Cultural Anthropology In The United States

Cultural anthropology is featured by the perception of culture itself. While many definitions of “culture” have been presented and argued among the intellectuals in last 100 years, a plain, yet absolute definition of culture is “the knowledge people use to live their lives and the way in which they do so”. Moreover, Culture is the patterns of learned and collective behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. It can also be described as the complex whole of collective human beliefs with a prearranged stage of civilization that can be explicit to a nation or time period. Humans in turn use culture to adjust and transform the world they live in.

People differ in their will, ethics, efforts, vision because human beings are subjected to different experiences which influence their beliefs and behaviors. These aspects can be studied under individualism and collectivism. The anthropological study of culture can be organized along two determined and basic themes: Diversity and Change. An individual’s upbringing, and environment (or culture) is what makes them diverse from other cultures. It is the differences between all cultures and sub-cultures of the worlds regions. People’s need to adapt and transform to physical, biological and cultural forces to survive represents the second theme, Change.

Cultural anthropology in the United States was inclined greatly by the ready availability of Native American societies as ethnographic subjects. The field was founded by staff of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, men such as John Wesley Powell and Frank Hamilton Cushing. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), a lawyer from Rochester, New York, became an advocate for and ethnological scholar of the Iroquois. His comparative analyses of religion, government, material culture, and especially kinship patterns proved to be influential contributions to the field of anthropology. Like other scholars of his day (such as Edward Tylor), Morgan argued that human societies could be classified into categories of cultural evolution on a scale of progression that ranged from savagery, to barbarism, to civilization. Generally, Morgan used technology (such as bow making or pottery) as an indicator of position on this scale.

Throughout its history, America aspired to be a melting pot, a place where people from around the world immigrated and blended together to become one united people. This has happened to some degree, especially for those in the white majority. But for those who look different, the task has been much more challenging and the barriers to full acceptance remain high.

Even in Pakistan where 97% population have one religion, share one school of thought that God is one and Muhammad is the last prophet. But their cultural values and beliefs differ from one province to other and from one city to other. Their way of dressing, art, food is different. For example Pathans are mostly non vegetarian and prefer mutton and beef on the other side in Punjab they are more vegetarian and most of them prefer white meat instead of red. Due to difference in temperature of weather women in KPK and Baluchistan wear heavy dresses with an art of jewelry while in Punjab women wear light dresses with only printed or ‘Kadhai” art. In Khyber Pakhtunkwa Pashto accent changes in every territory of 20km because different tribes of pasthoons living in this province.

This idea of culture anthropology can be seen in the way that we explain the Ashanti, an African tribe located in central Ghana. The Ashanti live with their families as you might assume but the meaning of how and why they live with who is an important characteristic of Ashanti culture. In the Ashanti culture, the family and the mother’s clan are most central. A child is said to inherit the father’s soul or spirit and from the mother, a child receives flesh and blood. This relates them more closely to the mother’s clan. The Ashanti live in an extended family. The family lives in various homes or huts that are set up around a courtyard. The head of the household is usually the oldest brother that lives there. He is chosen by the elders. He is called either Father or Housefather and everyone in the household obeys him.

Professional anthropological bodies often object to the use of anthropology for the benefit of the state. Their codes of ethics or statements may proscribe anthropologists from giving secret briefings. The Association for Social Anthropology has called certain scholarships ethically dangerous. 'Statement of Professional Responsibility' clearly states that 'in relation with their own government and with host governments no secret research, no secret reports or debriefings of any kind should be agreed to or given.'

More recently, there have been concerns expressed about bio-prospecting, along with struggles for self-representation for native peoples and the repatriation of indigenous remains and material culture, with anthropologists often in the lead on these issues.

Other political controversies come from the prominence in American anthropology on cultural relativism and its long-standing antipathy to the concept of race. The development of sociobiology in the late 1960s was opposed by cultural anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, who argued that these positions were reductive. While authors such John Randal Baker continued to develop the biological concept of race into the 1970s, the rise of genetics has proven to be central to developments on this front. As genetics continues to advance as a science some anthropologists such as Luca Cavalli-Sforza have continued to transform and advance notions of race through the use of recent developments in genetics, such as tracing past migrations of peoples through their mitochondrial and Y-chromosomal DNA, and ancestry-informative markers.