations to live a good and pious life. In this religious tradition, God commanded a series of prophets starting with Abraham to help guide humanity in a righteous path.

It is believed that since we continuously forget our obligations to each other, the planet, and to God, God continued to command multiple people to help get humanity back on the right track.

Islam in Arabic means "to submit" to God and Muslims are "those who submit" to God. Followers of Islam, believe that Adam was the first prophet, followed by Noah, and later Abraham who submitted to the One God and engaged in a covenental relationship with Him to lead his people towards God. Abraham was followed by many other prophets including Moses (a shared prophet among Jewish people) and Jesus (a shared figure among Christians). In addition, Muslims also believe that God's final prophet named Muhammad gave humanity a clear and final set of guiding principles intended to glorify God (Ayoub 2002).



Untitled by Pixabay

Muhammad was born in the year 571 CE in Saudi Arabia. It's believed that he was an illiterate man who entered a cave to pray and that, suddenly, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him to "recite!" Over the subsequent 23 years, Muhammad wrote the words of the Qur'an, the holy text of Islam. It's believed that, because Muhammad wrote the Qur'an in Arabic, that reading the text in Arabic is akin to literally reading the word of God (this is unlike most other world religious texts which have been translated into multiple languages over time).

There are 5 pillars of Islam:

1. Faith, the monotheistic idea that there is no God but one God and that Muhammad is God's favored and final prophet.
2. Prayer, which requires followers to pray 3 or 5 times a day depending on whether one is Sunni or Shia.
3. Alms-giving, where all Muslims donate a portion of their income to charity.
4. Fasting, when Muslims do not eat or drink from sun up to sun down during the month of Ramadan.
5. Pilgrimage, where Muslims are required to visit the holy site of Mecca once in their lives, which is called the Hajj.

As is commonly discussed, it's forbidden to depict Muhammad in the Muslim tradition. This rule is held in Islamic culture as an attempt to prevent the idolization or mischaracterization of their holy person. Similarly, drawing or making statues of Jesus, Mary, or Moses, etc. are also forbidden and considered to be idolatry in the Muslim tradition.

10.13 "Cults"

Although this chapter mainly focuses on religious groups who present themselves as inheritors of ancient traditions and have followers numbering in the millions, we should also stop to consider a type of religion that tends to be smaller and younger. The groups in question – those known in public discourse as "cults"– are of considerable importance for how we think about religious variation today.

10.14 What's in a name?

Like the terms "religion" or "culture," " **cult** " is a difficult concept to pin down. You may feel that you simply know one when you see it, but we will need a better definition than that to have a productive discussion. After all, it seems unlikely that every other student in your class understands the term in exactly the same way as you. Because a "cult" is such a difficult thing to define, it can be difficult to distinguish these groups from "conventional" religions. Groups identified as religions or cults both use rituals, sacred spaces, and symbols to create a strong sense of common identity and shared belief among their members. Both also involve beliefs in the supernatural (although they do not always acknowledge the supernatural nature of their beliefs).

One factor that separates “cults” from “religions” is how people perceive them within cultural settings where they exist (Melton 2004). Consider the term *religion* ; everyone within a particular society might not share the beliefs and practices of religions practiced within their cultural surroundings, but they likely don’t view the groups they call “religions” to be transgressive, dangerous, or threatening to the social order. In contrast, if your peers and family see that you are joining a group they consider a cult, they are likely to be worried, sad, confused, or even angry about your decision. They may even determine that you have been forced to join the so-called cult by means of manipulation and threats.

This is not dissimilar from the “witchcraft accusation” as described in Chapter 5: the term “cult” can be used as an accusation intended to discredit the spiritual movement/beliefs of a group. That being said, anthropologists, psychologists, and all social scientists *do* recognize that some religious movements are harmful or abusive. The distinction between a genuinely dangerous spiritual movement and an unpopular spiritual movement is an important distinction to make when analyzing modern religious trends.

While cultural insiders understand “religions” to be harmless and non-threatening, they usually view the groups they label as “cults” to be “abnormal” within their cultural surroundings. The term “cult” has taken on a negative connotation in the public eye for describing extremist religious sects that often separate themselves from the rest of society, sometimes with harmful or deadly consequences.

Exercise 10D

A cultural movement called “Cargo Cults” offers anthropology students an opportunity to practice cultural relativism. Read Cargo Cults to better understand the worldview associated with this religion.

Then, see if you can answer the following question:

How are symbols used in the European culture referenced in the reading? How are these symbols repurposed in this New Religious Movement?

10.15 Cargo Cults

While not a major world religion, Cargo Cults are another wonderful example to include in our chapter on comparative religion. As a more modern movement, Cargo Cults reflect the migration of people and how competing cultural interpretations can exist alongside one another.

The word “cargo” has Latin origins and refers to items being loaded onto a ship. In our own culturally-specific context, we define the word “cargo” to mean, “the goods or merchandise conveyed in a ship, airplane, or vehicle.” In other words, “cargo” is anything that we import or export with the intention of buying and selling.

In one community of Papua New Guinea, the European word “cargo” has evolved to carry another layer of local meaning that reflects many issues attached to the colonial encounter; it combines the local beliefs with the culture of more-powerful outsiders. In this local language, the term “cargo” refers to “trade goods” or anything brought over to Papua New Guinea by the people coming into their region from abroad (Stein and Stein 2017, 237). In other words, they use the word “cargo” to refer to the myriad of things that outsiders ship into their region including: money, weapons, clothing, technology, religious paraphernalia, etc.

Before the era of colonialism, the people of this region approached relationships as reciprocal. By trading goods and services equally between people, social relationships were maintained. Before colonialism, striving to make a profit off of others was not an acceptable practice. Anthropologists refer to this as balanced reciprocity and these societies largely maintain social ties through equal exchanges of goods or services. In this society, a traditional trade route exists called The Kula Ring. Within the Kula Ring, the people equally share time with a collection of sacred items that rotate between different communities. No group keeps the sacred items and all are expected to continue trading the items forward.

With the arrival of European colonial governments and missionaries, the people of this region started to witness a high volume of cargo arriving on ships and, later, on planes (Stein 2017). The wealth disparity between the local people and arriving Europeans was glaring and caused some locals to start to interpret the wealth gap using their own, culturally-specific terms (Stein 2017). This is a fascinating case to examine because, although the subsequent religion – called Cargo Cults – is often perceived as superstitious and absurd to the Western mind, their interpretations are actually exceptionally astute and correct. If we can examine the issues at hand using their own, culturally-specific context, we can actually understand more about ourselves.

Members of the Cargo Cult religion believe that Europeans accumulated a high volume of manufactured goods through ritual. The local people of Papua New Guinea watched the colonial officers dress in elaborate European clothing that served no apparent function, march about the island in striking uniformity, conduct meetings in a prescribed manner, and participate in other practices that are specific to the European culture. For example, a necktie is a fashion item that otherwise serves no function which caused the local people to struggle to understand why a person would wear a necktie. In response to this cultural clash, the religious belief of Cargo Cults emerged and believed that, if the natives of Papua New Guinea started to engage in the same rituals practices as the Europeans, they would start to accumulate as much wealth and "cargo" as the Europeans had.

The religion evolved to explain the wealth disparity and to explain the bizarre behavior of the outsiders. The native people saw the European behaviors as supernatural rituals that allowed them to access cargo magically. As a result, followers of the Cargo Cult religion started to develop rituals that copied the European behaviors. They march in lines with wooden "guns" over their shoulders, they stand at attention and raise "flags" up flag poles. On another occasion, they would place bark that resembles bullets in a sacred room and take hallucinogens in order to make actual bullets appear. In other words, they take these symbolic, culturally-specific practices and re-enact them within a different cultural context.

Another example focuses on fashion. Cargo Cult members design and wear their own form of necktie and understand neckties to be powerful amulets that allow access to cargo, wealth, and technology. We can practice cultural relativism and explore the mundane imponderabilia to understand how this makes sense. In their culture, only people wearing neckties had access to cargo and the European colonizers were actively seeking to convert the native people into a European way of life. So, the native people would give in to the European's pressure to act more European and would start to dress like them.

Consider this: In our culture, a necktie symbolizes professionalism (among other things). This symbol is traditionally reserved for one gender (although more genders are increasingly wearing neckties, too). If a person who we expect to wear a tie failed to wear a tie to a job interview, then we likely wouldn't think that person was fit for the job they interviewed for. As a result, that person wouldn't gain the income of the new job and wouldn't have access to wealth or to the technology and items that they hoped to purchase. Members of the Cargo Cult are not wrong in connecting European rituals – such as wearing a tie – to success. This is because the European culture has dominated wealth and global culture since the beginning of colonialism.

This new religion developed a new myth (please note: in anthropology we define a "myth" as "a sacred story that shapes a people's worldview". We don't use this term in the dismissive manner that it's used in common language). The sacred myth of Cargo Cults taught the people that their ancestors resided in another realm and that wealth, prosperity, and cargo could only be acquired from that realm through supernatural means (usually involving pleasing the ancestors). In their view, their ancestors intended for the people of the island to have the technology and goods (which were stored in the Land of the Dead) but, in their view, the Europeans stole the goods from the natives. In the Cargo Cults tradition, practicing magic will return the technology, wealth, and goods to the native people.

Remember that the European colonizers exploited native resources and people in order to amass their own wealth. The colonial governments did, indeed, steal natural resources and exploit native labor in order to profit, advance technology, and amass goods. In a real sense, the wealthy were stealing from the Cargo Cult followers and the colonial governments and missionaries were supposedly offering access to the wealth if the local people could become a part of European expansion.

Furthermore, a reason this interpretation emerged was due to the European's cultural preference for what anthropologists call negative reciprocity. "Negative reciprocity" occurs when parties seek to gain more than they give. If, for example, the shirt you are wearing was made in a factory for $1 but you paid $25 at the store, then the company selling the shirt made more than they gave to you (this is considered negative reciprocity). While living near the people of Papua New Guinea, the Europeans asked for labor, land, and resources but never offered cargo to the native people (Stein 237-238). Anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum writes,

"From [their] point of view…they had provided whites with territory, food, and services, and they expected a reciprocal endowment of valuables…In return they expected knowledge they could use to induce the gods to favor them as they had favored the whites." (Lindenbaum 2013, 111).

The missionaries worked to convert the native people to Christianity during this same time. In the Christian worldview, prosperity is a sign of divine favor (Weber 2001). So, in the Christian worldview, the natives of Papua New Guinea would, in fact, be favored with economic development if they converted to Christianity. So, as a result, much of the Cargo Cult religion evolved to include Christianity. Rebecca and Phillip Stein's book on the matter explains, "Much of the interest in the newly introduced Christianity was an interest in discovering the ritual secrets that the missionaries used to bring the cargo over from over the sea from the Land of the Dead."

Wikipedia's somewhat problematic explanation defines Cargo Cults as, "A belief system in a relatively undeveloped society in which adherents practice superstitious (magical) rituals hoping to bring modern goods supplied by a more technologically advanced society." This common misunderstanding of Cargo Cults is simply not sufficient and requires a more advanced anthropological analysis. Anthropologists define "magic" as "any practice that is intended to change the fate of the people, usually through supernatural means" (Kuper 79). In this way, both the Europeans and native islanders were engaging in symbolic superstitious rituals (marches, meetings, flag raisings) in order to change their fates, and both believed that Christianity would lead to prosperity. Each unveils some truth about the other.

By examining the beliefs and rituals of the followers of Cargo Cults, we are presented with an opportunity to examine ourselves. Their etic perspective on our culture highlights what is socially-constructed, culturally-specific, symbolic, and superstitious. When these people interpret our cultural practices, they are doing the work of anthropologists and developing an understanding of our practices that makes sense in their own context.

10.16 Comparing and Contrasting Religious Influences

Let's wrap up by comparing and contrasting the beliefs of the religions that we have discussed in this chapter.

Jesus and Buddha's stories emerged within 500 years of each other, and their similarities reveal a great deal about what societies needed at the time. You may recall that the hero archetype is a common story-telling structure that exists across cultures and, of course, the stories of Jesus and Buddha follow that structure as well.

- Their philosophies and stories are very similar; for example, when Jesus gives the "Sermon on the Mount", the first thing that he teaches is the "Golden Rule". The Golden Rule says, "do not do anything to others that you would not want others to do to you". On the other hand, Buddha gives his first lessons beneath the Bodhi tree and his first lesson is: treat others as you would like to be treated.
- Both Buddhism and Christianity preached nonviolence while living in violent societies, and it was a radical idea at the time.
- Both Buddhism and Christianity rejected material wealth and undermined the ruling powers of their society.
- Both Buddha and Jesus are believed to have had prostitutes as friends which reveals a common cultural oppression of women *and* a revolutionary new idea to overcome oppressive class structures.
- Both religious figures started their spiritual journey at age 30.

Jesus and Buddha's origin stories are also quite similar:

- Jesus' and Buddha's legends are similar, as both of their mothers' pregnancies were announced by angels : an elephant in Buddhism and Angel Gabriel in Christianity.
- Both mothers gave birth during a journey, with Mary traveling to Jerusalem, and Buddha's mother returning to her hometown.

While the stories of Jesus and Buddha are generally quite similar, they end in very different ways. Consider each:

- It's believed that Jesus was crucified by at age 32.
- It's believed that Buddha died at age 90 from food poisoning. In the story, one of Buddha's followers accidentally undercooked a fish and served it to him. Rather than dying dramatically, it's believed that Buddha calmly explained to his distraught followers the lesson: everything eventually dies.

Of course, because Buddhism and Hinduism emerged from the same origins, both religions believe in reincarnation, karma, and samsara, both seek liberation from suffering through inward reflection and selfless service.

Zoroastrianism heavily influenced the development of the Abrahamic religions. Christianity embraces the originally-Zoroastrian idea of "good versus evil", the idea that humans are engaged in a cosmic battle. Similarly, Zoroastrianism influenced the development of Hinduism as both religions share the ideas of spiritual responsibility (dharma).

Exercise 10E: Journal Reflection

How has your religious community been influenced by the practices and beliefs of other groups?

Exercise 10F: Study Guide

Define the following terms in your own words:

- The cross-cultural approach

- The evolutionary approach
- The diffusionist approach
- Personhood
- Mesopotamians
- Cuneiform
- Enuma Elish
- Polythsistic
- Monotheistic
- Ziggurats
- Reincarnation
- Samsara
- Karma
- Moksha
- Dharma
- Bhagavad Gita
- Akhenatan
- Aten
- Moses
- Zoroaster
- Dualistic
- Ascetic
- The Middle Way
- The Buddha
- The Four Noble Truths
- The Eightfold Path
- The Silk Road
- The Protestant Work Ethic
- Catholic
- Christian
- Protestant
- Protestant Reformation
- Prosperity Preachers
- Cult
- New Religious Movements

Briefly summarize the cultural contributions of the following figures:

- Akhenaten
- Prophet Zoroaster
- Siddhartha
- Jesus
- Moses
- Abraham
- The Prophet Mohammad

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11: Death and Dying



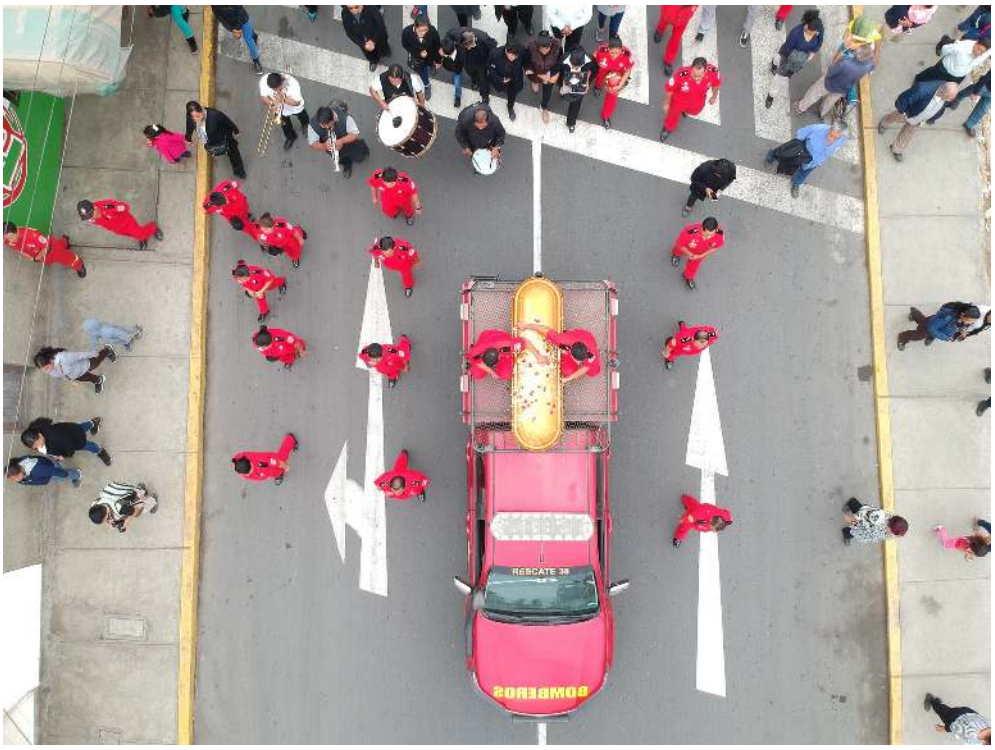
Table Mountain Peak by Paula Vermeulen. Available for use through Unsplash license.

Learning Objectives At the end of this chapter, you'll be able to:

- Recognize and describe the impact of death in human societies.
- Summarize roles of death rituals across cultures.
- Describe the cultural meaning of cannibalistic practices across cultures.

11.1 Death from an Anthropological Perspective

Though it can be unpleasant to consider, death is a universal part of the human experience. Perhaps for this reason, cultural beliefs about the nature of death can have an important role in shaping our relationships, our ethical beliefs, and our very understanding of what it means to be human. This chapter explores the considerable variation that human cultures exhibit in the ways that we approach death, both in terms of how we understand its meaning, and also in terms of our behaviors and practices: what we *do* when a death occurs. To put it another way, this chapter does not so much aim to explore death as it aims to explore *human life in light of death.*



Untitled by Paul Quispe on Unsplash.

11.2 Holism in the Anthropological Study of Death

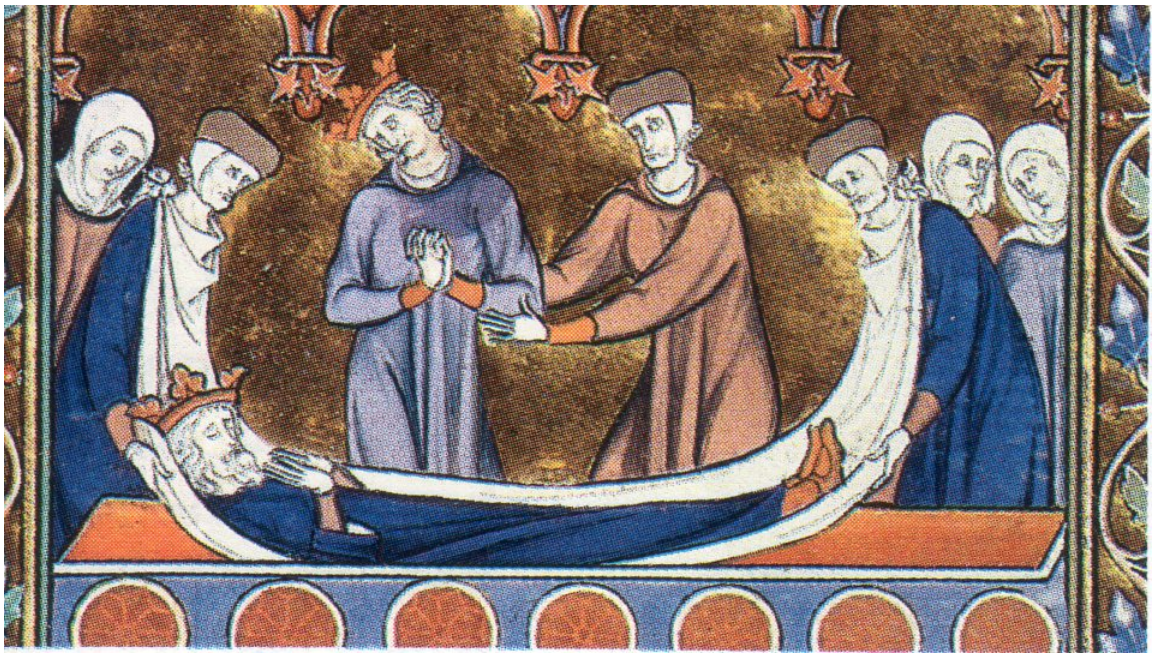
As we investigate variation in human cultures' approaches to death and dying, we use a holistic perspective (see Chapter 1), showing how beliefs and practices concerning death *connect to* economic, political, and moral life in different cultural settings. Our view as anthropologists, in other words, is that it would be pointless to study funeral practices and beliefs about death without also understanding how they fit into the broader cultural systems in which they exist.

11.3 Cultural Relativism in the Anthropological Study of Death

Death is, in many ways, an observable phenomenon. In contrast, if anything happens to a person after they die, this is not as easy to observe directly. Interpreting what happens to us after death is a cultural task, and cultural views on the relationship between a "person" and that person's body after they die vary widely. As we will see, even basic *definitions* of death – "What are its causes?" "In what ways does dying change a person?" "At what point can we even say that death has happened to someone?" – are not consistent from one culture to the next.

Some of the questions listed above might seem to have answers so obvious that just asking them reflects incredible ignorance on the part of the person expressing curiosity. However, part of our task as anthropologists involves stepping outside of our own cultural beliefs and expectations and recognizing that they – like all cultural beliefs and expectations – are just that: *cultural*. While all cultures provide members with some interpretation of death and dying, cultural relativism dictates that precisely *how* any given culture interprets these phenomena is appropriate for that group.

In this chapter, we will also encounter functionalist perspectives, which view different cultures' ideas about death as adaptations that help groups to meet their culturally-specific needs. Meanwhile, Marxist perspectives will explore the ways that beliefs about death affect power relations and the distribution of wealth within societies of all kinds.



A medieval depiction of the funeral of King David by GoShow, 2012

11.4 Death, Anxiety, and Religion

Among the anthropologists who study how people in different cultures grapple with the idea of death, some have gone so far as to suggest that our unease about dying may actually have led to the development of the first forms of religion. Religion, by this logic, is not simply a result of a human tendency to wonder about abstract themes like 'the meaning of life' or our 'purpose.' Instead, we can think of it as a sort of 'tool' that human cultures use to cope with a visible reality that has been part of human life in all places and at all times: the phenomenon of death and the anxieties and tough questions it raises for us.

Throughout his career during the early 20th century, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), a foundational figure in the history of anthropology (see Chapters 1 and 3), outlined an argument that death is one of the universal sources of anxiety for humans, and that religion is a universal human response to this anxiety. For Malinowski, to understand death as the result of unseen supernatural forces was also to portray its causes as *comprehensible*. When we think we can comprehend or even *reason with* the supernatural forces that affect the parts of our lives we cannot otherwise explain, we are able to rationalize seemingly unfair and tragic occurrences like death (Malinowski 1955).

In this way, Malinowski argued that belief in the supernatural had a function within human societies.It created (and still creates) a sense of order, an underlying logic in a world that might otherwise seem just a bit scarier, just a bit more random, and maybe just a bit more unfair (note that this is an example of what we have called functionalism in the anthropological study of religion. See Chapter 3).

Malinowski was not alone in his idea that human beliefs in the supernatural result from our fear of death. Sigmund Freud (1859–1939) – a towering figure in the development of the field of psychology – similarly suggested that an awareness of death has always disturbed the human imagination. To Freud, religious belief systems in their simplest form could have served as a means by which people comforted themselves in the face of death's disturbing inevitability. Freud suggested that by creating concepts of the soul and the afterlife, ancient humans were able to convince themselves that they and their loved ones would not be truly gone after death. In this view, religion allowed ancient humans to comfort themselves with the knowledge that the dead would instead continue to exist, but in a different form, after they were physically gone (Freud 1930).

? Exercise 11A

Anthropologists closely examine the death rituals that exist in each society. Mummification is a death ritual that was practiced in Ancient Egypt (and in other societies). Interestingly, humans were not the only ones mummified in Ancient Egypt. Listen to NPR's story titled, "."
Archaeologists Discover Dozens Of Cat Mummies, 100 Cat Statues In Ancient Tomb
Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. Based on information from this report, how did people living in Ancient Egypt view their relationship with cats and beetles?
2. *and*How did Ancient Egyptians understand divinity? Please discuss both cats gods/goddesses in your response.

11.5 Gawan Families in the Late 20th Century

In order to illustrate the role that supernatural beliefs can play in helping people to cope with anxiety and grief surrounding death, let's briefly consider an example. During the 1970s, American anthropologist **Nancy Munn** conducted ethnographic fieldwork on Gawa, an island located in eastern Papua New Guinea that was inhabited by just over 500 people at the time (Munn 1986). Munn's research focused on Gawan systems of exchange (their economy), but it also demonstrated the importance of a holistic approach since this topic could not be understood without exploring Gawan beliefs about death, the supernatural, and especially the family.

The Gawan concept of 'family' differed significantly from the one that Munn had learned about in her own cultural surroundings while growing up in New York. Gawans identified specifically with their *mothers'* families, believing that this is where a person gets their *balouma***,** or spirit. Gawans saw their fathers – as well as their fathers' brothers, sisters, and parents – as 'non-relatives.' In a similar category to fathers, Gawans also viewed a person's spouse and the family of that person's spouse as being non-relatives: members of someone else's family.

This is not to say that a person had no relationship with their father's family or with their spouse's family, however. In fact, despite their status as non-relatives, the families of a Gawan's father and their spouse both held extremely important places in any Gawan person's life. And as Munn showed, these non-relatives also had unique and very important roles to play in a Gawan's person's death.

11.6 The Gawan Mourning Process

When a person died on Gawa, Munn observed that the families of their father and their spouse were expected to fulfill very special responsibilities, despite their status as "non-relatives" of the deceased. The families of a dead person's spouse and father would gather and mourn loudly and publicly for up to a week before a funeral would eventually be held, all while wearing special clothes. These clothes tended to deteriorate during the mourning process, which Gawans associated with aging, and also with death. Mourners also shaved their heads and colored their bodies black using charred coconut husks, again recalling the process of dying and decomposition in symbols all Gawans understood. They also spent considerable time in the presence of the deceased person's body, making amulets out of his or her hair and nails. The mourners (again, specifically the families of the dead person's father and their spouse) would later wear these amulets during the funeral (and sometimes for a long time afterwards). Through these rituals, the families of the spouse and the father of a dead person actually came to *represent that* person during a funeral (Munn 1986, 164-171).

After a deceased person's burial was complete, the dead person's family collected valuable, elaborate, and rare objects that represented the relationships, successes, and deeds of their loved one, and then gave these objects away to the various "non-relatives" who had served as mourners during the funeral. Munn suggested that this act of gift-giving allowed Gawans to process their memories of their dead relative. Interacting with the mourners, who were symbolically performing the role of the deceased person, made it possible for family members to feel less alone. For Gawans, a deceased loved one could even be said to 'live on' in the objects that represented their deeds, and also in the people who were part of their life and who were honored in the gift-giving ritual (Munn 1986:170). In this sense, Munn argued that Gawan practices surrounding death and the symbolism involved in those practices both helped Gawan people to process the emotional weight of a loved one's death by giving them a chance to continue to interact with the deceased person symbolically.

11.7 Death Creates a Social Dilemma

Now that we have considered how cultural beliefs and rituals surrounding death can affect how individuals process grief, let's consider these themes at a broader scale. You have probably heard the term "social network" used to describe online social media

platforms, but this term actually describes something much more fundamental to human lifeways – something that has existed since the birth of our species.

At its core, "**social network**" refers to a group of individuals who are connected to one another – some directly and some only indirectly – through interpersonal relationships. Most humans participate in social networks that connect us to people outside our immediate families, and that extend beyond the small groups we see on a day-to-day basis. Most of us also participate in social networks that put us into *indirect* contact with individuals we will never actually meet in person. Although the precise scope of social networks in human societies varies considerably, extended networks have likely always existed in some form or another. They have likely existed in societies of all sorts, even those we might at first glance imagine to be fairly "isolated."

For example, although they spent most of the year living in small family groups that ranged in size from only six to about forty people, prehistoric and early historic Iñupiat inhabitants of northwest Alaska built social networks that connected them indirectly to people thousands of miles away. To do so, they conducted ritual events, including those known as "trade fairs." People from all over northwest Alaska – and in some cases from more distant areas as well – came together at these events, where they made new friends, learned valuable information about neighboring groups, and even sought out potential husbands or wives (Burch 2005).

Attendees often left Alaskan trade fairs with new contacts or having rekindled relationships with old friends from neighboring areas. Contacts and friends in neighboring areas each had their own set of relationships with others living in areas near *them*, and could extend their networks by attending local ritual events and trade fairs elsewhere. As a result, even though an individual Iñupiat person might not directly get to know people all over the Northwest Coast of North America, social networks connected them *indirectly*.

11.8 Funerals, Mourning, and Connections



Day Of The Dead Altar by St0rmz, Flickr 2008

As it turns out, *funeral rituals* can play a particularly important role in creating and maintaining social connections too. In many societies, when a person dies, their extended social network often hangs in the balance, since the chain of relationships that make up that network is now broken. In this sense, death is not onlya source of stress and grief for us as individuals (discussed above). By threatening to unravel or dismantle existing social networks, death also affects relationships among the living. In many societies, funerals present an opportunity for people to repair or reinforce social networks, counteracting the "break in the chain of relationships" someone's death can cause.

For example, 19th century Tlingit people in Alaska and the Canadian Northwest Coast provide an example of this "function" for funeral rituals. these groups conducted an elaborate series of funeral rituals, the final stage of which was called a **'memorial potlatch**.' A deceased person's distant relatives – and the extended families of those relatives as well – attended memorial potlatches and all attendees participated in a symbolic "renewal" of the relationships that existed between the family of the dead person and the funeral's attendees (Kan 1989, 41-44). Out-of-town guests at these funerals included non-Tlingit people who came from considerable distances, particularly when wealthy or influential people died.

Like the Gawan funerals discussed above, the immediate family of a deceased Tlingit person – the hosts of the memorial potlatch – presented valuable gifts to most of the people in attendance, and in doing so, they recreated the relationships that had existed between the deceased person and the event's guests, actually *taking on* the role that their deceased relative had played in these relationships. While Nancy Munn's work on Gawa focused more on the way that Gawan gifts for mourners helped people to grieve, anthropologist **Sergei Kan**'s examination of historic Tlingit potlatches emphasized the ways that these events helped to maintain existing social networks in the face of loss and death.

11.9 Death Opens up Political Opportunities



Painting by James Gilchrist Swan (1818–1900) of a 19th century potlatch event among the Klallam people, in Washington.

Death also leaves a unique opportunity for ambitious people to pursue wealth and social status, and funerals often serve as the place where this pursuit is most visible. To illustrate this point, it will be useful to think holistically about the connection between religious beliefs, ritual activities, economics, and power in society.

Because rituals tend to bring together large groups of people, they present a unique kind of "stage" that a person can use to "show off" for a large audience, as discussed in Chapter 6. This is no less true of funerals.

Funeral rituals are often expensive in terms of the resources they require, particularly as they often involve large feasts (Hayden 2009). In many societies, getting ahold of enough of the right kind of food to conduct a funeral feast is not as simple as visiting a grocery store, and for this reason, hosting a sufficiently impressive funeral ritual can be challenging. A good host needs strong managerial skills, a network of people who can contribute food, and considerable resources of their own in order to finance the event.

To return to the example of the 19th century Tlingit memorial potlatch discussed above, attendees judged these events by their extravagance; hosts fed guests with huge quantities of meat, fish, and berries, and offered gifts of valuable animal skins (Kan 1989, 232). In fact, hosts tried to show off the wealth of their families by presenting so many skins and so much food that the skins were impossible to transport home and the food caused guests to vomit from overeating. According to Kan's informants, if nobody vomited, at a funeral potlatch, it spoke badly about the food and reduced the hosts' prestige (Kan 1989, 233).

Similarly, at funerals in the Trobriand Islands, valuable offerings were buried with the dead (particularly for chiefs and other important people), and hosts distributed yams to the events' guests. Gathering and distributing yams was not simply a matter of feeding funeral attendees, it was also a way that hosts showed off the strength, cohesion, and organization of their family (Weiner 1987, 46).

In this sense, an impressive funeral feast is more than just a way of renewing the deceased person's social network or grieving their loss. Throwing a successful feast is also a way for hosts to impress guests, to attract followers who can provide future political support, and to gain social standing.

11.10 Funerals and Wealth: Secondary Burials in Berawan Culture

While beliefs and practices surrounding death are connected to economic and political organization in many human societies, the precise nature of how funerals are conducted differs significantly. Ethnographic research that anthropologist **Peter Metcalf** conducted during the 1970s among the Berawan people in northern Borneo (an island in Indonesia) provides a particularly interesting example.

The Berawan of the 1970s were a group of roughly 1600 people living in four separate communities. Funerals were the largest and most costly rituals in Berawan culture, requiring enormous amounts of money, labor, and rice so that a host could throw a suitably impressive ceremony, hire entertainment, and construct a structure where the deceased person's body would ultimately be buried. Berawan people viewed these parts of a funeral as ways to honor the wishes of a dead person's spirit, and in part for this reason, funerals were critically important to them (Metcalf 1981).

One part of Berawan cultural practices that Metcalf studied intensively was a type of funeral ritual called a "**secondary burial.**" Secondary burial refers to the practice of disposing of the dead by conducting multiple funeral events so that a person's body is moved or buried more than once. The Berawan would first hold a relatively small funeral immediately after a person's death. They would later hold a much larger reburial event, and it was only then that a person's remains would be deposited in their permanent burial place. These later reburial events sometimes occurred several years after a person died, and often after the body had been treated, processed, or changed in some intentional way.

Secondary burial practices had become less and less common in Berawan culture during the 20th century, and it was widely believed that they were disappearing due to globalization and contact with other cultures. Metcalf would examine the practice in considerable detail before eventually drawing a very different conclusion. Namely, he argued that – given the way the Berawan used funerals to display their wealth – there might be political and economic functions to these rituals (and political or economic explanations for their decline).

By demonstrating that they possessed the ability and the resources to host a truly gigantic ritual feast, Berawan funeral hosts could present themselves to guests as powerful and wealthy, thereby gaining public recognition and future political support. At the same time, conducting a funeral was expensive and time-consuming. By conducting secondary burials, ambitious Berawan individuals were able to save up resources to pay for a ritual event, and also to 'spread out' the work of amassing those resources and orchestrating the labor of political followers over a much longer, and therefore more manageable, period of time.

Cultures all over the world conduct burial practices that fit this "secondary burial" pattern, and during the 1970s, when Metcalf conducted his fieldwork, generations of anthropologists had examined them to glimpse the worldviews of the cultures who conducted them. Metcalf, however, observed that funerals were more than mere representations of Berawan *beliefs* (in this case, of ideas about the soul and the afterlife). Instead, he approached secondary burial rituals as a way Berawan people actively affected social life within their society. People used secondary burial practices to gain political opportunities that would not have been available if they needed to conduct funerals immediately upon the death of a loved one.

Why then were secondary burials *disappearing* if they were so important for Berawan people to gain recognition, prestige, and political support? Once, it had been necessary for most Berawan people to delay a funeral if they wished to make it sufficiently impressive. However, with the arrival of a credit-based economy in 20th century Borneo, Berawan families could now take out bank loans, and the need to conduct secondary burial rituals was reduced.

11.11 Death Raises "Legal" Issues

Dealing with a person's *stuff* might not seem like a *religious* issue, and the term "legal" might also sound out of place in a chapter on religious approaches to death and dying. In most cultures, people do, however, have expectations about what a dead person is "owed" or what they "want" from the living. Social expectations about the needs of the dead and the debts they are owed can be said to function as *laws* in the sense that they serve as rules concerning property and ownership. These expectations often govern "inheritance" practices, dictating *what* the living can take from the dead, *who* can take it, and *what the dead must keep* if they are to remain on good terms with the living. Below, let us consider the outsized effect that religion's "legal" role can play in determining how power is distributed within a society.

Human societies vary considerably in terms of power dynamics. Some societies – many, if you only consider contemporary societies – feature enormous differences between people in terms of wealth, power, and social status. Yet throughout the human past and present, many human societies have instead exhibited what anthropologists refer to as **"egalitarian" social organization**.

In these societies, most adults possess relatively similar social standing within the group; there are no all-powerful emperors, no Silicon Valley tech billionaires, no subjugated masses, and no slaves.

Cultural outsiders often mistakenly interpret these groups as less advanced, lacking the technologies and social institutions that would allow for the accumulation of wealth and the consolidation of power. As it turns out, this view is largely incorrect, and reflects a deeply ethnocentric bias. We may think, "because social inequality exists in *my* culture, it must reflect 'progress' or a more evolved form of social organization." In fact, egalitarian societies feature elaborate and highly evolved practices that serve as obstacles or "checks" against anyone interested in hoarding wealth or power.

For example, a variety of practices existed in historic and late prehistoric cultures of California that reinforced the relatively equal footing of all group members. When a particularly wealthy Wintu person died, their possessions were burned or buried, which left little or no physical property for offspring to inherit (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 127). Ohlone people of the southern San Francisco Bay area also destroyed or buried a deceased person's property. According to their beliefs, failure to respect the dead in this way would make a person's ghost enraged and cause it to enact severe punishments on the living (Margolin 1978, 56). Practices like these, which limit the transmission of wealth from one generation to the next, have been observed in many societies that also feature egalitarian tendencies.

Compare these practices to the ones you are familiar with in your own cultural surroundings that pertain to the transmission of wealth at death. In the United States, for example, the estate tax – a tax on money and other property that is inherited when someone dies – has long been a topic of considerable debate. Proponents of the estate tax argue that it helps to prevent the development of further social inequalities between the wealthy and the rest of American society – precisely the same function as the ritual practices that exist in egalitarian societies, discussed above.

None of this is meant to suggest that the estate tax should necessarily be seen as a "religious" custom, although many have made arguments for or against its implementation on the basis of the will of a supernatural being, a 'God-given right,' or a shared value that is greater than the needs of individual American citizens. What is noteworthy here is that religious practices surrounding death and burial serve the same functions or address the same social issues in many societies that legal institutions do in others.

11.12 Death in the Contemporary United States is Just as Strange as Anywhere Else

As we have repeatedly seen in this text, it can be easy to take your own cultural perspectives for granted – to believe that they are not actually "perspectives" at all, but objective truths. For many Americans, widespread practices surrounding death in this country are quite unremarkable; they seem to be based on science, and are unaffected by superstition. However, a brief examination of the ways that modern American (and English) burial customs have changed over several hundred years illuminates strange, irrational, and easily-taken-for-granted elements (Fowler 2004, 82-84).

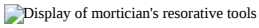
Archaeologist **Chris Fowler** suggests that during the medieval period (roughly 1000 – 1500 AD), many cultures throughout Europe associated death with bodily decay, and explicitly displayed the process of decay in symbols on tombstones and in other works of art. Decay and decomposition was not viewed as an unsightly or grotesque problem to be solved in this cultural context. Instead, it was a part of what was seen as the "normal" or "ideal" way that death and its aftermath should proceed. Death was generally depicted in texts and artworks as a slow process, and following death, the supernatural component of a person (a spirit or soul) was believed to travel to the afterlife gradually, paralleling the gradual process of natural decay.

In contrast, Fowler describes what he sees as a 20th century obsession in some cultures of Britain and America with a need to *control* or even to *prevent* the process of decay, in the bodies of both the dead and even the living (see the case study on the Nacirema in Chapter 6 for related discussion). Fowler lists a variety of ritual practices relating to death that reinforce these values or obsessions in Britain and America. When an individual dies, he notes that specialists usually establish a specific "time of death," which frames death as an instantaneous event rather than a prolonged process. After this, the body rarely remains with their surviving family members for long, as it does in other cultural settings. Instead, specialists (coroners and morticians) manipulate the body in private, using chemical and surgical techniques, in an attempt to make the deceased appear as healthy, youthful, clean, and as peaceful as possible (rather than leaving it unaltered).

When the living family encounter the body of their loved one again, they usually wish to see it "in one piece," and treat it *as if* it remains unaltered, despite the fact that morticians have removed any organs to be donated and have replaced or modified parts of the body during the highly invasive embalming process. According to Peter Metcalf, when he described embalming practices to his Berawan informants, they were disgusted and confused by the strange behaviors of Americans:

> *"I became aware that a sudden silence had fallen over my audience. They asked a number of hesitant questions just to be sure that they had understood me correctly and drew away from me in disgust when they found that they had. So shocked were they that I had to backtrack rapidly and change my story. The topic was never broached again. (Metcalf 1978:7)."*

Clearly, to the Berawan, American funeral practices are *not* unremarkable. In fact, they reflect specific cultural views and expectations about death and the body; views that have the potential to utterly disgust cultural outsiders with different worldviews!



Mortician's resorative tools by Robert Lawton, 2006

While burial and cremation, the two most common ritual burial practices in the United States and Britain, differ in several key ways, both achieve the same effect: removing the body from visibility so that the living can continue to remember the deceased as "intact," well-groomed, and untouched by any hint of natural decay. In contrast, for the Berawan people, decay and decomposition are seen as *necessary* parts of the process of dying; to prevent these processes from occurring is to fail in one's moral obligations to the dead and to one's family. This is because the visible decomposition of the body mirrors the invisible transformation of the person's soul. The soul separates from a person's body at death, but it lingers nearby, stuck in a liminal state as the body decomposes. As that decomposition occurs, the soul transforms into a spirit (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of the concept of "liminality").

This liminal period of decomposition is also dangerous for the living, since evil spirits can reanimate a body and cause harm to the living until that body is fully decomposed. No wonder the Berawan were so horrified by Metcalf's description of American funerary practices. From a Berawan perspective, they trap the soul in a prolonged state of misery and expose survivors to considerable danger!

? Exercise 11B

How have American burial practices changed over time? How have they remained the same? Listen Bones In Church Ruins Likely The Remains Of Early Jamestown's Eliteto NPR's story, "."
Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. In addition to serving the living, what role did early colonial churches play for the dead?
2. How was the class system reinforced both in life and in death for early American colonists?



Human Skull in Black by Ahmed Adly. Available for use through Unsplash license.

11.13 Mourning, Cannibalism, and Kuru

Remember that the principle of cultural relativism is central to this course (see Chapter 1). **Cultural relativism** is the principle that we cannot judge or understand another culture's beliefs or practices based on our own, culturally specific logic. Rather, we must examine other cultures based on *their* culturally specific logic and understanding of the world. While this isn't always easy, close, holistic research can lead us to new ways of understanding those who appear to be different from us. Let's practice this skill with the example of cannibalism.

In 1961, a team of anthropologists traveled to a remote region of Papua New Guinea to investigate the cause of a fatal disease called **kuru** (Lindenbaum 2015). They were able to connect the illness to the practice of cannibalism, but was cannibalism the *cause* of kuru? The answer is no. Eating human flesh does not *cause* disease. Eating *diseased* flesh does, however.

Kuru spread among the **Fore** (pronounced "for-ay") when a member of the community ate the diseased flesh of another member of the community. This disease functions similarly to Mad Cow Disease. Eating cow meat doesn't automatically give you Mad Cow Disease, but eating the flesh of a cow who had Mad Cow Disease would then also give you the disease. What causes kuru is infectious prions (abnormally-shaped microscopic proteins) found in the brains of infected people. These proteins can infect other proteins they come into contact with, causing damage to the brain and nervous system, and even death. It is therefore those who ate the brains of the dead (usually women and children) who were then debilitated by this neurological disease (Lindenbaum 2015, 109).

? Exercise 11C

*essential*The specific details of the Fore's form of cannibalism are for anthropologists to understand. Mortuary rites of the South Fore and kuruRead the article titled, "" and take note on the worldview and ritual practices of the Fore.
Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. How do the Fore view the soul and the afterlife?
2. Who performs the rituals necessary in this death ritual? Describe their responsibilities and consider how these duties correspond with their role in society.

11.14 Cannibalism as a Way of Managing Grief

We call the Fore **endocannibalistic anthropophagers**. This term refers to a community that eats their own dead (Stein and Stein 2017, 9). Please note that endocannibalistic anthropophagers do not kill people to eat and they do not eat the dead of other communities. They do not hunt down humans or farm humans for consumption. This type of cannibalism refers specifically to communities whose members only eat already dead members of their own community.

Grief by Gokhan Yildiz, Flickr, 2015

In another example, we may note that in some Jewish communities, the mourning period is considered to last for a full year, and individuals are expected to avoid certain activities during this time. For example, some Jewish people in mourning will not listen to or play music for the full year after a close family member has died.

The death rituals of our communities may be restricting, they may be empowering, or they may be both at the same time. Consider this example: one of the reasons why the Ebola outbreak of 2013-2016 in West Africa was so difficult to control was because some of the sacred mourning and death rituals in the region allow (or even require) mourners to touch, wash, dress, and cry over the bodies of their lost deceased loved ones (Manguvo and Mafuadze 2015). It is believed that connecting physically to a loved one's body connects the living to ancestral spirits in the afterlife, and giving up this mourning practice would impact eternal life.

Unfortunately, Ebola is highly contagious immediately after a person has died; the virus is present in the bodily fluids of the corpse. It's estimated that 60% of infected individuals contracted Ebola during a mourning ritual (ibid). People may resist public health directives that come from people they don't know or trust (like government health officials), especially when those directives prohibit culturally required practices of mourning, including handling the bodies of loved ones who have passed away. It's important for health officials to form relationships with local religious leaders in order to mitigate the impact that mourning rituals can have on people's health. These leaders are in a position to modify cultural practices of mourning to the point that they are still meaningful, but no longer present a risk to the health of the mourners (ibid).

This West African mourning practice is empowering because it allows mourners special rights to express their grief. It is also restrictive because it has the potential to impact the mourners' own health. As an anthropologist, it's important to examine these issues through a variety of perspectives in order to understand the complete reality of the cultural practice and its implications.

? Exercise 11D

The purpose, power, and value of land are often contested issues within a society. When a community utilizes land for burial, what obligations do other communities have to respect that? NPR story about burial sites in Arizonastory about burial sites in ColoradoListen to and this to explore this type of conflict in modern, American society and reflect on the issues at hand.
Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. What culture clashes are described in these stories? How do Native Americans and archeologists view the importance of this land and how does the American government view the importance of this land?
2. What burial traditions are described? How and why are these sacred traditions?

11.15 Cultural Relativism and Fore Cannibalism

Because we live in a diverse society, we are accustomed to cultural conflict. This conflict usually arises when a group of people expects another group to conform to their own, culturally-specific practices. We can prepare ourselves to examine the plight of the Fore by first examining two popular forms of death ritual embraced by many societies and by asking ourselves why they are preferred in each context. Consider the following:

- Christianity is a diverse religion (like all others) and there is not one universal belief about the appropriate disposal of the dead in that community. But burial is commonly considered to be the best way to dispose of a dead body because, in many Christian communities, the body needs to remain intact in preparation for the Second Coming of Christ. Burying preserves the body and allows the body to be resurrected upon Jesus' return (Choudry 2018).
- In Hinduism and Buddhism, it's preferable to cremate a body because it's believed that cremation allows the soul to be freed from the body (Choudry 2018). In this case, the soul may be reincarnated in a new life or it may be freed from the cycle of birth

and death (called **samsara**) in order to reach liberation from suffering (called **moksha**).

Both communities are concerned with rebirth and with caring for the eternal soul of their loved ones. Christians want their souls to be reborn by their God upon his return, while Hindus and Buddhists want the soul to have a chance to be reborn in a new life. We can see that these two religions share a core value but that they seek to achieve it in mutually exclusive ways. Asking a Christian to cremate a body would prevent them from achieving salvation and asking a Hindu or Buddhist to bury a body would prevent them from achieving peace. We can practice cultural relativism to see that these cultural practices both make perfect sense in their own, culturally-specific contexts.

Remember that anthropologists take a holistic approach (defined in Chapter 1) when examining a cultural practice. If we don't examine a community's "big picture" worldview, we cannot make sense of their cultural practices and beliefs. As a student of anthropology, ask yourself, "what would need to be true for this cultural practice to make sense?" Then earnestly try to discover the answer whenever you encounter a cultural belief or practice that is different from what you expect or are comfortable within your own culture.

Remember that anthropologists practice objectivity, and therefore are:

- not interested in making moral judgments.
- not interested in creating a cultural hierarchy.

Anthropologists understand that moral judgments and cultural hierarchies are *subjective* concepts. It is not necessary for anthropologists to agree with or adopt a subjects' mode of behavior or belief system, only to understand and appreciate it.

Cultural anthropologists know that what is "moral" is culturally-specific and that concepts like "better" or "worse" are also culturally-specific. We cannot judge another culture against our own ideas of morality, but we can strive to learn another culture's idea of morality in order to understand them.

Let's practice this with the Fore. The Fore believed that eating the body of their loved ones guarantees that the loved one's soul will travel into the afterlife successfully while blessing the family who consumed their body (Whitfield et al. 2008, 3721). They believe that your body will, ultimately, be eaten by *something* (worms if you are buried and maggots if you're not buried; Ibid 3722) and they believe that the best place that your body should ultimately rest is within the bodies of those who loved you. This process is called **transumption**, and the Fore believe that eating your family moves their soul into the afterlife (Ibid).

In the Fore worldview, your body becomes the fuel that sustains life for your children and then causes you to live on through them. But it's not just one person who lives on in this way. As each generation has consumed their parents and grandparents, your body contains the entire ancestral line. To the Fore, burying a loved one in the ground would be a cruel fate that would separate the loved one, trap them forever in their dead body, and end the ancestral line.

At this point, you don't need to morally agree with endocannibalism nor do you have to want to practice it yourself. But, as an anthropologist, you need to stretch your mind to be able to understand this unique cultural practice in its own terms. Soon, after you complete all of the work associated with this topic, you will get to decide how to analyze this cultural ritual using anthropological tools. We will closely examine the Fore's form of endocannibalism and, at the end, you should develop your own ideas about this practice based on the evidence presented.

There is one final element to address: gender and power. As you read before, in the Fore community, the women and children were more likely to die from kuru because they are more likely to eat diseased flesh. While anthropologists do not like to judge another cultural practice against their own belief systems, we are interested in examining how these cultural practices are experienced differently by the groups with less power. As lower-status members of the community, women and children may not have the ability to protest the cultural practice of eating diseased flesh (this is hard to comment on without a direct study on the matter). According to Whitfield, Pako, Collinge, and Alpers, the women eat the diseased flesh as a sacrifice to the community and are later rewarded for doing this. According to Rebecca and Phillip Stein, women are given undesirable meat because they are less powerful in society. As always, please practice critical thinking *and* cultural relativism in order to develop your own ideas about this cultural practice.

Exercise 11E

Anthropologist Shirley Lindenbaum was a principal researcher among the Fore and it was her ethnographic work that ultimately brought kuru to an end. Read her article titled, "An Annotated History of Kuru."

Then, see if you can answer the following questions:

1. “Gender Blindness” is the practice of ignoring the contributions and/or lived experiences of one gender (usually women) in fieldwork. How did gender blindness lead to poor medical research in this case?
2. What major revelation (previously dismissed by biologists) did Robert Glasse and Shirley Lindenbaum uncover and how did this change the debate surrounding kuru?
3. What problem arose when the local Fore people did not receive clear and accurate information about the anthropologists’ intentions for research?

11.16 Cross-Cultural Concepts of Cannibalism: Understanding the continuity of spirit

For many readers of this text, the concept of cannibalism may be seen as aberrant and taboo. For Westerners, the idea of cannibalism conjures up frightening or upsetting images. However, when the consumption of human flesh is part of societal religious practices, what does it really entail and what does it mean? In order to better understand the diversity and meaning behind the practice of cannibalism, we can examine cases of cannibalism as a **societal practice** – that is *a mode of consuming humans that is an accepted practice in society.* These practices are seen in many cultures around the world and are associated with ritualistic and religious beliefs that are deeply embedded in society. Please note that, in this course, we are not examining the aberrant forms of cannibalism (i.e., criminal) in Western society.

For cannibalism to be an accepted societal practice, the culture practicing the **religion** believes that partaking of the body or parts of the deceased ensures that the deceased person’s **spirit** lives on through them. For ritual cannibalism to be accepted, there has to be:

- A belief in a supernatural human spirit.
- A belief that the spirit can live on after death.
- A cultural acceptance of the cyclical nature of life.

11.17 Cannibalism in Catholicism/Christianity

In the New Testament of the Bible, the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke detail what is known as the “Last Supper” of Jesus Christ, which occurs during the Jewish celebration of Passover, before Jesus is sentenced to death and crucified.

During this shared meal, Christ makes various ritualistic gestures as he breaks bread and shares wine with his followers. Specifically, in this story, he states the following as he passes bread to his followers, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Later in the meal Christ takes a cup of wine, and gives it to those present, saying “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

This practice is commemorated today in Christian services around the world. In Catholic traditions, this is known as the Eucharist. This ritual is *not symbolic*; it is actually *literal* in its beliefs. The Catholic doctrine of “Real Presence” established the belief that the bread and wine are actually Christ’s flesh and blood, that Christ is literally present in the Holy Eucharist, and the wine is transfigured into the blood of Christ as it is consumed. A full one-third of Catholic Christians worldwide have a firm belief in the Real Presence of the Eucharist.

Communion as Cannibalism? Holy Communion, by Lawrence OP, Flickr, 2012

So, here from an anthropological perspective, we see a few concepts unfolding.

1. The firm belief in the practice of cannibalism.
2. A person who sacrifices themselves to be consumed as the ultimate sacrifice.

3. A belief that the consumption of the sacrificed person unifies the consumer spiritually with the sacrificed person, so that the sacrificed person's spirit lives on.

11.18 Revenge Cannibalism

The Korowai Tribe of Papua New Guinea practice a type of **revenge cannibalism**. The Korowai have a strong traditional belief in sorcery, witchcraft, and the belief of curses and revenge. These beliefs permeate the society and act as a sort of social sanction.

Anthropologists use the phrase **social sanction** to refer to a cultural practice that utilizes positive or negative feedback from others in order to enforce a standard of "proper" behavior. When we deny people access to social life in response to their "bad" actions, we are utilizing social sanctions.

For the Korowai, the belief in magic and sorcery works as a social sanction because "abnormal" behavior can cause one to be accused of being engaged in sorcery. People strive to get along with their community members in order to avoid societal punishment. However, these fears become so heightened that tensions can run high until fights and acts of revenge occur.

The Korowai explain illness and death in their own, culturally-specific way. In fact, until the 1970s when British anthropologists visited them, the Korowai had no idea there were any other people that were unlike themselves. Illness was viewed with suspicion and was explained as the action of an evil sorcerer. Before dying, a victim may state that they had a vision and they know who the sorcerer is that put a curse on them. If a child is dying, a child or an adult relative might name their sorcerer.

After the death, male relatives of the deceased person filled with rage, fear, and sadness, will go and find the named sorcerer, make them stand in a clearing, shoot them with arrows and then cook and eat the sorcerer. The parts and bones of the sorcerer are dismembered and put on branches to warn other would-be sorcerers of retribution.

What religious beliefs would support this action? The Korowai strongly believe that the **sorcerers** are **cannibals.** The Korowai believe that illness and death in a loved one is the result of the sorcerer's magic. The Korowai believe in a practice in which a shaman literally eats the soul of a person from a physical distance; they call this practice **remote eating** (this results in the death of the victim) (van Enk 1997).

The Korowai claim they do not want to eat sorcerers. The Korowai say that human meat tastes terrible and that '*normal people should not eat each other*'. However, in order to prevent the sorcerer from eating people, the Korowai must eat them in retribution. For more, watch "The Gentle Cannibals" from Oxford Humanities.

? Exercise 11F: Journal Reflection

Now that you more intimately understand cannibalism, has your opinion changed on the matter? In what way? What cultural representations of cannibalism are commonly presented in your culture and how have these impacted your understanding of the practice?

11.19 Relics

In some religious traditions, dead bodies of holy people, parts of dead bodies, and objects associated with the body of a holy person, take on a particular significance. These bodies, body parts, and objects are called **relics.** We can think of relics as a material aspect of a sacred person or sacred event that has remained on earth. In this sense, certain religious traditions understand relics as blurring the boundaries between life and death; they bring death into the world of the living but may also be believed to assert the continuity of life in death.

Anthropologists Victor Turner and Edith Turner have noted that relics work through the principles of sympathetic and contagious magic (Turner and Turner 2011). Relics involve sympathetic magic, because they can be embedded in a reliquary that resembles the form of the holy person, such as an icon or statue. Also they are often a part of the body, or an object that has been in intimate contact with the body of the holy person. Such an object or fragment of the body is thought to carry as much sacredness as the person from whom it came.

Some scholars argue that the oldest example of relics are those of Pharaohs in ancient Egypt, whose mummified remains were interred in pyramids and venerated. Mummification began as a way to prevent decomposition of the physical body so that when the spiritual element of a person ("ba") was reunited with the body in the afterlife the body would be complete and functioning. In this section, we will examine relics in two major religious traditions: Catholicism and Buddhism.

11.20 Relics in Catholicism

In Catholicism, the focus on relics can be traced to the rise of the "cult of saints," which began in the 3rd century CE and gained popularity in the 4th through 6th centuries CE. Whereas earlier Christian beliefs did not place particular importance on graves or bodies (the soul was what was important, and was understood by early Christians to separate from the body upon death and ascend to heaven), beginning in the 3rd century, tombs – and, moreover, the remains that they contained – began to be viewed as sacred sites on Earth. Indeed, tombs were thought to be a point of contact between heaven and Earth. By the medieval period, the cult of saints was so popular that people, including monks, robbed tombs, gravesites, and otherwise engaged in ***furta* sacra**, sacred theft in order to obtain relics to place in new shrines.



Relics of St John Southworth by Lawrence OP, Flickr 2008

The historian **Peter Brown** in his work on Christianity in late antiquity (Brown 1981) argues that as relics were removed from graves scattered across Europe, the cult of saints became at once widespread and localized. New chapels and shrines sprung up in places where people managed to obtain a fragment of a saint's body. Relics could unify communities and create social identities (a saint could be a patron of a particular place where their relic was located), reveal the Church's power in a particular place (bishops could consolidate power by obtaining relics), and serve spiritual needs. Relics were thought to be able to produce miracles, in the same way that a saint could during his or her lifetime, such as curing an illness or a physical disability. Other signs believed to show a relic's authenticity included apparitions, dancing lights, and sweet smells.

From late antiquity to the present, the desire of devout people to be close to the saints and sacred places has motivated them to undergo pilgrimage, a sacred and often transformative journey (see Chapter 6). Relics could travel, too, so that more people could venerate them: the travel of relics is called **translation**, and is highly ritualized.

Whereas the early veneration of relics generally took place in close proximity to a saint's tomb, as relics traveled across Europe they were usually kept in **reliquaries**: cabinets, arks, chests, statues, busts, these containers were often in the shape of the body part that the fragment of bone came from (a head, a hand, an arm). Reliquaries are often spectacular works of religious artistry in their own right: they were often made with precious metals and gems, and were ornately worked and carved.

The emphasis on the proper attitude toward relics points to the importance placed on *not*viewing the relics as ends in themselves, but rather as a means to an end. They are to be venerated, not worshipped. They are to be recognized as a gift the saint left behind that carries memory of the saint's own pious life and to be reminded that the owner of the bones has already achieved eternal life. Saints who died as martyrs are understood to have emulated both the life and death of Jesus because they gave up their own lives as a form of sacrifice. Relics in Catholicism work as a kind of channel or conduit to the sacred. At the same time, as Caroline Walker Bynum argues, there is a long history of devout Catholics treating material objects (statues, paintings, rosaries, and relics) as themselves "[loci] of the divine" (Bynum 2015, 65). Devout people may pray in the presence of the relic, meditate on the life of the saint, ask the saint to intercede on their behalf, give thanks to the saint for favors received.

In Catholicism, relics consist of bodies or part of the bodies of holy people (saints), objects associated with martyrdom (the sacrifice of one's life for one's religion), and other objects that came into close contact with the holy person. The holiness of a person is thought to exist in their body (or even in the tiniest fragment of their body) even after that person has passed away. In Catholicism, relics are generally categorized into three types:.

- First-class relics consist of the entire bodies, or fragments of the bodies of saints and also instruments of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, such as splinters claimed to be from the cross that Jesus was crucified upon, the nails of the crucifixion, the crown of thorns, the shroud that covered Jesus's body.

- Second-class relics encompass objects made sacred by being in close proximity to saints like clothing, objects that the saint used, or instruments of a martyr's torture.
- Third-class relics are objects that touched either first- or second-class relics (Cruz 2015, 3).

11.21 Relics in Buddhism

When we look at relics in Buddhism, we see areas of similarity with Catholic beliefs and their practices surrounding relics, but we also see dissimilarities that reflect the theological differences between the two religions.

In Buddhism, the fragments of bodies and objects considered to be relics belong to the founder of Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha, other Buddhas of the past, and saints. Relics have been central to Buddhism since the beginning of that religion. They are considered to be both mobile and fecund, meaning that they miraculously move and multiply. The movement of relics helped to spread Buddhism across Asia (as Christianity spread across Europe). Relics are thought to carry memory and be receptacles of merit and virtue.

Relics in Buddhism may be fragments from the body, such as bones, teeth, hair, etc. . In Buddhism, bodies are generally cremated. The bodies of Buddhas are thought to exude substances during the cremation process and appear as hard, mineral or gemlike substances among the ashes. Some scholars think that the appearance of these crystallized bodily substances may be a cultural response to culturally based taboos concerning the handling of dead bodies, which are considered polluting. However, the existence of relics that are actual fragments of bodies would seem to contradict this idea. Relics also may be objects that belonged to the Buddha, such as his staff. They may consist of other traces of the Buddha's presence on earth, such as his shadow or footprints. Yet another kind of relic in Buddhism is that of dharma, the Buddha's teachings. Dharma relics can be anything that recorded these teachings, such as sutras, scriptural texts.

Relics are contained in reliquaries, which can be made of a number of different materials: clay, stone, crystal, and metal. Reliquaries may contain materials not directly associated with the Buddha, such as precious metals and gemstones, pearls, beads, and jewelry. The reliquaries are often placed in larger containers, or in multiple containers, one nesting inside another, then placed in a **stupa**. Stupas for safeguarding relics of the Buddha were first constructed in India, around 250 BCE. The earliest stupas were low, dome-shaped monuments that simply marked the presence of a sacred site and presence of the relics of the Buddha. Over the centuries, as Buddhism and its architecture spread across Asia, stupas became increasingly decorative, bearing reliefs and friezes. Stupas themselves were placed in prayer halls, or elaborate temples to be visited and venerated (Byrne 2015).

Buddhist tradition holds that following the Buddha's cremation, the ashes were divided into eight parts to be enshrined in the form of a mound that ranges in shape from low mounds to bell and bulb shapes, depending upon the region. There are many thousands of Buddhists monasteries and temples across the world, and they all contain stupas. Not all possess relics; instead, upon the construction of stupas, they might contain tiny statues, amulets, or even the ashes of ordinary devout people. The continuity of connection between a relic of the Buddha and the Buddha himself allows the power of the Buddha to "flow through time" but also through space: from the relic, to the stupa, to the temple that houses the stupa, and even to the town where the temple is located (Byrne 2015).

The relics of the Buddha can be understood as equivalent to the Buddha: in different cultural settings and historical contexts, the relics of the Buddha have been viewed as being alive, being legally able to hold property, perform miracles, inspire devotees, and have the qualities of the Buddha himself. At the same time, the relics are not the Buddha; they are a substitute for the Buddha. They are mnemonic devices meant to invite reflection on the Buddha's life.

Relics can be understood as extensions of the Buddha's own life story: they have biographies of their own. Relics of the Buddha can work to make empires recognize and spread the teachings of the Buddha in regions that the Buddha did not visit in his own lifetime. Some legends tell that in the future, prior to the coming of the next Buddha, the Buddha's relics, currently scattered across different regions of the world, will eventually assemble and undergo a **parinirvana** — final extinction and release from karmic rebirth (already experienced by the Buddha upon his death) — of their own (Strong 2004).

Exercise 11G: Journal Reflection

Reflect on loss in your community. How are social networks broken when a person dies? How are people in your community expected to grieve? Does the grieving process rebuild the broken social connections? How?

Exercise 11H: Study Guide

Define the following terms in your own words:

- social network
- memorial potlatch
- secondary burial
- egalitarian social organization
- relics
- furta sacra
- translation
- reliquaries
- stupa
- parinirvana
    - Kuru:
    - Transumption
    - The Fore:
    - Endocannibalistic anthropophagers:
    - Death Ritual:
    - Mummification:
    - Tibetan Sky Burial:
    - Prion:
    - Revenge Cannibalism:
    - Social Sanction:
    - Remote Eating:
    - Functionalism:

Ensure that you can briefly summarize the arguments of these social scientists:

- Nancy Munn
- Sergei Kan
- Peter Metcalf
- Chris Fowler
- Peter Brown
- Shirley Lindenbaum

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