
UNIT 11 CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, the learner would be able to discuss the following contemporary theories in anthropological discourse:

- symbolism;
- interpretative theory;
- post-colonial and critical period; and
- feminism and feminist thoughts in anthropology.

11.0 INTRODUCTION

There was a paradigm shift in anthropology from the seventies onwards. As you had read in the earlier units the focus had shifted from evolution to functional aspects. Earlier attempts at creating a science of society on the lines of the natural sciences were replaced by the realisation that humans had some unique capacities, foremost among them being the capacity for creativity and the capacity to symbolise. Thus it was not possible to create mechanistic models of human behaviour as humans could if they so wished completely change the course of their lives.

Another major transformation had begun to take place when the male and white-centric academic community became diversified. The former 'objects' of research became scholars in their own right and began to question the labels, assumptions and paradigms of the earlier positivist approach. It became increasingly evident that the 'truth' that was being propagated was only the 'truth' from one perspective and not from that of the 'others'; the native anthropologists, the women and the 'marginal' from within societies. Although termed as a 'post-colonial' critique, it became evident that there were more than one form of colonisation there were many categories of people who did not have a voice in the dissemination of knowledge. The women's voices had not been heard, but there were mainstream women, and marginal women, the Afro-American women, the Muslim women and the Dalit women, to mention only a few categories. Similarly, the internal colonisation of the erstwhile colonies

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kept the dominated and marginal people such as tribals and the Dalits of India, out of the intellectual discourse.

In this unit, we shall discuss some of these concerns, the emergence of new perspectives in the wake of power shifts in the world.

11.1 SYMBOLISM

By the sixties, the understanding of culture as a system of symbols was taking its roots (Ortner 1984). A symbol is a representation of something to which it has no inherent or physical relationship. Thus language is the prime example of symbolic behaviour, something that only the human brain is capable of. Since the relationship of an object to the sound that represents it is purely arbitrary, there are numerous languages and dialects in the world, for there are just so many ways in which anything can be attached to a verbal expression. The same or similar sound may mean something quite different in different languages. The symbolic approach looks at culture itself as a system of symbols and symbolically constructed action patterns. Everything in culture has a meaning. Thus we have culturally prescribed dress codes, we have culturally understood scripts for action, and we are able to understand signs, gestures, words and actions because the process of symbolic behaviour is also a public and shared one. So to say, all belonging to the same community of shared meaning can communicate easily with each other, while outside of one's shared meaning system people become illiterate, they become clueless as to what is happening.

It was realised that different aspects of culture convey meanings that can only be understood when contextualised within a larger system of meaning. Meanings also exist at two levels, at the level of the actors and at a higher level, where their functions pertain to the general level of society. Higher level meanings can be only assessed by deductive reasoning. Let us take the action of unfurling of the national flag on Independence Day. At the level of the participants, it symbolises the freedom of the nation. But against the theoretical perception of the nation as a construct, with no real form or existence; it is one way to give symbolic meaning to an amorphous entity that needs constant reinforcement to exist. In other words, if people were not periodically reminded and that too in a theatrical manner, that the nation exists, they would forget.

In the earlier phase of symbolic analysis, it was the analyst who had the prerogative of deciding what meaning the acts or objects had in the scheme of things. The symbolic analysis done by scholars such as Victor Turner (1967, 1969), Edmund Leach (1961), and Sherry Ortner (1973) were done in the backdrop of ethnography but the final say was that of the scholar, who put himself/herself, in the position of privilege. Turner is well known for his analysis of rituals and the function of rituals in maintaining social harmony. In his book *The Ritual Process*, he has done a semantic analysis of the ritual of *Isoma*, a woman's ritual that involves fertility rituals and is part of a larger category of rituals that involve the shades (spirits) of the ancestors. Turner (1969:10) describes his method of doing such an analysis by first understanding the meanings that the Ndembu (the people who have been studied) give to their own symbols. From the collection of this specific data, Turner then goes onto a more generalised and analytical level. The Ndembu derive the meaning of their symbols mostly from the name they give to it. Thus in their language the word for ritual is *chidika*, which means an obligation. Thus the performance of rituals, for the most part is an obligation for them. The ritual of *Isoma* is performed as an obligation to the ancestors, who have become angry and sent affliction as they had not been

remembered well enough. Thus among the matrilineal Ndembu, “social placement is through women but authority lies in the hands of the men” (ibid:14). The women get involved with their husbands and forget their female ancestresses who then afflict them with barrenness or frequent miscarriage or loss of live of their children. In all cases they cannot become successful mothers, which is the prime goal of women among the Ndembu.

Now according to Turner, every item that is part of a ritual has a symbolic meaning, “by convention stands for something other than itself” (ibid:15). Every ritual element acts as a trail blazer and as a connection between known and unknown territory, here between the known world of the living and the unknown world of the shades (spirits). The name *Isoma* is also symbolic, as it literally means to slip out of place or come unfastened; and when applied to the woman suffering it means that her children are slipping away or going away from where they are supposed to be. It also implies that the matrilineal kin are being forgotten (slipping away from memory). The entire ritual process also brings out (to the analyst) the process of binary opposition that Lévi-Strauss (1967) had attributed to the human mind. But to Turner, the symbolism of the Ndembu rituals do not simply relate to the mind and are not only, as Lévi-Strauss suggests cognitive categories for making sense of the universe, but they are also outlets for channeling of violent emotions, such as grief, anger and affection. They are also goal oriented and they set out to achieve something. In case of the *Isoma*, they succeed in bringing the husband-wife together and appease the matrilineal kin, thus absolving the inherent contradiction of Ndembu society between matriliney and patrilocal residence.

Edmund Leach’s famous essay on the symbolism of annual rituals shows how time was reckoned by the process of reversal, like a pendulum. So that during the festival of Holi for example, a lot of role reversals take place, women beat men (popularly known as *lath mar* Holi), younger people throw colours on elders, barriers go down; in other words there is break down of society as a normal routine. This reversal marks out a break so that the year begins again. Similar reversals are found in the annual rituals of other cultures as well.

Another well-known symbolic analysis of rituals is that of life cycle rituals by van Gennep (1902), who identified three stages in any ritual that marks a transition from one social status to another. There is a stage of separation, a liminal stage and a stage of incorporation. Let us take the case of marriage, where in the first stage, the woman and the man are given a different designation, namely bride and groom and separated from their normal life. Then the marriage rituals ensure that they go into a liminal stage, remain suspended from their routine work in society. People take time off from routine work and go into a different mode to prepare for a future life. This stage continues till the actual marriage ceremony and then the married couple get back to routine. This ritual of incorporation is also marked like when the new daughter-in-law makes her first meal in the new house or when the colleagues at office throw a party to greet a newly married man or woman. Then life enters a new routine where one’s status has changed forever. Thus the different rituals were integrated within a complete symbolic cycle by van Gennep, whose theory was incorporated within symbolic anthropology by scholars like Edmund Leach, who made use of the concept of liminality.

Ortner (1973) has given the theory of Key Symbols. According to her, every culture uses a key symbol as a fulcrum around which it builds up its identity. More complex cultures may have more than one key symbol for different aspects of its society, like

Theoretical Perspectives

the national flag is the symbol of the political identity for any person belonging to a nation-state. Every religion may have its own key symbol, like the Cross for Christians, the Swastika for Hindus and so on. She divided Key Symbols into two basic types; Summarising Symbols and Elaborating Symbols, the second one is again divided into Key Scenarios and Root Metaphors. The summarising symbols are those that pack a lot of meaning into a single item, like the national flag. These symbols have multiple meanings operating at different levels and evoke a wide range of emotions. Elaborating symbols are those that break down the components of any social event to make it comprehensible to the members of society. They are of two types, Key Scenarios, scripts that make things easy to understand and Root metaphors that are key aspects of culture that make the various meanings of life clear. For example, in the context of India, we can say the performance of the Ramlila is a Key Scenario, where each aspect of the drama brings out one facet of life and indicates the ideal behaviour associated with it; the ideal son, ideal daughter-in-law, ideal mother, ideal wife, ideal brother and so on. So that it is a script for how to live one's life according to the highest ideals of the given culture. Root metaphors are social icons or the central aspect of any one's life. They differ according to the subsistence patterns, the geographical location and so on. For example for the pastoral people, it is their animals. Their entire life is woven around these animals. Referring to Evans-Pritchard's ethnography of the Nuer we can easily say that the cattle provide the Root Metaphor for their lives. The Nuer reckon the time of the day, the time of the year, the annual cycle of weather, the climate, colours, aesthetics and every aspect of their lives with reference to their cattle.

Thus symbolic analysis tells us that all cultural traits, customs and behaviour have underlying meanings. Since the relationship between a symbol and what it stands for is purely arbitrary, it takes qualitative ethnographic methods to get to the true meaning of things. These meanings are both latent and under the surface. They are often multifaceted and different categories of persons may also have their own system of meanings.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1. Give a prime example of symbolic behaviour.

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- 2. Who wrote the book *The Ritual Process*?

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- 3. The theory of Key Symbol was given by which anthropologist?

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4. Can you identify some of the anthropologists who have contributed to the concept of symbolism in anthropological theories after reading this section?

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11.2 INTERPRETATIVE THEORY

According to this theory, given by Clifford Geertz, entire cultures are nothing but systems of meaning, that hang together because the meanings of one part are only explainable by the meanings of another and all are contextualised to the entire system of meanings. Thus human beings are suspended in webs of signification that they have created and they reproduce, but no longer control. We are born into a system of meanings that we imbibe through the process of enculturation. In our everyday life practices, we continuously reproduce these systems of meaning. For example, in the Hindu cultural system, there are many sacred beings and places, and there are culturally prescribed ways of behaviour associated with these beings and places, that further tend to reproduce the sacredness of these fragments of the environment. The manner in which the sacredness is expressed is again a part of the larger system of meanings, like some colours are auspicious in a culture and some colours are not; some prescribed acts are respectful and others are not. Why this is so is again linked to other systems of meanings and explanations. Thus every part of the cosmology is linked to the other, and every act makes sense only in reference to the larger context. Geertz (1973) said that cultural anthropology was not a science in search of laws but an interpretative one in search of meanings. In this way he had directly criticised the earlier positivist stand point.

According to Geertz, interpretative theory is only possible if we engage in what he has designated as ‘thick description’ that is trying to get to the deeper layers of meanings of any act. These imply not just the meaning that the analyst is attributing to it, but also the meaning that the actor is acting out. Whenever we are faced with interpretation of any cultural act, the question is not of objectivity or subjectivity but of the implication of the act, what was the act meant to be, why was it enacted, how can it be placed in the larger scheme of meanings that exist in that culture?

Culture is composed of public meanings, because cultural meanings would be meaningless if they were not understood by the community or the collective, where they occur. Culture is thus a context. It is not a constellation of physical acts but the meanings of these acts that makes them intelligible to members of a society. The task of the anthropologists is to be able to converse with members of a culture in a way that one is able to make oneself understood. Thus one needs to go into what Geertz has called “the informal logic of everyday life”; to understand exactly what is happening and why it is happening, in other words, how is it meaningful to those who are performing. Again a cultural description need not always be neat and bound, it can be fuzzy, as culture in real life often is.

Ethnographers write but they should not move away from the people or events about which or whom they are writing; in other words writing should not be too abstracted, as was done by the structural-functional scholars, in the interest of getting tight and neat analysis. It should retain the living aspects, even if that means that

description is long drawn and fuzzy. This is what Clifford Geertz meant by thick description; examples of this are found in his description of the Balinese cockfight and of markets in Java.

Check Your Progress 2

5. Who postulated the Interpretative theory?

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6. What is meant by ‘thick description’?

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11.3 POST- COLONIAL AND POST-MODERN CRITIQUE

The modernist period for anthropology that began with the Age of Reason and to some extent continues at least for some people was marked by Positivism, a belief that there was a ‘truth’ that was an objective reality outside of the subjective self; and that it was possible to get to it. Once established it was immutable and fixed. The post-modern period began in the post-world war era, also marked by rapid decolonisation of the erstwhile colonies and a renegotiation of power across the globe. While the Euro-American supremacy continued for a long period and took the form of neo-liberalisation, and to some extent neo-colonialism, the erstwhile marginal people slowly began to take their place in the sun. Philosophers like Derrida, Foucault, Wittgenstein, Homi Bhabha and Spivak, questioned the notion of fixed truths, leading to an era of deconstruction, a shifting of the center and a disbelief in ‘truth’ as the product of one class and kind of people.

The Post-colonial era saw the rise of non-western intellectuals and also those not male. Thus, the white, male, western European scholar or eminence, whose voice was law; was replaced by a multitude of voices raising themselves from many locations. Post-modernism applies to all disciplines, all forms of aesthetics and philosophy in general. For anthropology, postmodernism had its unique significance, like anthropology, by definition was the study of the Other by White, male, colonial anthropologists. The critique of the production of knowledge about the ‘other’ the biases involved in such studies were foregrounded by non-European scholars such as Edward Said, Talal Asad, Gayatri Spivak, Lila Abu-Lughod and many others, from the erstwhile colonies. From within the white fraternity, many voices came out like that of Eric Wolf, James Clifford, Stephen Tyler etc.; critiquing earlier established, ‘truths’.

A major criticism such as that posed was regarding the claim to truth, “is there not a liberation, too, in recognising that no one can write about others any longer, as if they were discrete objects or texts” (Clifford 1990: 25). The methodology of assuming that the self of the anthropologist was neutralised in his/her pursuit of truth was exposed as a fallacy. As more and more anthropologists came forward to do restudies, it was found that each person had his or her versions of what they put forward as the

truth. It was realised beyond doubt that the self is never far away from the other, and a separation of the two is not possible. The publication of the Diary of Malinowski showed that the anthropologist is human and has an emotional relationship to the field. There is no possibility of absolute objectivity and neutrality when we are dealing with other human beings. In the diary, Malinowski sheds the mask of the impersonal observer to write about his emotional outbreaks, his subjective response to the people with whom he was forced to share a few years of his life.

The restudy by Annette Weiner of Malinowski's field area, revealed another source of bias, what is now recognised in anthropological methodology as the gender bias. Weiner found that Malinowski's otherwise detailed and excellent ethnography had completely ignored the important ritual and economic significance of women's work. The women of the Trobriand Islands play an important role in society, even though they do not participate in the famous Kula exchange. Malinowski was a nineteenth-century European male. He was accustomed to a society where women were confined to the domestic sphere only. Even when he observed the women weaving grass skirts, he would have dismissed it as 'domestic' activity, not worthy of anthropological attention. Weiner, a woman scholar born several decades after Malinowski, took the women's work seriously. She was able to understand that there is a world of women apart from that of men. Many anthropologists have dwelt on the self of the anthropologist in interaction with the field since then. The anthropologist's body and mind are both gendered and also subjectively constituted. Each one of us have our preconceived notions and our way of constructing the world, that is unconscious and buried so deep that we tend to take some things for granted, what Bourdieu has called *doxa*.

Reflection

Doxa are those aspects of life that we accept without question, that we take as givens but the reality is that every such aspect is 'constructed'. These include ideas about what is considered 'normal' in every society. It is nearly impossible for anyone to rise above all such subjectivities and in the post-modern times, there are any number of critiques of concepts and findings of the modernist or colonial period.

The colonial period was also marked by the power hierarchy between the observer and the observed. The coining of terms such as 'tribe', 'wild', 'modern', 'traditional' were all done with the goal of administration, extraction and extending the agenda of the dominance of the First World ideologies. Wolf has made critical remarks on how the concept of development and modernity are being used with a bias towards the USA. So whenever modernisation theory is put into practice, "It used the term modern but that term meant the United States" or as he puts it, an idealised version of what USA stands for rather than what it really is. Similarly there is a tendency to simplify categories. Terms like modern, traditional were essentialised into dichotomous categories; without taking into account the internal differences. There is not one kind of non-western society, nor is the USA a uniform society. Likewise, there is not one kind of community that can be called as 'tribe'.

Contemporary times are seeing a lot of critical gaze being turned onto these earlier created categories, seeing their top-down bias, the role of power hierarchies in creating them and the interests they served of particular categories of people.

A large amount of this criticism is being done by those scholars who earlier belonged to the margins of society. In India, work by Dalit and tribal scholars are important

indicators that the earlier scholarship was both created by, and meant for those in the mainstream. This scholarship was also more reflexive and oriented towards narrating experiential reality that in building formal structures (Channa and Mencher 2013). Rather than reify the experiential and lived data, such scholars focused on narrating their life experiences so that the genre of poetry and poetics was often used by them as a way of expression. Thus post-modernism moved beyond the formal and the structures towards the experiential and reflexive modes of writing.

However there was a critique of post-modernism in that it sometimes became too hazy and the subject matter itself became endangered. The critics were of the opinion that there was enough solid data and factual empirical concerns that needed to be addressed and one could not always dwell in the realm of the abstract. Thus even from the margins, there were bottom-up approaches where the actual facts and figures too played important role. Dalit studies focused on real-life conditions, oppressions, poverty, lack of access to resources such as education and access to political power. Tribal studies are focusing on actual data of land and resources lost to the tribes, factual figures about atrocities along with more reflexive accounts of identity and self-reflection. Thus while scholars are critiquing the rigidity of earlier modes of analysis, this is not to replace all empiricism and reference to factual data. The role of history both documented and oral, also plays a significant role in anthropological ethnographies. There is also a focus on identities both of the self and as codified by society (Channa 2016).

Check Your Progress 3

- 7. Suggest some of the markers for the post-modern period.

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- 8. Why was the post-colonial era important in Anthropology?

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11.4 THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

The Feminist critique is one form of the deconstruction of the white, male-centric discipline that anthropology was in the colonial period. As described by Abu-Lughod (2006:467; org.1991) “Feminism has been a movement devoted to helping women become selves and subjects rather than objects and men’s others”. The feminist approach brought certain methodological issues to anthropology. Firstly it was a critical approach, rooted in the power differentiation between men and women and assuming at least some form of universal subordination. In this sense some early feminist scholars were critical of the cultural relativism of anthropologists, even ones like Margaret Mead. Mead had inspired generations of American women, by letting them know that ‘biology was not destiny’. Her work, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, was a seminal work that showed what is masculine and what is feminine, may vary from society to society. In other words, nature had not made men and women different from each other, but the culture had. This went

against the universal subordination of women, proposed by the early feminists, especially the radical feminists, who identified universal subordination with biology and sexuality.

However feminists of the first generation, namely who had an essentialised view about men and women, as universal dichotomous categories, with similar problems located in a universal construction of masculinity and femininity, were heavily criticised on many counts. The criticism was directed against what was regarded as 'white, middle class, elite' feminists by non-white, non-western women, also non-heterosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals and others who did not fit into neat compartments of being men and women. In India, we have had Dalit women's perspectives as opposed to that of the upper caste and class women. In each case the argument has been that there are different issues and problems that different categories of people have. Every one cannot be reduced to the same essentialised concept. For example African-American women criticised the white, middle-class women's efforts towards sexual liberation. They put forward their alternate perspectives about *wanting to have their men around*, as a majority of African American young men are in jails. What they were looking for was a life of dignity where they should not be perceived only as sex objects. In other words they wanted *just the opposite* of sexual liberation. Similarly Dalit women had criticised the upper caste women's liberation movement in India, by saying that the concerns of the upper caste women; pertaining to child and widow marriage, emancipation of women, etc., did not address *their* issues. For them it was poverty, lack of resources, sexual exploitation and the grind of hard work that were important issues. Thus Black feminist scholar Angela Davis had put forward the question, as to whether feminist work was being developed "with an adequate historical sense of differences among women" (c.f. Bhavnani 1994 :27).

But what feminism did contribute was to show the possibilities of alternative worlds, alternative ways of knowing and it deconstructed some taken for granted 'truth' like 'science'. It was the critical analysis of scholars like Donna Haraway (1988) and Susan Harding (1991) that deconstructed the privileged position held by science and they relabeled it as Western and male-centric body of knowledge, that far from being eternal and a purely objective body of knowledge was biased and male-centric. They showed with examples from biological and natural sciences that scientists often set up their experiments, or engage in analysis, that is informed by pre-conceived notions and analysis is often only the establishment of proof of what is already in the mind of the scientist. For example, with reference to studies on primate behaviour done by men, it can be shown that men always ended up demonstrating the 'facts' of male dominance and female dependency but working with the same species, women scholars often came up with startlingly different results.

There is in fact today a great deal of criticism of the concept of 'science' as an infallible statement of the truth. Feminism coined the concept of 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988); with science being now recognised as 'western science' and 'male-centered knowledge'. By deconstructing the fulcrum of knowledge, they opened up the possibility of recognition of alternative forms of knowledge, especially knowledge from the margins. Thus, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to be answerable for what we see" (ibid: 583). In other words what Haraway is pleading for is not grand and abstract theory construction, in the name of science but small, essential and applicable knowledge's that are created and can be used situationally. Thus the Feminist approach is critical of the ethics and values of science more than of its methodology. They are against an elitist science that may be used

for mass destruction but may not come to the rescue of a marginal few on the ground.

The feminists, including those who are pleading for environmental conservation; recognise that more than men and women as essentialised categories, what one is looking for is masculine and feminine principles, that may manifest anywhere and in anybody. The masculine are the dominating principles of today's world, looking towards more and more exploitation, of humans as well as of nature; eulogising violence and aggression in both the political and economic domain. Thus for long the colonising western world has worshipped patriarchy and masculinity both as an ideology and in practice. It is this aggression that has destroyed cultures, peoples and the environment and continues to do so.

The feminine principles are of nurture, compassion, solidarity and building relationships. These are indeed the classical feminine characters that were used by men to denigrate women. But the contemporary feminists assert these very qualities as life giving and globe sustaining. Thus the new generation of feminists do not deny femininity as a form of weakness. They assert feminism as desired qualities both in terms of methodology and in practice.

In terms of methodology the feminist approach, humanises the object of knowledge to perceive it "as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of 'objective' knowledge". In other words, while collecting data as well in the analysis the entities that one is studying should be made part of the interactive process of both data generation and the analysis. Thus the kind of analysis that was done by, say the positivist symbolic analyst is not approved of by the feminist scholars. A feminist analysis does not simply go beyond creating a dialogue but to include the subject as an actor, as an active participant in the process. This also automatically means that all analysis is contextualised within a specific context and there is not too much possibility of sweeping generalisations.

Thus, feminist analysis is not about women or about gender, as is often falsely implied. It is about incorporating and celebrating the feminine principles, values and ethics, into research. This means a nurturing, caring and sharing attitude. When applied to nature, it negates the earlier dominating and exploitative relationships which the dominant masculine principles had established. Men can be feminists and women can be masculine in their approach. It is the values that matter not the gender of the person.

11.5 SUMMARY

In this unit we have reflected upon the paradigm shift in anthropology from the seventies onwards. How the focus had shifted from evolution to functional aspects to realisation and acknowledgement of unique human capacities, foremost among them being the capacity for creativity and the capacity to symbolise. Thus it was not possible to create mechanistic models of human behaviour as humans could if they so wished completely change the course of their lives.

Another major transformation that came to the forefront was the anthropologists themselves. The earlier anthropologists male and white-centric in the academic community shifted to the former 'objects' of research who became scholars in their own right and began to question the labels, assumptions and paradigms of the earlier positivist approach. It became increasingly evident that the 'truth' that was being

propagated was only the 'truth' from one perspective and not from that of the 'others'; the native anthropologists, the women and the 'marginal' from within societies. Although termed as a 'post-colonial' critique, it became evident that there were more than one form of colonisation and there were many categories of people who did not have a voice in the dissemination of knowledge. The women's voices had not been heard which came into prominence during this era.

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11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Language.
2. Victor Turner.
3. Sherry Ortner.
4. Victor Turner, van Gennep, Sherry Ortner etc.
5. Clifford Geertz.
6. See section 11.2.
7. See section 11.3.
8. See section 11.3.