UNIT 1 SOCIO-CULTURAL BELIEF SYSTEMS

Structure

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Humans adapt to their surroundings in a creative manner using the neuro-motor skills developed by them in the course of evolution. The characters of the human brain that set them apart from other species is the ability of abstract thinking, to communicate using this capacity for symbolism (that is through language) and living in aggregates by forming long term attachments and symbolic associations, what we call society. The human societies are not genetically formed by information coded in the genes but by the process of conscious association and a long term formation of a system of symbolic meanings that we call culture. In the course of human evolution culture has been the tool of adaptation, enabling humans to spread across the globe and occupy all possible ecological niches, by the use of technology that is only an aspect of culture.

More importantly humans have created their own environment by the process of cognition, so that the environment does not impinge upon them only as a material source of stimulation and resource but as a perceptual source where everything is interpreted before it impinges the senses. According to the philosopher Wittgenstein, human do not just “see” but they “see as”. Thus what may appear to be only a clump of trees may appear to a group as the abode of spirits; an animal may appear to be a god and so on. These perceptions that in an integrated sense we call a belief system, informed action and the behavior that is exhibited by humans and since they are held in a collective manner by a group (the society) and passed on by a collective process we call socialization; an entire society’s collective representations then give rise to collective behavior that regulate the ecosystem relationships of that society with its environment. It is for this reason that study of beliefs and values play a crucial role in the study of sustainability. In this unit we shall examine some of the beliefs held by various societies and see how they affect the ecological relationships and regulate the process of sustainability.

So also every society has philosophies of existence, it is not something that is confined to complex societies. How we perceive the world, the role of human beings, the cognitive dimensions of reality, cosmology and world view are part of the philosophy of every culture. Ecophilosophy is something that has been coined recently more in terms of the western system of dichotomous thinking that differentiates between nature and society in a way that most other societies do not.

1.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- determine the nature and culture dichotomy;
- explain the eco-philosophy of the West; and
- illustrate the concept of Eco-cosmology.

1.2 NATURE AS NATURE OR NATURE AS HUMAN

The nature culture dichotomy is rooted in Western mode of thinking and the Judeo –Christian tradition privileged humans above nature and also brought forth other dichotomies, like woman and man seen as parallel to nature and culture in a way that both nature and woman were seen as appropriately dominated by cultured men. Sherry Ortner (1974), an American feminist anthropologist, equated the universal subordination of women to the universal subordination of nature, a point of view criticized by many other scholars. MacCormack (1980) who pointed out that not only nature was not seen as subordinate in many non-western cultures, the dichotomy itself did not exist in many world-views.

Anthropomorphic representations of nature are a feature of most antique religions such as ancient Indian, Persian, Greek and Egyptian systems of beliefs. Most natural phenomenon was perceived as human like men and women but with superhuman abilities. Thus the forces of thunder, lightning and rain were deified as the king of heavens, Zeus in Greek and Roman mythology; Ahura Mazda the god of heavens in ancient Persian system of beliefs travelled to India and was established as Varuna, the god of heavens along with his partner, Mitra and thus the duo of Mitra-Varuna were the subject of many ancient Vedic verses. The Sun was worshipped as god not only by the Vedic Indians but also by the Egyptians and the Inca and Peru civilizations. These forces of nature like wind and rain, rivers and mountains are invested with human qualities, and believed to behave like humans. Like for example in Hindu mythology, Himalaya is god and Menaka is his wife and their daughter Parvati, is a goddess who wins the supreme god Shiva as her husband. There are myths that tell us that they have sons called Ganesha and Kartikeya. The celestial goddess Ganga, came to the earth in the form of a river to bless human beings, but in her human form she married King Shatanu and had a son who was known as Bhishma. These human attributes of natural things gives humans a sense of identification and they feel morally guilty while ravaging or exploiting them. Like the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh who believe that the earth is their mother and do not wish to use a plough as they say it is like tearing the breast of your mother.

In fact in India most natural phenomenon are deified including mountains and rivers. In her seminal study on the Ganga, Kelly Alley shows how the concepts

of purity and pollution with respect to Ganga have a real effect on the actual state of physical pollution of the river, with most people refusing to believe that the river (Goddess) that washes away every one's sin (Pollution) can herself be ever polluted. In her research in the city of Varanasi, Alley found that even though some (not all) people knew about the hidden drains carrying waste water from the city into the Ganga, right at the place where devotees were taking bath, they still considered the water to be pure. "But even if pilgrims know about the drains, many argue that they have no impact on her purification power, that power is eternal (acyut) and praised by the ritual practices of bathing, meditation and worship" (Alley 2002:101).While the belief in the purity of the Ganga may actually prove an impediment to the river's clean up drive, not all beliefs may have such detrimental effects on the environment. In fact most scholars have in recent studies praised the positive effects that beliefs and norms of folk and pre capitalist societies have on the sustainability of the environment.

Nature has often been viewed in terms of kinship with human beings. Many communities believe in what has been termed as totemism, where the human clans or kinship groups are believed to have been descending from non-human ancestors, in their environment. The people who have a particular animal, plant species or even a natural object like water, for their totemic ancestor, have the duty to protect and conserve the species or object and to treat it with veneration. This has the overall effect of maintaining biodiversity and ecological balance. In fact in many places it was shown that ecological degradation began as soon as people lost their beliefs in the kinship with nature or began to lose faith in the sacredness of nature.

1.3 EARTH AND SKY SYMBOLS

The belief in the sacredness of the earth mostly as a mother figure and the sky, seen likewise as a father figure or male god, is among the most primordial of beliefs that humans developed. The contemporary eco-philosophy of Deep Ecology or nature-centric beliefs has revived the ancient Egyptian concept of Gaia, or mother earth. In India, the Indus Valley civilization has yielded many female figures that typically represent such mother goddess figures that are associated with fertility, of the earth and of humans and animals. From ancient times people were well aware that death and decay is only one stage in the beginnings of new life; this cyclical aspect of nature was well understood even in the most primeval times and usually associated with female power. People celebrated the regenerative power of mother earth across civilizations, in India, Egypt and many tribal societies. In the ancient Vedas, Prithvi, the hot female goddess was cooled and made fertile by the rain sent by the sky god Indra, and produced the green trees and vegetation essential for all life.

As Caldwell (1999) explains, in the non-Aryan ancient traditions of India, preserved in the South, Tamil poetry of the Sangam period, focused on the earth's body in the form of mountains, rocks, trees and water bodies; and five types of landscapes were described with their specific moods. *Marutum* are the fertile plains where people live, and which contains the agricultural fields, the kitchen gardens and houses. The harvested paddy carried on the heads of women is seen as analogous to the body of the goddess Bhagwati. Thus traditionally the paddy sprouts were transplanted only on Tuesdays and Fridays, which are sacred days

of the goddess. She is also considered the deity of the tender coconut palms. Thus the staple food of Kerala is embodied in the form of the major goddess Bhagwati whose dance is performed on the dried paddy fields after the grain has been harvested. Coconut is in fact seen a sign of fertility and considered auspicious all over India to make appropriate ritual offerings. There is an intrinsic association of the staple and most nourishing foods and sacredness. The coconut tree is a guarantee of food and income, while the fruit is eaten, the other parts of the tree, its leaves, trunk etc, are used to make coir, coconut oil, mats, fans and many handicrafts. Thus sacredness is often an indication of the importance a tree or animal has in a culture. And it is this concept of sacredness that also serves to conserve the species and ensures that its good care is taken.

The sacredness of the earth is the key belief that motivates a reverential attitude towards nature and its manifestations. The reverence has two aspects; one is that of awe and fear, which instigates action of avoidance and that of gratitude and love like for a caring mother that motivates acts of nurturing and care. Thus while the former may be the attitude towards a forest that is avoided and circumscribed with taboos, the latter may be the attitude towards agricultural fields that need to be tendered and cared for. The result is the sustainable management of forests and its biodiversity. Similarly agricultural and horticultural fields, being circumscribed with taboos and care prevent many harmful and degrading practices from developing. For example a study done in Orissa reveals that while chemical fertilizers and genetically modified seeds are used in the fields in which the produce is designated for the market, the rice that is offered to the gods and used in rituals and self consumption is still grown by organic methods of cultivation.

For the pastoral as well as coastal people on the other hand the sky and the heavenly bodies are seen with a reverential attitude. In a pastoral community in the upper Himalayas the sheep herders looked upon the Sun as a mother and called it "Aama Nyama" or Mother Sun and the Moon was referred to as father's brother. Unlike what may be thought that illiterate people do not have any idea of the scientific explanations of natural phenomenon, the Bhotiya sheep herders knew about the water cycle, and how the sun caused the waters to evaporate and then come down as rains that were preserved as snow in the mountains. In summer when the snow melted, lush green grass came up and was fed to their animals. They said, "We worship sun because it causes the rain to fall and it gives warmth to our animals to survive. The sun is our life giver and therefore we consider it as our mother". The fishermen and coastal people who venture out into the sea, the heavenly bodies like the moon and stars are of great importance. The sea fearing people of the Melanesian islands could navigate with the help of the heavenly bodies without the help of compasses and they were some of the best navigators of the world. The traditional fishermen likewise can predict tides and the weather better than the weather men.

We shall discuss more about the traditional knowledge systems later. Here it is sufficient for us to emphasize that reverence for nature was not based upon ignorance but rather upon fairly comprehensive knowledge that gave rise to rationality that may have appeared as superstition but which had very positive impact on sustainability.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit

1) What is a dualistic philosophy of nature and culture?

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2) How is nature viewed in Hinduism and other ancient religions of the world? How do these beliefs affect practice towards the environment?

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1.4 THE ECO-PHILOSOPHY OF THE WEST

It is widely accepted that the western philosophy makes a distinction between nature and culture, yet as Gisli Palsson points out such was not the case in medieval Europe where people still thought that they were a part of nature and the western world view was more monistic than dualistic as it is now. It was only during the renaissance period, marking the beginning of modernity those extraordinary changes took place that led to the perspectives centered on "discontinuities and distinctions" (Palsson 1996:65). From a spiritual focus, the renaissance artists for example followed a more explorative methodology and began to depict "human activities and their place in nature and history" (ibid). The painting styles that went in for the depiction of three dimensional spaces added a completely different world view and epistemology that triggered a revolution in the manner in which people now approached their relationship to nature, knowledge and learning. By such representations it became possible to acquire nature to see it as something outside of one's self.

As Descartes saw the world, everything that was real could be placed on a time/ space axis as an objective reality and all such reality was capable of being exploited, acquired and manipulated. This was the rational Universe that was not an aspect of subjective experience but of objective knowledge. By painting nature in three dimensions, it was understood that nature was an objective reality with an objective existence (situated within time –space coordinates) and hence graspable and exploitable. Nature in other words was neither sacred, nor were humans a part of nature or inside it as they were capable of grasping it from the outside. Humans, more specifically men were rational and objective while women

were more subjective, less rational and therefore both nature and women (equated with each other) were to be dominated and kept under control by men. Adding this perspective to the colonial experience the term men was understood as 'white' men in particular as the 'native' were irrational and even infantile. Thus any decisions made on how to deal with nature were best made by white men with their objective and scientific knowledge. Thus nature and environment were continuously modified, subjugated and brought under control.

As Palsson points out this domination attitude of nature was of two kinds, what he calls the Orientalist and the Paternalistic. The third approach that is more non-western and pre-modern is the one that advocates a more sharing and reciprocal relationship, namely Communalism. The Orientalist approach is the attitude exhibited by the colonial rulers over the resources of their colonies. It is also expressed in the capitalist which emphasis on maximizing profit at the cost of devastating the environment; it is the attitude of taking without giving, what has also been called as negative reciprocity, where one party to an exchange appropriates disproportionate amounts from the other by virtue of its power. The vocabulary of Orientalism is typically one of domestication, frontiers and expansion-of exploring, conquering, and exploiting the environment for the diverse purposes of production, consumption, sport and display (Palsson : 68). However the world has realized today that this kind of exploitative attitude towards the environment has not paid off as nature is not a passive victim. The massive environmental issues that we are facing today is a result of this philosophy that humans can dominate over nature and that white man's rationality is the most superior. It is because of the realization that too much of exploitation is not sustainable and one is in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden eggs that the Paternalist philosophy developed.

With Protectionism, the attitude that humans are in control still prevailed, the only difference was that now the strategy was not of direct destruction and extraction but of management and judicious exploitation. These may include rights activists who may aggressively put their own views forward. Many of them have an exaggerated and romantic view of the so called 'primitive' or native people who they feel have ideal human –environment relationships. Many scientific approaches modeled on terms such as resource management fall within this approach. Also traditional producers such as peasants who feel that they have a balanced reciprocal relationship with nature are also having an attitude by which they feel that by using their judgment and skills they can make the environment yield what they want. The use of modern technology, introduction of concepts such as efficiency and regulation are all aspects of protective *Paternalism*. This philosophy continues to prioritize humans and ignores other aspects such as inequality, external costs and subjective aspects such as emotions, sentiments and values. It is primarily an economic approach that seeks to maximize the availability of resources to those who can afford them and to see to it that an uninterrupted supply is maintained.

The third type of philosophical approach, *Communalism*, is radically different from the first two that it does not put a priority on humans. It does not seek to look for a balanced reciprocity but rather for an intimate and subjective relationship in which both nature and humans are situated at par in a monistic unity. It is highly influenced by Marxism and the theory of practice. It does not focus itself on the individual but on the community. Many preliterate societies

living close to nature exhibit communalistic philosophies. For example Nurit Bird-David working among the Nayakan of South India has shown how these people who are forest dwellers look upon the forest as their parent, who satisfies all their needs; such that their view of nature is that of a giving nature and they see themselves as children. In such a philosophy, the concept of control, management and exploitation cannot arise. On the other hand it is an affectionate and intimate relationship in which the people feel comfort in nature.

The Bhotiya pastoral communities are afraid of civilization and cities and feel comfortable and secure when they are in the upper reaches of the Himalayas, even in the forests and high altitude pastures. A shepherd grazing his sheep hundreds of miles away from civilization, in the high mountain tops has nothing to fear, he knows how to deal with the forest spirits and deities up on the hills. The shepherds relate their security to the purity of the environment, air and water in the high mountain tops, they feel as they come closer to cities, the air and water gets polluted and their animals get sick. To them the more a region is away from human habitation the purer and more sacred it is.

The western world view has usually the opposite view point and also those who live in cities and urban areas. They fear nature as wild and dangerous and in the early phase of colonization the human –nature relationship was often phrased in terms of conquest, control and clearing. Thus, forests were cleared to make way for agricultural fields and cities; and the two were seen as opposed to each other. Thus both oriental and protectionist philosophies sought to use nature rather than live with it. It was only the communal approach that included nature within its social relationships and had a more interactive approach to nature actually was able to manage a more sustainable relationship. We have seen that the maximum amount of time as homo- sapiens has been spent as hunters- gatherers, a philosophy that we can also call as eco-cosmology, where the deep relationship and bond of humans with the environment is explicitly felt. When humans lost their bonding with nature they became predators, what Ramachadra Guha has called the omnivores, trying to usurp as much as possible of the environment for their own use. At this point instead of a communal sharing of natural resources, various strata and interest groups compete with each other to extract as much as possible for their greed.

Thus industrialization and capitalism along with the development of a value system that placed too much emphasis on materialism and accumulation of material things led to increase in accumulative attitudes and measuring social status and success by pecuniary standards only. All other qualities of humanity are superseded by that of monetary success. It is for this reason that people cannot put a stop to their accumulative behavior and therefore need to exploit nature more and more. The concepts and values of sharing decreases; competitiveness increases. Consumption becomes directed towards status and a consumer driven world view that puts people on a scale of consumption in order to assess their worth for society. It is this world view that has led to a disastrous situation for the world. On the other hand eco-cosmology is a way of living with nature rather than using nature.

1.5 ECO-COSMOLOGY

Eco-cosmology was a term coined by Elizabeth Croll and David Parkin(1992) in their seminal volume, Bush Base Forest farm, one of the first attempts to consolidate non-western philosophies.

The Amazonian forests have held the attention of the world as one of the last remaining rain forests that is fast getting depleted by the onslaught of commercialization and capitalist development. The forest dwellers of the Amazon region have been a focus of study for this reason as well. Here we shall describe the eco cosmology of the Amerindians of the Amazon, studied by Kaj Århem (1996), for whom there is no separation of nature from society. Thus humans are one part of a total world that is regulated by cosmic principles. "As holistic cultural constructs, eco-cosmologies engage and motivate; they mould perception, inform practice and supply meaningful guidelines for living" (Århem: 186).

The Makuna, of the Columbian Amazon all beings are interlocked in exchange relationships of hunters and preys. They are subsistence farmers and hunters and food gatherers where men hunt and women do the gardening. The Makuna, called themselves the 'Water people' and have marriage relationships with the Yiba people who are stipulated to be descendents of the forest. This is a totemic relationship. Together the Water people and the Forest people form a single community speaking the same language and occupy continuous territory. Since they speak the original language of the Water people they are called as a community by the name of Makuna.

Like most other people of their type of subsistence, the Makuna have all their activities such as hunting, gardening and even daily consumption of food accompanied by rituals. There is no separation between the sacred and the ordinary. The Makuna distinguish between the transcendental world of the *he* spirits who are both life givers and predators and the every day, visible and physical world. While the former is unchanging and timeless the latter is moving and visibly transforming. Everything in the material world has its counterpart in the *he* world, and everything that happens in the visible world is made meaningful by the spiritual existence of the *he* world.

The animals and humans are all the same kind of being with the same essence so that one class of being can always transform into another class of being, thus humans can turn into animals and animals into different kinds of animals. Thus the essence of every being can manifest itself into different kinds of energy, all living things share the same vitality that circulates around and manifests itself in various physical forms that have only a superficial difference. All beings are the same essence otherwise. The relationship between all these beings are of predators and prey; either one is a prey for another class of being or is a predator for the same. Thus from the human point of view the entire Universe consists of either human food or eaters of human beings. There is a cosmic web of either eat, or be eaten. The system has two extreme points that all the eaters are prey to none and the plants are only eaten and do not eat anything. The humans occupy a middle position where they are food for some and eat some. The supreme predators include the anaconda, the jaguar and the gods and the *he* spirits.

When an individual of any species is eaten, a new process of reproduction begins as the spirits are sent back to the 'birth house' of the particular species and the

species as a whole is empowered for reproduction. Thus when the *he* spirits eat a human spirit, it is sent back to the birth house and similarly if a human eats an animal; its spirit is sent back to its birth house. Thus individual deaths ensure the continuation of the species. The Makuna philosophy of life explains predation as exchange as death is exchanged for regeneration of life.

The shamans are the human counterparts of the supreme predators, the jaguars, anaconda and spirits; all of these can change forms, transform from one to another. The main role of these 'cosmic hunters' is to move from one life world to another and see that all species are ensured for reproduction. The Makuna believe that the animals, birds and fish are all 'people' who live in houses, have their fields and have intelligence, rationality and agency just like humans. They roam in their particular bird or animal forms yet when they reach their own place they become like people. They recognize kinship between the spirits, animals and humans; the Makuna are Water people the descendants of the water Anaconda and the Yiba are descendents of the mythical forest being, Yiba. In this cosmic world all are equal and share bonds of kinship. They are bound to each other by bonds of exchange just like people who have married into each other's groups. The role of fish and animals is however different, as animals are seen as incarnations of the God while the fish are only byproducts of the creative work of God. Therefore the Makuna consider fish to be more like food than game animals that are seen as active agents like God and men. While other animals have appropriate food, humans can convert any species like animals into food by their shamanistic powers. A shaman is a person with ritual powers and he blesses the animals or plants that are killed so that their spirit goes to the 'birth house' from where the species originate. This is the exchange process involved in hunting that the hunter gets the meat but has to ensure that the spirit of the dead animal/ plant returns to the birth house. In this way humans differ from other species that they are not confined to any specific foods. If the food is not cured by blessings then it is dangerous as it contains its own weapons. Only blessings neutralize such powers inherent in all food. Unblessed food thus causes illness, being the result of failed reciprocity because unblessed spirit does not return to the birth house.

Most non-western societies relate disease to failed morality, like among the Makuna mentioned here it is the failure to reciprocate, to complete the exchange; but in Hinduism often people say disease is caused by bad karma, or many people think it is caused by the wrath of the God. Since many times God is nothing but natural objects, the concept of failed morality is often attached to irresponsible behavior towards natural objects, like polluting water, over killing animals etc. As among the Makuna, all species eaten, are just like humans, so one must kill only if one has to that is for survival. But, in most cases the person who kills must make up by prayers, rituals or blessings to atone for the killing. Thus while humans hunt and kill the animals for food and eat the plants, they also ensure their survival and reproduction through rituals and shamanistic practices.

This in fact is the principle of sustainability at the metaphysical level. One must replace what one takes and there is no essential difference in scale of values between a human and non-human being. All are equally important and like the Makuna, many preliterate people understand this mutual dependency of humans and non-humans in the cosmic order.

Most scholars working with illiterate and traditional people have found their belief systems to be perfectly logical and rational and contributing towards a sustainable relationship with the environment. The Makuna for example do not have a technology for storage of food, and the ideology of reciprocity that they have with the natural beings prevents them from any kind of overexploitation. Only what is required for immediate consumption of the family is to be taken from the environment. If there is a ritual, then that extra food is always shared among several families and the shaman regulates the amount to be used, ensuring that there is no wastage. Makuna eco-cosmology emphasizes man's responsibility towards the environment and the interdependence of nature and society. Human life is geared to a single, fundamental and socially valued goal i.e. to maintain and reproduce the interconnected totality of beings which constitute the living world; 'to maintain the world', as the Makuna say. In fact this cosmonomic responsibility towards the whole end the accompanying shamanistis knowledge= is, according to the Makuna, the hallmark of humanity" (Arhem: 201).

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with the possible answers provided at the end of this unit.

1) What kind of attitudes makes people expiate nature? What social conditions are responsible for such attitudes?

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2) What is Eco-cosmology? Discuss.

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3) What are the ways in which we can develop a more sustainable attitude towards the environment?

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

- Sustainability is a value that is inherent in the cosmologies of many pre-literate and pre-capitalist people.
- The inclusion of the natural world within the moral Universe of social relationships is what is crucial to bringing about a sustainable relationship with the environment.
- Because of the intervention of the western system of rationality and a modernist way of looking at the world, some of us can no longer perhaps go back to the same ways of thinking as of antiquity. But the important thing for future is to examine the rationality of the beliefs and their real impact on sustainability.
- The modern scientific dichotomous way of thinking about nature and society has not paid us good dividends.
- It is relevant for us to respect not only all forms of life but all manifestations of nature like mountains and streams.
- It is the attitude and values that need to be relearned from our own past, the technology is not so important for technology can always be invented.

1.7 KEY WORDS

Totem : An animal/plant/natural object which is considered as the representative emblem of a clan.

Taboo : A social custom of restriction or prohibition based on religious beliefs.

Community : Group of people who have common interests and understandings.

Industrialization : Development of industries on a large scale.

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1.9 KEY TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) Your answer must include the following points
   - Nature-culture dichotomy.
   - Celestial bodies into the forms of natural things, beings and phenomenon.
   - Developed in Indeo-Christian era.
2) Your answer must include the following points
   - Naturalistic form of worship representation of Gods and Goddesses.
   - Conserve environment.
   - Control agricultural activities.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Your answer must include the following points
   - Capitalist emphasis on maximization of profit.
   - Negative reciprocity
   - Diverse nature of production and consumption.
   - Fear of nature.
   - Wilderness of nature.
   - Industrialization
2) Your answer must include the following points
   - Nature and human beings are complementary.
   - Holistic view of living encompassing the relationships
3) Your answer must include the following points
   - Respect all forms of species.
   - Appreciate the ecological wisdom.