

# **Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology**

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UNIT 2 History and Development of Social and Cultural Anthropology	Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa, Former Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi
UNIT 3 Relationship of Social and Cultural Anthropology: Other Branches of Anthropology and other Disciplines	Dr. Keya Pandey, Department of Anthropology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow <b>Unit 3 Edited by:</b> Professor Vinay Kumar Srivastava, Former Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi. Currently Director, Anthropological Survey of India.
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UNIT 5 Culture	
UNIT 6 Institutions I: Kinship, Family, Marriage	
UNIT 7 Institutions II: Economic, Political Religious	
<b>Block 3 Theoretical Perspectives</b>	
UNIT 8 Classical Theories	Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa, Former Professor, Department of Anthropology University of Delhi
UNIT 9 Theories of Structure and Function	Prof. Vinay Kumar Srivastava, Former Head and Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Currently Director, Anthropological Survey of India.
UNIT 10 Contemporary Theories	Prof. Subhadra Mitra Channa, Former Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi.
<b>Block 4 Fieldwork</b>	
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UNIT 13 Methods and Techniques	
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# BANC 102 INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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## Course Introduction

Social and cultural anthropology under its rubric encompasses the study of society and culture. The foremost contribution of the subject has been in the understanding of the various societies and cultures across the globe both objectively and subjectively, doing away with biases and prejudices, while presenting their relative importance. The main objective of the course is for the learners to understand in a holistic manner the social institutions and the cultural attributes that constructs human societies.

## Learning Outcomes

After reading the course the learner would be able to:

- i) explain the origin, historical background and foundation of social and cultural anthropology;
- ii) identify the various institutions in a society and relate to the cultural aspects present in societies;
- iii) discuss the theories and approaches to the social and cultural anthropology; and
- iv) describe how fieldwork is to be conducted in the field of social and cultural anthropology.

## Course Presentation

The course has been divided into four blocks and a practical manual. Each block has been thematically arranged units. In total there are thirteen units. Now let us see what we have discussed in each block.

**Block 1:** The first block will acquaint the learners with the basic understanding of the foundation of social and cultural anthropology along with its emergence as a scientific discipline. This block deals with the early developments that lead to the beginning of the discipline of social and cultural anthropology. Herein, the development of the subject in Britain and America has been dealt that presents the question of why the British anthropologists laid emphasis on society and the American anthropologists on culture. The growth and development of social and cultural anthropology in India is also reflected upon. The learners would also gain insight as to how the subject is different yet have similarities with some of the other disciplines like sociology, psychology, history, political science etc.

**Block 2:** The second block deals with the study of the forms and processes in the conceptualisation of society and culture. This block takes into account the social institutions that are the pillars of the society. Social groups; concepts of kinship, marriage and family; religious ideas and ritual practices; the production, consumption and exchange of necessities. The learners while reading this block would be able to comprehend how culture is entwined with the institutions forming an integral part of society. Institutions are universal in societies however, it is cultural variations that bring forth diversity.

**Block 3:** The third block presents the theories and approaches, some defunct some still in practice, that make up the study of human society and culture. From this block the learners would gain insight as to how the theories have changed with the perspectives that the anthropologists looked at societies. In the initial stages of the subject the focus was on how evolution had taken place, to diffusion, then the trend was to understand the functions and the structures within a society. In the twenty first century how the focus has shifted to modern and post modern phases and the inclusion of the female voice in anthropological writings.

**Block 4:** In the last block, the learner would be introduced to field traditions and fieldwork, the hallmark of anthropology. The nuances of how to conduct a fieldwork, the tools and techniques that are to be used during data collection in the field, compilation and analysing the data after returning from the field to writing and presentation of the dissertation, thesis or project report has been discussed in depth. This block would prepare the learner to take up anthropological fieldwork.

**Practical Manual:** The practical manual would assist the learners to prepare a synopsis. It is a guide for the learners to acquaint themselves with the process of preparing a synopsis. The manual would guide the learners to prepare a synopsis step by step right from the stage of conceptualising a topic to the style citing references.

All the best, happy reading and wish you success. Hope the course material act as a guide for you to achieve your goals.



**BLOCK 3**  
**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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**UNIT 8**

**Classical Theories**

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**UNIT 9**

**Theories of Structure and Function**

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**UNIT 10**

**Contemporary Theories**

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## UNIT 8 CLASSICAL THEORIES

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- 8.0 Introduction
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- 8.2 Classical Evolutionary Theory
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- 8.5 Neo-Diffusionism
- 8.6 Neo-Evolutionism
- 8.7 Summary
- 8.8 References
- 8.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, you will learn about the following perspectives:

- the beginning: comparative method and the science of society;
- evolutionary theory;
- diffusion theory;
- historical particularism;
- neo-evolution: multilineal evolution and cultural ecology; and
- neo-diffusion: culture area theory.

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### 8.0 INTRODUCTION

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Anthropology starts as the Science of Man (quite literally as almost all the early scholars were white men). By the sixteenth century, the understanding that humans as a species are part of nature and controlled by its laws like any other species, animals or plants; had taken its roots. Since humans and society were subject to the laws of nature, they could be studied by principles of natural science. In other words an objective, scientific study of society was possible. Although the human body was already an object of medical science, the position of human beings as a species in the schema of natural evolution, were matters that needed academic attention.

The most significant paradigm shift was from a religious perspective to a scientific or secular perspective. The scholarly approach was based upon ‘rationality’ and ‘evidence’; following an empirical methodology, where the physical evidence was complimented with deductive reasoning.

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## 8.1 THE BEGINNING: COMPARATIVE METHOD AND THE SCIENCE OF SOCIETY

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Scientific method is based upon observation, experimentation and comparison. While inanimate objects can be easily subjected to, such as a process, humans in their society can only be observed to a limited extent and cannot be experimented upon. Thus, observation and comparison of already existing social phenomenon are the only methods that can possibly be applied to what was deemed to be a scientific study of society. The early scientific method was cast within Positivism implying that there is a truth that can be reached, if proper scientific investigation is carried out. Comparing society to a natural system also made possible the formulation of laws pertaining to society, in the same way as laws exist for the natural and physical world.

The comparative method was used by arm chair anthropologists to compare data collected from a wide range of societies and from a wide variety of sources. Although the sources from which the data was gathered, was not collected by the use of rigid scientific techniques, the scholars who analysed them, had used the power of their deductive reasoning to construct fairly rational schema and theories. Let us take the example of James Frazer, who wrote the magnum opus *The Golden Bough* that continues to be a classic. Frazer brought together data from a wide variety of societies of antiquity as well as those considered as tribal (or primitive) to give an extensive account of rituals and customs of people across the world. More importantly he compiled all the data to give his Laws of Magic based upon the Principle of Sympathy (here meaning association or likeness). According to this theory, most 'primitive' peoples believe that things that are alike or things that have a close association with each other also have an influence on each other. Thus the Law of Sympathetic Magic has two parts, the Law of Contagion and Law of Similarity. In many cultures, including India, people used to believe that a photograph or likeness can be dangerous because people can practice witchcraft using these likenesses. Similarly people offer food to the gods that become sacred (*prasad*) by becoming imbued with the sacredness that emanates from the deity. Thus, although Frazer formulated these laws to characterise what in those days was known as 'primitive' society, if we look around we find that these operate even today in most urban and modern societies in some form or the other. Like the belief people have in wearing gem stones for luck.

Frazer had also given his evolutionary schema of Magic, Religion and Science, saying that each of them dominate on epoch of human social evolution. However as is evident to all of us, such has not happened and elements of magic and religion prevail even as humankind is moving towards higher and higher scientific achievements. Frazer followed the schema given earlier by August Comte, of the Age of Religion, Age of Metaphysics and Age of Reason. For most white men of those times, the European Civilisation was the peak of achievement of mankind and it was possible because of the superior qualities of mind of the white men. Women were considered as equivalent to 'primitives' and children, with no mature faculties of reason. In this way the European conquest of the world also spread patriarchy around the world along with the concepts of 'primitive' and the idea that all things western were superior; and that modernity was equivalent to westernisation. As we know that even when academically the theories of evolution are no longer considered valid, these ideas linger and persist in the collective consciousness.

**Reflection**

**The ethnological or comparative method** was used to develop theories where a large amount of data was compared. This data was collected from travelogues, missionaries, accounts given by traders and tourists, people who travelled across the world for various pursuits other than academics. Scholars of the caliber of Edward B. Tylor and Frazer, did try to separate the wheat from the chaff, yet most of it was only hearsay and could not be verified in any other way than by comparison and the frequent recurrence of the same or similar accounts.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1. Which aspects of human life did James Frazer deal with in his work *The Golden Bough*?

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2. Whose schema did James Frazer follow in his work?

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3. James Frazer was an arm chair anthropologist. Suggest if the statement is whether true or false.

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**8.2 CLASSICAL EVOLUTIONARY THEORY**

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By the early twentieth century, two schools of thought began to predominate; these were the schools of Evolution and of Diffusion. Both of these schools of thought were coeval with each other and although they appear to be diametrically opposed, they did share thoughts and the evolutionists like Tylor had acknowledged that diffusion of traits does take place and the diffusionists too had a time sequence that was almost similar to the stage by stage evolution theory.

Let us first discuss the basic premises of the evolutionary school.

1. The evolutionists believed that societies move from lower to higher stage. Meaning thereby that evolution is progressive, going towards improvement.
2. They believed that there is only one Culture, with a capital C as described by Ingold (1986). The difference that we see in societies across the world is not because they have different cultures, but because they are at different stages of the *same* Culture.

3. Thus classical evolutionary theory is also a unilineal theory, a theory that believes that there is only *one line* for cultural progress.
4. The implications for this is that once the sequence of progress has been established, it will be but one more step to determine the next stage to which the society will progress. In other words if the sequences are worked out well, this should be a predictive theory as well.
5. The evolutionary theory is a meta theory, a theory that is generalised and all encompassing. In this sense it was a theory that in science would be one that established the order of things.

However, if you just reflect a little you will realise that there can be several criticisms of this theory. The evolutionists believed that evolution was progressive, but what was progress? How was it to be defined? What were the criteria by which a society could be put higher or lower in the scale of evolution? For the white, male scholars of the nineteenth century, the solution was simple. Any society that was closer to the western civilisation was higher or more civilised and those that appeared, both in appearance and technology to be at the farthest distance was the most 'primitive'. The coining of the term 'primitive' was simply an index by which the distance from western civilisation could be measured. Thus the Australian Aborigines were considered as one of the most 'primitive' societies because they Australian Aborigines had a physical appearance very far from that of the Europeans, and they also had a Stone Age technology. Emile Durkheim went to study them in order to write his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as he thought they represented the earliest and most elementary stage of human society. Sigmund Freud also took their example in his book *Totem and Taboo*.

The upper caste Indians on the other hand were considered very close to the Europeans and as pointed out by Trautmann, there was an initial phase of Indophiles who looked upon India as a great civilisation, quite close to Europe. But the situations changed with changing political relations.

Since patriarchy was the norm in western societies, the European colonisers considered matriliney and matriarchy to be representatives of a lower scale of civilisation. Thus the famous scholar of this school, Bachofen, considered matriarchy or Mother Right to be a lower form of social order than patriarchy. Nineteenth century Renaissance led by scholars such as Francis Bacon had relegated women to a lower order incapable of rational thought. Thus according to Bachofen, the Mother right complex had all things of lower and negative value, like moon, night, wet, lower etc., it also had fertility and death associated with it. Since men alone had the ability to reason, any society led by women had to be inferior. Thus western patriarchy brought about civilisation and the conquest of the East by the West was a turning point of history when the world became truly civilised.

The Unilineal theory was also unable to explain exactly why certain societies were more progressive and some were less. Although there was agreement to some extent among scholar about what came first and what came next; there never was a full agreement as these sequences were constructed speculatively. There was no real evidence or possibility of knowing from societies long extinct, as to what really happened. Thus Maine clashed with McLennan on the issue of whether matriliney came first or patriliney. Maine, a lawyer and proficient in languages and cultures of the East, was of the opinion that patriliney came first and matriliney came later quite opposite to McLennan and Bachofen who had the opposite sequence in mind.

Edward B. Tylor gave us a sequence of the evolution of religion. According to Tylor's definition, culture was something that everyone had, but only in different degrees of development. He also defined the earliest form of religion as Animism; a belief in the soul or the belief in a dual body of spirit and material body. He explained that since all humans have the same capacity for reflective thinking, the earliest humans must also have thought the way he (Tylor) was thinking. Thus Tylor speculated that the most primitive people must have pondered over the phenomenon of death and of dreams and invented a belief in soul to explain them. They must have thought that in dream, the soul leaves the body temporarily and wanders around, while in death it leaves it permanently. But since the soul appears to be the real source of life or *anima*, it is the most important part of any living being. All life is animated by the existence of a soul or spirit.

According to Tylor, from Animism, evolve other systems of beliefs like in the other world, in ancestors, in sacrifice and other rituals. Animism was followed by Naturism, Totemism, Polytheism till finally the ultimate stage of religion, namely Monotheism and the belief in a supreme God comes about. Thus Christianity, the religion of the Europeans of that time is seen as the highest form of religious belief.

In America, the evolutionary school is represented by the work of Lewis Henry Morgan, who is also regarded as the father of Kinship studies. According to Morgan societies move from being based on kinship to territory. Modern societies are based on the concept of territory based citizenship (*Civitas*) while earlier societies were based on membership through kin groups (*Societas*). He coined the terms 'descriptive' and 'specific' kinship systems, where according to him descriptive systems evolved into specific kinship systems. In contemporary times this has changed to 'descriptive' and 'specific' kin terms, rather than systems. The concept of a kinship system based on how kin are classified and named in any society was the contribution of Morgan.

Unlike other arm chair anthropologists of his time, Morgan had also done fieldwork among the Native American tribes (Iroquois) who lived in his backyard and was directly involved with them. He gave his famous sequence of Ethnical Periods, where instead of focusing on just one aspect of society, like the other evolutionists of his time; he gave the sequence for most social institutions, subsistence, family, political institutions and law. Each ethnical period, saw a particular stage of development of each of these institutions.

In spite of being Eurocentric, and speculative, the evolutionist brought about a definite change in conceptualising a universal humanity bound by a common possession, Culture. They thus, transcended the racism of their times to say that all human beings are one and all are capable of attaining the same level of culture. Their contributions in terms of defining specific institutions, giving names to customs and discovering the way society works is a part of the rich heritage of academic thought.

**Check Your Progress 2**

4. Give one of the premises of the evolutionary school.

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5. Which school of thought believed that there is only one culture with a capital C?

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6. Who considered matriarchy or Mother right as a lower form of social order in his work?

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7. Which anthropologist is accredited with the sequence for evolution of religion and structured definition of culture.

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8. Lewis Henry Morgan represents which evolutionary school and among which Native American tribe he did his fieldwork?

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### 8.3 CLASSICAL DIFFUSION THEORY

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According to the theory of Diffusion, there is not one but several cultures originating in different regions, which have then spread like the ripples on water. These cultures may meet at the edges and produce hybrid cultures. The diffusion school differs from the evolution school in two significant ways. Firstly they believe that cultures originate at the point of most creativity and favourable conditions and as they spread, they become diluted and inferior. Secondly there is not one but several Cultures in this world and each can be regarded as a specific regional complex of traits. Thus even though as already mentioned the two schools did not deny that both diffusion and evolution as a process happens, they differed in basic parameters. While one believed in progress the other believed more in deterioration of cultural traits and while one believed in a unilineal culture the other believed that there are multiple complexes.

One school of diffusion, the Egyptologists, did believe that all culture originates in Egypt, but they did not have much lasting influence, as their speculations were too far- fetched. Thus Perry and Elliott-Smith did not last for long but the German school of Graebner and father Schmidt, had a longer lasting influence as they put forward a theory of multiple origins and the radiation of cultures outwards from these centers. They also conceived culture as a configuration of traits, culture circles (*kulturkreis*) that diffused together. This foreshadowed the notion of cultural configuration and

trait –complexes, as developed in the American School. Graebner also put forward the idea that diffusion was not a mechanical process of adding on cultural traits but that the pattern of the receiving culture would also determine which cultural traits would be accepted and which ones rejected or modified. This again is reflected in the theories of Acculturation developed later in America.

The construction of these culture circles were however largely speculative and based on ill-informed data from various sources. The classical school of Diffusion thus had less influence than the classical evolutionary school. In fact the comments that Tylor made about diffusion of traits were more acceptable. The amazing similarity in prehistoric tools all over the world was attributed by Tylor to the process of diffusion rather than to independent origin. Tylor (1879) however warned of deriving diffusion from superficial resemblances. If there are similar conditions existing in two different cultures from which similar developments are possible then the similarity may be due to independent origins rather than diffusion.

**Check Your Progress 3**

9. Name the three schools that propounded the theory of Diffusion.  
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10. Who attributed the similarity of prehistoric tools all over the world to diffusion rather than independent origin?  
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**8.4 HISTORICAL PARTICULARISM**

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The American School of Historical Particularism was founded by Franz Boas, who being of German origin derived his theoretical insights from the German school of diffusion as well as from the Gestalt Psychology. He understood the importance of history in other words of the process of contextual social transformation rather than the generalised process of evolution. The American experience of colonisation was different from that of the British in Africa and India. The Native Americans were a dispersed and depopulated lot and the impact of history was evident as the anthropologists were often faced with the prospect of having to interview the last remaining representative of a tribe; and often had to make do with remnants of material culture, stories passed down and myths and folklore, when most members of the tribe were dispersed or dead. Boas spent most of his academic life in collecting and classifying these materials under the apprehension that they were going to be lost forever. Since history refers to the particular and not the general, according to Boas, there is not one Culture, but many cultures, each historically derived and specifically located and the product of minds of people in different locations. Thus both regional environments and the minds of the people who make up that culture, were factors influencing how a culture shaped up. Culture was also rooted in its material existence and not a sequence of ideas building upon ideas, as postulated by Tylor. In other words, Boas, had a more materialistic perspective on culture, and a

situational one, unlike Tylor's ideational view of culture as a purely mental phenomenon.

**Reflection**

**Gestalt psychology** is a philosophy of the German school of thought. That believes in the human mind and behaviour as a whole. The central principle of Gestalt psychology is that the mind forms a global whole with self-organising tendencies. Gestalt psychology proposes a unique perspective on human perception. As the Gestalt psychologists say; we don't just see the world, we actively interpret what we see, depending on what we are expecting to see.

From this historical and contextualised perspective on culture, American Anthropology was able to branch out in many directions, it developed into branches of historical anthropology, ecological, medical and psychological anthropology as well. Thus Boas gave importance to the role of individuals in shaping of cultures. Culture was not something that evolved on its own, but a cultivated process that individuals created and also changed, in the context of history that played out in a specific environment. Individuals were not the same across the world but each people had their mindset that was the product of their history and environment. Thus Boas wrote his famous work on *The Mind of the Primitive Man* and also wrote books on primitive art, etc., that clearly established the unique nature of different cultures. Foreshadowing the culture-personality school, Boas advocated that the structure and organisation of the human mind is similar but its manifestation varies according to human experience that is different in different cultures. Thus Boas put forward a theory that was ideographic and not nomothetic like that of the classical evolutionists; in other words his was a theory of the particular and not the general. History does not have laws, it has incidents, many of which are unique and therefore the name Historical Particularism for the theory put forward by Boas.

Yet Boas also followed the German school of Diffusion and culture circles, in that the American School, and the students of Boas, like A.L. Kroeber and Clark Wissler etc., believed in cultural diffusion and culture areas. Such theories did talk about some generalisations that were middle level and not sweeping generalisations as we come across among the evolutionists. The American school was also more focused on collection of field data and documentation of the same. Another student of Boas, Ruth Benedict, put forward the theory of Cultural Configuration that visualised a culture to be more than the sum of its parts. Thus Benedict talked about the character of a cultural whole, a configuration, like the personality of a person. A configuration was supposed to be an overall ethos, a concept derived from Gestalt psychology, where a personality has an overall essence that cannot be described in terms of discrete entities but can only be felt as an overall quality. Like if one looks at a painting, one gets an overall impression, that is conveys joy or sorrow or celebration or depression. Similarly individuals are more than the sum of their characters and people come across as overall personalities where one cannot pin point to any one or even a collection of characters. Benedict theorised that cultures too are more than the sum of their parts, and have an essence or ethos, like an individual. Her theory developed into the notion of National Character studies that were popular for a while and even today people refer to the 'American' character or the 'Indian' character.



**Check Your Progress 4**

11. Who founded the American School of Historical Particularism?

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12. Name the different fields of study that were taken up by the American School of Historical Particularism.

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**8.5 NEO-DIFFUSIONISM**

It was Kroeber to whom we can look for further developments on the concept of Diffusion. Like Benedict, Kroeber had also talked about the ethos and eidos of culture, the overall character (ethos) and the components (eidos). He had also discussed about the relationship between culture and environment; saying that under certain favourable conditions a culture can develop into a climax culture, which then radiates outwards. The radiation is always a process of dilution and as cultures come into contact with other cultures at the edges of their radiation, they tend to form hybrid cultures. The Culture Area theory developed by Kroeber, led later to the establishment of regional school of studies; the underlying hypotheses being that cultures have an association with space and different regions of the world do have their own cultural specificities. Ruth Benedict too had given her theory of National Culture, that had found a lot of popularity but the theoretical premises were different; they were based on the premise of cultural configuration. The culture area theory was derived from historical particularism and also the concept of ethos, as given by Kroeber.

Otis T Mason and Clark Wissler also had an ambitious plan to trace the cultural areas across the world, beginning from North America, but because of the practical difficulties of trying to locate the center and the time and rate of diffusion, they could not carry this project forward.

Diffusion or the spread of cultural traits from one region to another is an undeniable process. Many critical aspects of culture, such as methods of food production, technology and even items of food and clothing have spread across the world through travel, trade and migration of populations. Whenever a culture is politically dominant over another culture, whether by the process of conquest or by any other means, traits from the superior culture is voluntarily accepted by the people of the marginal culture, as by the Indian people who accepted the culture of the British after colonisation. Even today because of economic domination, the culture of the USA is spreading rapidly across the world. Diffusion is distinguished from a similar process called acculturation which takes place when two cultures come directly into contact. Some like Herskovits have used time as a distinguishing character. While the process is taking place it is acculturation and when it has been accomplished, that is when the

traits have become established in the new culture, it can be said that diffusion has taken place. In other words the process is acculturation and the end product is diffusion.

Earlier Mason and Wissler had tried to access the antiquity of a diffused trait by the time it had taken to diffuse, but in contemporary times, the enhanced technology of internet and satellite communication has made almost instant diffusion possible and the final result of rapid and large scale diffusion is what we call globalisation. Today the entire world is like one huge mass culture, yet the very threat of loss of identity in this globalised world has made many cultures go into regression or into a process of revitalisation of tradition.

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## 8.6 NEO-EVOLUTION

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The classical evolutionary school had faced rejection because of their Eurocentrism and flawed methods; but by the fifties, and after the World Wars, the idea of evolution again began to reappear in the minds of the scholars.

The major theories were given by Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service, Leslie White and Julian Steward. All of them tried to combine the processes of history and evolution to say that while there are particular processes of historical transformation, there are also larger more generalised meta- processes of evolution. All these scholars attempted to make the identification of the process of evolution more methodologically rigid as the earlier evolutionists were accused of speculation and bias.

Sahlins said that we can identify two kinds of evolution, General and Specific. The General evolution can be compared to the trunk of a large tree that shows overall growth, and for cultures it can be seen in the increased level of complexity of cultures, over the centuries of development of human civilisation. However Sahlins was clear that this increased complexity, if only in organisational attributes and is no indicator of superiority of a culture. The process of specific evolution refers to the adaptations of cultures to their environments, that show a large range of variability and gives rise to the variations in cultures depending upon their different habitats and historical conditions. Sahlins compares specific evolution to the branches of a tree.

The difference between a so-called higher civilisation and a more simple one lies in the difference between what Sahlins has called adaptability as compared to adaptation. Adaptability is the ability to adapt to a higher range of situations, and enables a culture to undergo Adaptive Radiation. In the process of general evolution, some cultures acquire the technology for adaptive radiation that enables them to establish domination over other cultures; like the colonisation of the world by the Europeans that was made possible by their acquisition of gun powder and superior technologies of navigation. Adaptive Radiation is not necessarily something good for humanity as it often involves war and conquest enabling some culture to dominate over others and spread itself around the world.

Specific radiations can be very effective and functional but often get ousted or destroyed by more adaptive cultures, as their very functional adaptation to specific environments prevents them from spreading. For example the Inuit of Alaska and parts of Greenland are very adapted to their surroundings but would find it difficult to adapt to other environments. But an invention like electricity will enable a culture to adapt to a variety of habitats and thus enable them to spread over a wider region.

Leslie White was deeply influenced by the unilineal evolutionary theory of Tylor, and like him, also believed in progressive evolution. While accepting most of the basic

premises of Tylor, White pointed out that Tylor failed in identifying the real cause of change in societies. Following the principle of cultural relativism put forward by the American School, White agreed that no culture as a culture was superior or inferior. But the transformation of technology and the amount of energy that a culture could harness, was an indication of its evolution or attainment of a superior stage. According to White the amount of energy that a culture could use indicated its standard of living, and all humans aspired for higher standards of living. His theory became famous as Energy and the Evolution of culture. White gave some mathematical formulas to exactly measure the amount of energy that a culture could use. But when it came to the empirical application of his theory, it was found to be methodologically impossible.

Human cultures are too complex to be dealt with in such a simplistic fashion. Yet White was effectively able to point to the difference between history and evolution and to show that the classical evolutionists had confused between the two.

The most effective of all the neo-evolutionist theories was that given by Julian Steward. He modified the concept of culture, as uniform or all cultural traits being evenly placed to a layered concept, with a core and a periphery. His theory is also known as the theory of Cultural Ecology. He combined the functional model with the cultural historical one to produce a model of culture, where the core was in a functional interdependent relationship with certain elements of the habitat. This core was thus defined in terms of the techno-economic aspects of a culture. In terms of the core aspects of a culture, one could create a typology as there are not many different types of adaptations of societies in the world. Since each culture is also unique, this specific nature of a culture is a result of its history, by which the peripheral aspects of the culture assume a specific character for each culture. These two aspects of culture change in different ways.

The core has a dialectical relationship with the environment. As the technology of the core acts upon the environment, the latter changes, thus creating a need for changes in techno-economic aspects. Further changes in technology create more transformation in the habitat, and pushes the system forward. Since there are only some known types of habitats in the world, Steward put forward the theory of Multilinear Evolution. He postulated that one could empirically establish the exact line of evolution of cultures in specified regions, but each stage needs to be verified through the collection of empirical evidence, even from the past.

Steward called his theory of Culture Change, both a theory and a methodology and he insisted that every aspect of every relationship should be established empirically and there should be no scope for speculation. His was an inductive theory and it helped to prepare classifications of modes of subsistence that we are still using. We can now classify societies based on their culture core that is the basic units of their techno-economic adaptation, without referring to the peripheral cultural elements that make each culture unique. For example all hunters and food gatherers have some core features in common but each is also a unique culture contextualised in its own setting. The Paliyans of South India and the !Kung San of Kalahari have common characters in terms of technology and basic features of social organisation that are integral to their foraging economy but are otherwise quite distinct in their cultures as far as other features not directly related to their economy is concerned.

Thus neo-Evolutionists tried to improve upon classical evolutionists mainly in terms of method. They tried to replace the speculative nature of classical evolution by empirical and verifiable methods.

**Check Your Progress 4**

13. Name the anthropologists who postulated major theories on Neo-Evolutionism.

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14. Whose theory on neo-evolutionism is also known as Cultural Ecology?

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15. Who was inspired by E.B. Tylor’s theory of unilinear evolution?

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**8.7 SUMMARY**

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The classical theories have their own place in the study of social and cultural anthropology. These theories were the starting point from which the emphasis on theorising a particular event came up. Though these theories are no longer of prime importance yet they built the foundation for the anthropological thoughts. These theories brings into focus how the study of society and culture from the Victorian era had changed over the passage of time, the anthropologists have moved forward from the speculation on cultural evolution and the spread of culture diffusion to the more relative aspects in the present era. We have seen that the history of anthropological theories has involved a transition from a diachronic perspective to synchronic perspective which further moved on to interactive perspective. Moving from these classical theories we will discuss functionalism, structural-functionalism neo-functionalism and conflict theories in detail in the next unit.

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## 8.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. James Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough* gave an extensive account of the rituals and customs of people across the world.
2. August Comte.
3. True.
4. Please see section 8.2 where five premises of the evolutionary school are given. You can write any one of them.
5. The evolutionary school of thought believed that there is only one culture with a capital C.
6. Johann J. Bachofen.
7. Edward B. Tylor.
8. Lewis Henry Morgan followed the American evolutionary school, his fieldwork was among the Iroquois, a Native American tribe.
9. The three schools that propounded the theory of Diffusion are:
  - a. The Egyptian School,
  - b. The German or *Kulturkries* and;
  - c. The American School of Diffusion
10. Edward B. Tylor.
11. Franz Boas.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

12. The different fields of study that were taken up by the American School of Historical Particularism were historical, medical, ecological and psychological anthropology.
13. Marshall Sahlins, Elman Service, Leslie White and Julian Steward.
14. Julian Steward's theory on neo-evolutionism is also known as Cultural Ecology
15. Leslie White was influenced by E. B. Tylor's theory of unilinear evolution.

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# UNIT 9 THEORIES OF STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

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## Contents

- 9.0 Introduction
- 9.1 Functionalism and Structural-Functional Approach
- 9.2 Structuralism
- 9.3 Conflict Theories
- 9.4 Summary
- 9.5 References
- 9.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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The learners in this unit shall be acquainted with the approaches that have been used by anthropologists in the study of society and culture:

- functionalism and structural-functionalism;
- structuralism; and
- conflict theories.

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## 9.0 INTRODUCTION

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In the earlier unit we had discussed the classical theories, some defunct and some being revived for the study of society and culture. The classical theories like evolutionism and diffusion gave way to the understanding of the society from the context of here and now. Taking this argument forward in this unit, the focus would be on the theories of function and structure.

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## 9.1 FUNCTIONALISM AND STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

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Functionalism is the name of an approach, a method, to undertake the study of a society. It subscribes to the idea that a society is a whole (or a system) of interconnected parts, where each part contributes to the maintenance of the whole. The job assigned to the investigator is to discover the contribution of each part of society to the whole and how society works together as an 'ordered arrangement of parts'. The parts of society are roles, groups, institutions, associations, and organisations; and each one of them carries out a set of duties assigned to it. Because of the contribution each part makes to the whole, which the society is, that it is able to exist.

Functionalism believes that for the survival and continuation of any society, a minimal level of order is essential. The order comes when different parts of a society carry out the work they are supposed to do. In this way, they contribute to the emergence

of order. When the needs of a society and the individual that comprise it are fulfilled, which happens because of the coordinated working of its parts, order is bound to result.

As a distinct approach, as a way of looking at and analysing society, functionalism emerged first in social anthropology in early twentieth century, and later in sociology, beginning in the 1930s. However, its roots are as ancient as the concept of organic analogy, used in the philosophy of Antiquity by Plato (B.C. 428/7-345/7) and Aristotle (B.C. 384-322). Organic analogy is a way of conceptualising and understanding society as an organism – as an organism has parts, so does society, and as these parts are interconnected, so are the parts of society.

The term ‘functionalism’ is generally associated with the work of the Poland-born, British anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). In course of time, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), another British anthropologist, argued in favour of the term ‘structural-functional approach’. The American sociologist, Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) called the approach ‘structural-functionalism’. In its long history of more than two hundred years, starting from the French thinkers of early nineteenth-century to the newer developments in functional approach under the name of neo-functionalism, functionalism has witnessed the emergence of a number of subsidiary approaches, but all of them share certain ideas in common. They are all concerned with the ‘problem of order’ – how does order come in society and how society is able to endure over time.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the French sociologist, is not a ‘functionalist’ in the sense in which this term is used for the approach that the British social anthropologists, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski have espoused. Durkheim does not use the term ‘functionalism’, although he defines the concept of social function. One comes across in Durkheim’s works a fine coexistence of the diachronic (genetic, evolutionary, and historical) and the synchronic (society ‘here and now’) approaches to the study of society, but it is quite clear that the study of the contemporary society occupies a preferred place in his writings. For instance, in his celebrated study of religion, he begins with a consideration of Australian totemism as the most elementary form of religious life, but he does not start speculating it as the earliest form and then, as his predecessors had done, offering theories to explain it. He is rather more concerned with the structure and function of totemism and how its study can help us in understanding the place of religion in complex societies. This emphasis on the study of synchronous (or ‘present’) societies exerted a tremendous impact on later scholars.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the continuation of the old evolutionary approach and also, its gradual decline. It also witnessed the rise of functionalism. Adam Kuper (1941-) thinks that 1922 was the ‘year of wonder’ (*annus mirabilis*) of functionalism, for in this year were published two monographs that substantiated the functional approach. One was by Radcliffe-Brown titled *The Andaman Islanders*, and the other, by Malinowski, titled *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. The impact of anthropological functionalism was felt in other disciplines, particularly sociology. Although there were scholars – such as Kingsley Davis (1908-1997) – who saw nothing new in functional approach because they thought that sociologists had always been doing what functionalists wanted them to do, there were others (such as Talcott Parsons) who were clearly impressed with the writings of functional anthropologists. As a result of the writings of these people, functionalism emerged as an extremely important approach, holding its sway till the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In its history of about 150 years, functionalism has come to comprise a number of variants and foci. However, pointed differences exist between different functionalists.



### Reflection

Notwithstanding their differences, it seems that all functionalists share the following five propositions:

1. Society (or culture) is a system like any other system, such as solar system, mechanical system, atomic system, chemical system, or organic system.
2. As a system, society (or culture) consists of parts (like, institutions, groups, roles, associations, organisations), which are interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent.
3. Each part performs its own function – it makes its own contribution to the whole society (or culture) – and also, it functions in relationship with other parts.
4. A change in one part brings about a change in other parts, or at least influences the functioning of other parts, because all the parts are closely connected.
5. The entire society or culture – for which we can use the term ‘whole’ – is greater than the mere summation of parts. It cannot be reduced to any part, or no part can explain the whole. A society (or culture) has its own identity, its own ‘consciousness’, or in Durkheim’s words, ‘collective consciousness’.

The first approach in social anthropology for the analysis of society was evolutionary. During the second half of the nineteenth century, almost every anthropologist was concerned with two issues. First, how was the institution (or, cultural practice, trait) established in the first place? What has been its origin? Second, what are the various stages through which it has passed to reach its contemporary state? Both the questions were important and relevant, but in the absence of authentic data, the early (or, ‘classical’) evolutionists extravagantly indulged in speculations and conjectures, imagining the causes (or, the factors) that gave rise to institutions and the stages of their evolution. Most of the evolutionists – barring a few possible exceptions, such as Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1881) and Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) – had not themselves collected any data on which they based their generalisations. They almost completely relied upon the information that travelers, missionaries, colonial officers, and soldiers, who were in touch with the non-Western societies, provided, knowing full well that much of these data might be biased, exaggerated, incomplete, and incorrect. Because they themselves did not carry out any fieldwork, they earned the notorious title of ‘arm-chair anthropologists’.

Both the founders of the British functional approach (Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski) were vehemently critical of the nineteenth-century evolutionism. Radcliffe-Brown said that it was based on ‘conjectural history’, a term we used earlier, and not ‘authentic history’. It was ‘pseudo-historical’, thus devoid of a scientific value. For Malinowski, classical evolutionism was a ‘limbo of conjectural reconstructions’. With the works of these scholars came a shift from:

1. arm-chair anthropology to fieldwork-based studies;
2. the study of the origin and stages of evolution of society and its institutions (diachronic studies) to society ‘here and now’ (synchronic studies);
3. the study of the entire societies and cultures (macro approach) to the study of particular societies, especially the small-scale societies (micro approach); and

**Theoretical Perspectives**

4. an understanding of society confined to a theoretical level to putting the knowledge of society ‘here and now’ to practical use, to bring about desired changes in society. Rather than remaining just an ‘academic study of the oddities of society’ – different and bizarre customs and practices – the knowledge we have acquired should be used for improving upon the conditions of people, for improving upon the relations of local people with the outside world. Incidentally, Malinowski called this concern of anthropology ‘practical anthropology’.

The scholars who later came to be known as ‘functionalists’ sought to shift the focus of their study from ‘what society was’ to ‘what society is’, and this study should be carried out not by speculative methods, but by living with people in their natural habitats and learning from them, from the field.

It was not against the processes of evolution and diffusion that the functionalists leveled their criticism, for they knew that they were important processes of change. In fact, both Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski thought that after they were through most of their important fieldwork-based studies, they would take up the study of the processes of evolution and diffusion. What they were against was a study of the past through ‘imaginative history’ rather than one based on facts. If authentic documents were available about societies, they must readily be used for some insights into change. But the functionalists noted that these documents were not available about ‘primitive and pre-literate’ societies, therefore we would not have any knowledge of the development of social institutions among them. Instead of speculating how they have evolved, we should study ‘what they are’, using the scientific methods of observation, comparison, and arriving at generalisations.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1. Which century saw the emergence of Functionalism as a distinct approach in anthropology?

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2. What is organic analogy?

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3. Name the anthropologist with whom the term ‘functionalism’ is associated with.

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4. Who defined the concept of ‘social function’ and ‘collective consciousness’?

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## 9.2 STRUCTURALISM

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The term ‘structuralism’ refers to an approach in anthropology concerned with the study of the structures underlying the social and cultural facts that are collected during the course of a fieldwork study or from the already available information in archives, museums, and libraries. In other words, if the functional approach regards fieldwork, the first hand study of a society, as the main method of data collection, structuralism submits that the data for analysis can come from other sources. The approach can be used on what is properly called the ‘secondary data’.

Structuralism had its origin in the study of languages, particularly in the work of a French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). One of the observations the linguists (those who study the language, its structure and function) have made is that people are able to speak a language correctly, according to its norms, even when they do not know its grammar. It was an exemplary work of the colonial scholars and missionaries who unraveled the grammar of these unwritten languages. They also prepared their dictionaries, and also helped in developing their scripts, although they were invariably from the scripts in which the colonial scholars wrote. Thus, for example, the script in which the Naga dialects were written up was Roman, as the scholars who worked on them were English-speaking.

In other words, the people had created their respective languages, having a hidden grammar, of which they did not have any knowledge. It was left to the scholars working on these languages to discover their grammars. As a language has a grammar, of which the people are unaware, in a similar way, the institutions of society have their underlying aspects, which we may call ‘structures’. Those who bear these institutions, customs and beliefs, and live through them, do not know what these underlying structures are. It is left to the anthropologists to discover them. So, those anthropologists who devoted their skill to discovering the underlying structures (or ‘unconscious structure’, because people are not aware of them) called themselves ‘structuralists’, having been influenced by the French linguistic structuralism. If for functionalism, the analogy taken for understanding and explanation was of organism (thus, ‘organic analogy’), for structuralism, it was of language. If functionalism was influenced by biological science, structuralism was by linguistics.

To summarise, the approach to discover the underlying structure of a language came to be called the ‘structural linguistics’ in the discipline of linguistics. In anthropology, the approach to discover the underlying structure of society, of which people are unaware, was called structuralism, the chief exponent of which was Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009). His name was almost used interchangeably with structuralism, for he was the sole, the giant, advocate of this approach. The point we wish to put forth is that for British functionalism, we have two names, of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown; for American functionalism, we have the names of Parsons and Robert K. Merton (1910-2003); but for structuralism, we have just one name: Lévi-Strauss. All those scholars who followed him were his admirer-critics, who made some changes to his approach, here and there. They were not the independent proponents of

structuralism. These scholars who modified structuralism came to be known as 'neo-structuralists'. The names prominent in this list are of Edmund R. Leach (1910-1989), Mary Douglas (1921-2007), T.O. Beidelman (1931- ), and even, Louis Dumont (1911-1998) (who worked on Indian caste system).

Structuralism did not conflict with the earlier approaches that were popular in anthropology. It believed that there were other, equally important, ways of understanding society. Societies have undoubtedly evolved over time. It is mandatory on our part to know their origin and the stages through which they have passed. So is the fact that each society has to work for the survival of its members. The question that functionalism investigated about the actual working of society and how its parts hang together is equally important. In a similar way is the fact that human beings in their long history of survival on this planet have migrated from one geographical space to another, carrying with them their culture, depositing it at another place, and also, learning from their hosts. The approach called diffusionism is as significant for understanding human life as are the other.

Thus, there are different ways of studying human society and culture. One such way is to take up an institution for study, find out its components, examine the way in which they make up the whole, and the design or pattern that thus results. By doing this, we have moved to an understanding of its structure. Thus, social structure is not given; it is not an empirical entity as said by Radcliffe-Brown. Social structure is an abstraction from the observable reality, but it cannot be reduced to that. It is a model that the anthropologists create from their field study, primarily for the purpose of study. Social structure thus is a methodological devise.

To take an example: each kinship system has its own rules of regulating blood ties, sex and marriage. Besides the basic kin terms – for the mother or the father – that may have a cross-cultural similarity – each society has its own host of terms. Sometimes different relatives are called by the same terms, and sometimes, by different terms. Rules of marriage differ from one society to another; so do the types. The point is that as the societies are enormously diverse, so are their institutions. But structuralism would submit that regardless of their diversity they would all have the same structure, built on certain universal principles. In his first major work, on kinship, titled *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss showed that it is the principle of the 'exchange of women' which is universal, irrespective of the descent system that is followed, which results in two models.

The first is when women are exchanged between two groups, over generations. It is the practice of 'sister exchange', where those who give their women to the other group are the same who receive women from the group to which they give. Thus, in Lévi-Strauss's terms, the wife-givers and wife-takers are the same people. Thus, a symmetry is established. The other model is based on the principle of asymmetry. Here, a group (say, A) receives women as spouses from group B, but transfers its women (sisters) to group C. In this case, wife-givers to a group are different from the wife-takers. Lévi-Strauss called the first, the system of sister-exchange, 'balanced reciprocity', which is an exchange between two groups (A to B, B to A). The second is where endless groups are annexed to the system of exchange (A to B, B to C, C to D, D to n... , from n to A) and the system closes when the women from the final group return to the first group (from n to A). This model is called the 'generalised exchange.' If the British anthropology stressed the descent relations (from father to son, from mother to daughter) for understanding kinship, Lévi-Strauss became a proponent of the idea that marriage established relationship between groups. In

French, the word ‘alliance’ means ‘marriage’, so Lévi-Strauss came to be known as an ‘alliance theorist’.

The structuralist tries to discover the structure of the entire society. That is why, the critics say that Lévi-Strauss was interested in the ‘global structure’. Such an ambition bypasses (or ignores) the diversity of human living. Moreover, societies change over a length of time. The change may be slow, gradual, and imperceptible. With an accumulation of these small changes, a new stage comes into being. The structuralist did not incorporate the historical progression of societies in their analyses. That was the reason, why structuralism came to be called ‘a-historical’. Although the structuralists claimed that their method could be used for the analysis of every aspect of society, Lévi-Strauss confined his work to the study of kinship, totemism, and myths. In fact, he devoted a major portion of his life to the study of myths; he founded what has come to be called the ‘science of mythology’. In the context of the application of structuralism to the study of different institutions of human society, one of the issues was how to use this method for the study of economic and political relations, the impact of globalisation on the lives of people, the relations of oppression and subjugation.

With the coming of the interpretive approach in anthropology, structuralism became less popular. However, it succeeded in making an inroad in literature and art history, especially in the studies of aesthetics and cultural products. As said in the beginning, structuralism impressed some British anthropologists, but they were doubtful of its ‘cosmic ambitions’. They thought that the best application of structuralism would be on a limited area, at a more regional level. This was a humbler approach for which the term ‘neo-structuralism’ is used.

**Check Your Progress 2**

5. What does a structuralist do?

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6. ‘Structuralism had its origin in the study of languages.’ State whether this statement is true or false.

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7. Who was the chief exponent of structuralism?

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8. Name the anthropologists a. British and b. American associated with Functionalism.

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9. Name some of the scholars who worked on ‘neo-structuralism’.

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10. Who gave the concepts of ‘balanced reciprocity’ and ‘generalised reciprocity’?

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### 9.3 CONFLICT THEORIES

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Conflict theory is an ‘umbrella term’, which includes the writings of a number of theorists who focused on the study of the ‘relations of conflict’, not only from the disciplines from social anthropology and sociology, but also from the other social sciences and humanities. Some of them trace their academic genealogy from Karl Marx (1818-1883), the German social thinker, well known for his approach called ‘dialectical and historical materialism’ and the ‘theory of revolution’. Others go back to the political thinkers such as Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Hobbes (1588-1679). Others think that the theory of conflict can be built up independent of Marx’s contribution. However, most writers think that Marx’s writings on conflict have been truly insightful and must be given a closer look irrespective of the fact whether the society under study has a class stratification or not.

All conflict theorists agree that conflict is a general social form that should not be limited to just episodes of violence. It is because in a common parlance, conflict is usually concerned as synonymous with war. For social scientists, every society, including the simple ones, has conflict in one form or the other. It may be in the form of dissents and disagreements, verbal duels and abusive behaviour, mental or physical violence, protests and uprisings, rebel movements and revolutions. It should not be thought that each of these types is a closed one, because one form of conflict may over time progress into another. For instance, an instance of dissent may aggravate into bloodshed. The universality of conflict is well expressed in a statement from the work of Ralf Dahrendorf (1929-2009): ‘The absence of conflict is an abnormality.’ Georg Simmel (1858-1918) similarly situated conflict at the centre of social life.

The term ‘conflict’ may have come into vogue in the second half of the twentieth century, but the idea of conflict goes back in time. It was mentioned previously that Marx, a nineteenth century thinker, assigned a prominent place to conflict in changing society. The popular statement that ‘conflict is the engine of progress’, follows from the work of Marx. Going earlier in time, it was in the writings of Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a French scholar, that one finds two ideas: first, the conflict

between the interests of the ‘industrialists’ and ‘workers’; and second, each stage carries in it the ‘germs of its own destruction’, because of which change occurs in society. Experts say that these ideas of Saint-Simon, along with that of the others, particularly G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), greatly influenced Marx in shaping his theory.

No disagreement exists with respect to the idea that every society tries to maintain order and cohesiveness (the idea of ‘social stability’) and also change over time (‘social dynamics’). One of the initiators of change is conflict. Conflict exposes the problems which surface in running the society smoothly. These problems must be resolved, otherwise the working of society will be affected, thus obstructing the fulfillment of its members’ needs. The resolution of these conflicts brings about a change in society, leading to the emergence of order. However, the order thus established is short-lived. With the passage of time, new crises surface, posing another round of conflicting situations, which demand resolution. Thought in this way, conflict is, in the words of Lewis Coser (1913-2003), a ‘normal and functional part of human life’. Further, he said: ‘Conflict is instinctual for us. We find it everywhere in human society.’

The value of conflict as an important process of change got an impetus in Charles Darwin’s (1809-1882) 1859 book titled *On the Origin of Species*, where it was argued that the competition between members of the same species is so intense that only those who are fit are able to survive and those unfit are eliminated. For Darwin, ‘struggle for existence’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ are the ways in which conflict is expressed in the biological world. Some scholars, while not adopting Darwin’s views, have developed the idea of conflict between ethnic groups. For example, a nineteenth-century scholar, Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838-1909) spoke of the ‘struggle of the races’.

By mid-nineteenth century, both the concepts of order and conflict received almost an equal importance from the social scientists. However, some of them from France thought that during the Revolution (1798-1799) so much of social disorganisation has taken place that in case we lend further support to the idea of revolution, which is an intensification of conflict, the situation which is so delicate would become a matter of grave concern. Thus, they – which included the founder of sociology, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) – opposed the idea of revolution, and later, the thesis Marx put forth was that revolution is the prime mover of change. Durkheim held the same view as did Comte, and so he opposed the socialist thoughts. The result was that the theory of conflict was gradually eclipsed. This led to a strengthening of the theory of order – ‘how does consensus come in society’ rather than ‘how does it change’.

The functional theory started making its appearance, as we saw earlier, in the beginning of the twentieth century. Durkheim’s two books – *Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) – explained persuasively how division of labour and totemism (an example of the ‘elementary religion’, as we saw earlier) contributed to social solidarity. And, when it was weak or absent, what resulted was an increase in suicide rate. For these situations of sudden change or where norms broke down and new norms had not made their appearance, Durkheim used the word ‘anomie’. It was a state of ‘social illness’, causing volcanoes of disruption.

Anthropological fieldworkers initially concentrated on studies of small societies, which were largely cut off from the wider world. Hence, the pace of change among them was remarkably less than what it was in well-connected societies, where cultural

diffusion played an important role in speeding up change. Because the small societies had a strong system of norms and values, and people abided by them, the probability of violation of rules was far less. Thus, order seemed to prevail. These societies appeared changeless. Such a situation misguided the anthropologists to think that these societies were conflict-free. When Tylor, the British anthropologist, expressed surprise on seeing no policeman in Mexican villages he had visited, the instant interpretation was that they were free from contra-normative actions. The argument put forth was that there were societies in the world which did not require the mechanisms of law and order because there was no infringement of rules. The logical conclusion was that conflict was not a worthy field of study. We should direct our attention to the study of order. It was the triumph of the functional theory.

Whilst conflict found a respectable place in sociology much earlier, since its concern was with modern societies where conflict abounded and was open, the entry of conflict studies was delayed in anthropology, because one functional study after another was tilting in favour of social harmony and equilibrium. Even when there were indications that conflict was precipitating in small communities because of asymmetrical cultural contacts, attention was scarcely paid to its study. For instance, Malinowski in his Trobriand study noted that with the advent of missionaries in their land, their youth dormitories were gradually disappearing, because the missionaries were critical of such institutions. But Malinowski did not study the kind of conflict that was brewing in the society because of colonisation.

In anthropological studies of conflict, Gluckman's (1911-1978) work occupies an important place. He noted that besides the conflicting situations as being introduced from outside, the tribal societies have their contexts of disagreements and conflicts. For example, when a ruler becomes a tyrant, and the people are unable to tolerate the oppressive rule, they start protesting, demanding his replacement. These movements are not for a change in the system, but only of the incumbent of the office, in this case, the ruler. These social movements are known as 'rebel movements'; and are different from revolutions, which demands a total change in the system. An important lesson we learn from these studies is that tribal communities were far from being placid and free from conflict. This once again supports the universality of conflict in human society.

At this juncture, the functional theory stages a comeback by asking: If conflict is universal as has been found through a number of field studies, then it must be performing some functions. Here, we may refer to Coser's ideas. He says that conflict ensures the maintenance of a group and its cohesion within its boundaries. It also prevents its members from leaving. For substantiating these ideas, empirical studies of the situations of conflict need to be carried out.

**Check Your Progress 3**

11. Name the scholars whose works influenced Marx.

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12. Give the two ideas propounded by Henri de Saint-Simon.

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13. State how according to Darwin, conflict is expressed in the biological world.

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14. Name the scholar who worked on the ‘struggle of races’.

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15. What is ‘rebel movement’ according to Gluckman?

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## 9.4 SUMMARY

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This unit provides an overview of the three main approaches in anthropology. The functional approach, which has several sub-types, tries to explain how order comes in society. It submits that unless there is order, society will not be able to survive. The functional approach had its beginning in the nineteenth-century, especially in the discipline of sociology, but in anthropology, it became a powerful method to explain the working of society and culture in early twentieth-century. Structuralism is an approach which came to anthropology in mid-twentieth century from the field of linguistics. The main proponent of this approach was Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist. Structuralism is concerned with discovering the underlying structure of society. It believes that regardless of the diversity of human living, there is a common structure that all societies share. Conflict theory submits that society is always in a state of dynamism, and one of the processes that contributes to this is conflict. Like the functional theory, it also has an early beginning. One of its early proponents was Henri de Saint-Simon. However, Marx developed the idea, with the result that most of the variants of conflict theory have been influenced by his writings.

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## 9.5 REFERENCES

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## 9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Twentieth century
2. see section 9.1. for detailed explanation.
3. Bronislaw Malinowski
4. Émile Durkheim
5. See section 9.2 for detailed explanation.
6. True
7. Claude Lévi-Strauss
8. British anthropologists were Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. American anthropologists were Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton.
9. Edmund R. Leach, Mary Douglas, T.O. Beidelman and Louis Dumont.
10. Claude Lévi-Strauss
11. Henri de Saint and G.W.F. Hegel.
12. see section 9.3 for details.
13. a. struggle for survival and b. survival of the fittest.
14. Ludwig Gumpłowicz
15. see section 9.3 for details.

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## UNIT 10 CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

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### Contents

- 10.0 Introduction
- 10.1 Symbolism
- 10.2 Interpretative Theory
- 10.3 Post-Colonial and Post-Modern Critique
- 10.4 The Feminist Critique
- 10.5 Summary
- 10.6 References
- 10.7 Answers To Check Your Progress

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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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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.

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### 10.0 INTRODUCTION

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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.

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## 10.1 SYMBOLISM

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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

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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## 10.2 INTERPRETATIVE THEORY

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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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**10.3 POST-COLONIAL AND POST-MODERN CRITIQUE**

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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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**10.4 THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE**

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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.

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## 10.5 SUMMARY

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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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## 10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Language.
2. Victor Turner.
3. Sherry Ortner.
4. Victor Turner, van Gennep, Sherry Ortner etc.
5. Clifford Geertz.
6. See section 10.2.
7. See section 10.3.
8. See section 10.3.

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