III.3 Ideology & Culture

The two extreme explanations of cultural development (environmental determinism and de Tracy's 'ideology') claim mutually exclusive predominance of only one of these factors.

Marx's dialectical materialism views society as an interconnected *whole* of both the 'economic base' and the 'ideological superstructure.'

> **"The first historical act is…the production of material life itself … This is, indeed, a historical act, a fundamental condition of history."**
>
> Karl Marx

Marx views the 'economic base' as primary (but not the all-determining factor), because "The first historical act is…the production of material life itself" – no ideas can exist outside of the physical brains that think them.

Each of us is both 'body and soul'; the fact of our physical birth, even before we develop our personalities, is 'the fundamental condition of our history' (we must exist physically, for our personalities to develop). By the same token, societies develop their 'personalities' in the course of their historical development. The thoughts and behaviour patterns of an individual form that person's character; the thoughts and behaviour patterns of a social group form the *culture* of a society. Our thoughts are rooted in our physical sensations and our physical environment which affects our nutrition and physical and mental health; yet, our thoughts drive our actions, which, in turn, have the power to transform our physical and social environment.
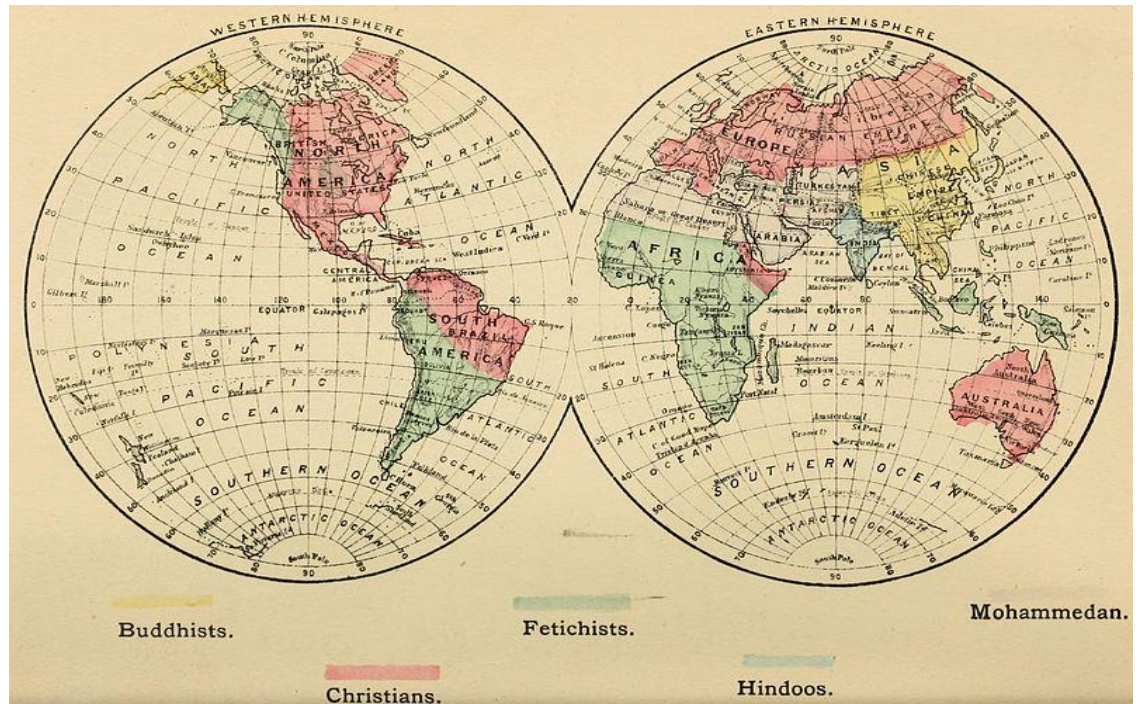
Dialectics gives us a balanced view of the complex whole of society. The society's gift to each of us, symbolic/verbal thought, enables us to spin our 'webs of significance' that envelop and support us. We have glimpsed the dynamic interaction between the 'economic base' and the system of ideas related to Value that together shape the so-called 'social orders.' Having seen how one of those 'webs,' the idea of *value*/benefit, motivates us, humans, in all that we do, let us now zoom in on another powerful 'web' that cradles most of us from birth – superstition/religion.

3.1 Superstition/Religion & Culture

In our childhood, we 'soak up' the beliefs and attitudes of our society without question; they become an essential part of our being, and we naturally feel defensive about them. In fact, people often sacrifice their lives for their beliefs (nothing is absolute, not even Maslow's hierarchy of human needs!).

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

The grip of superstition and religious beliefs on human minds has been particularly tenacious. Look at the1883 map[1] of the world divided into colors representing "Christians, Buddhists, Hindoos, Mohammedans, Fetichists" below – it did not leave any space for atheists! Why has religious belief, no matter which kind, been part of every human society?

Buddhists.   Fetichists.   Mohammedan.

Christians.   Hindoos.

3.2 It's in the way we *think* – we are natural 'dualists'

To understand what we are today, imagine our pre-historic ancestors, and what life must have been for them in this world, full of dangers, thousands of years ago. They understood little of Nature; however, their thinking (like ours) connected ideas by resemblance, contiguity in time/space, and cause/effect. This 'human' way of thinking naturally drives us to look for the '*causes*' of things. Imagine how confused and frightened they must have felt, seeing dead people in their dreams, or finding themselves in strange or different places from where they would wake up, etc. For them, their dreams were *real*; they began to believe in the **duality** of their being, in 'body and soul' being separate. The idea that 'there is a *me* somewhere inside my head' is instinctive to all of us, particularly in childhood. This tendency to dualism makes us naturally receptive to religious ideas.

By analogy with their observations of themselves, our ancestors saw everything in Nature as being *alive*, driven by 'souls' or 'spirits' (that is why their view of the world

---

[1]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_religious_groups

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

is called *animism*[2]). Most Pagan beliefs exemplify **animistic thinking**; this points to the possibility that collective /social consciousness also goes through stages of cognitive development, similar to those of individual minds (See Appendix III Reading 2 *Society – the Foundry of Human Minds*).

Our distant ancestors were no philosophers – their primary concern in looking for 'causes' of things was raw survival; in their psyche, logic was subordinate to their instinctive and emotional reactions (much like the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, going by Piaget's scale).

Societies are a bit like individuals – in their common humanity, they are all unique. Just like different individuals have their unique personalities, so also groups of people have their unique cultures, shaped by their shared experiences. These shared experiences produce shared thoughts, beliefs and practices, which may be very different in different societies, and at different stages of their evolution.

Ideas have no physical substance – they exist only in the individual (or collective) minds that create them. Eventually, some of our ancestors' religious beliefs got

Animistic Thinking

We all remember as, when toddlers, we used to think that inanimate objects, like cars, trees, or toys have living qualities and feel things, just like us. At that age, I would think a wilting flower was sad; slap a chair for hitting my knee, and be easily convinced that the 'TV is tired and, so, it has to be turned off.'

This way of thinking is *egocentric* – centered on 'self'; the unfolding of consciousness (whether individual or collective) is powered by 'connecting' experience/ knowledge.

Egocentric thinkers view things only from one perspective – their own. Ability to see things from another perspective is *acquired* in the course of cognitive *development* (Piaget's proof of egocentrism: the **'three mountains' problem**, where a small and medium sized mountain are put in front of a large mountain. Because they can see all three mountains from the front, pre-operational kids would say that the mountains would look the same from the other side, while in reality, the big mountain would block the smaller ones behind it).

It is egocentrism that leads young children to think non-living objects think, feel, and act just like humans. Piaget further linked animistic thinking and egocentrism when he discovered that even though children of this age can distinguish between living and non-living objects, they still assign these inanimate objects human qualities. It is also interesting to note that when children cannot explain an event, they often attribute the event to magic.

---

[2]   **a)** the belief that natural objects, natural phenomena, and the universe itself possess souls
b) the belief that natural objects have souls that may exist apart from their material bodies

written down in 'sacred texts' (the Vedas, the Torah, the Bible, the Koran, etc.), and so became more powerful than the unwritten pagan ideas, which rarely cross societal / linguistic community boundaries.

> ## Major World Religions
>
> **Abrahamic** religions (the largest group) -**Judaism, Christianity,** and **Islam**; they all worship one God and are named after Abraham, the patriarch. Today, around 3.4 billion people are followers of Abrahamic religions.
> **Indian** religions: **Hinduism**, **Buddhism** and **Sikhism** tend to share key concepts, such as dharma and karma.
> **East Asian** religions: **Confucianism** and **Taoism**, both of which are asserted by some scholars to be non-religious in nature.
> **Indigenous ethnic religions**, traditionally referred to as *Paganism*: formerly found on every continent, now marginalized by the major organized faiths, but persisting as undercurrents of folk religion. Includes African traditional religions, Asian Shamanism, Native American religions, Austronesian and Australian Aboriginal traditions, and Chinese folk religion.
> http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_religious_groups

Two of these sacred texts, the Bible and the Koran, became the cornerstones of two aggressively **proselytizing** religions, Christianity & Islam; their struggle for dominance spilled 'rivers of blood' in the Middle Ages; arguably, these rivers continue to flow today.

Common 'Roots'

Paradoxically, Christianity and Islam share a lot in common: both originated in the Middle East, both believe in the Covenant between God and Abraham, the Messiah, etc.

Islam puts heavy emphasis on the special bond between the two religions. For instance, belief in the Injil (the original Gospel of Jesus) is an important part of Islam. Islam and Christianity also share, at their core, the twin 'golden' commandments of 'loving God' and 'loving Thy neighbour.'

Despite the similarities between the two faiths, there are some major differences. Islam denies that God can be divided into a Holy Trinity. Muslims consider this division of God's Oneness to be a grave sin (Shirk). Islam also denies that God has a son. Muslims see Jesus as the last prophet sent to the Children of Israel like Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, etc. Islam, thus, takes the Judaist position with regard to the sacredness of Jesus Christ. Unlike Judaism, however, Islam fully accepts Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_Islam

3.3 Clash of Two Aggressive Religions – a historical snapshot

Out of all the major world religions, only Christianity and Islam have been aggressive in pursuing proselytizing campaigns. As we have seen, they both originated roughly in the same geographical area, and share common beliefs.

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Christianity owes its origin to the Romans and King Herod's atrocities on the people of the Jewish state of Judea and the corrupt Temple culture in Jerusalem. Early Christians were hounded out of Judea but found followers in Syria, Egypt and Rome. The very existence of Christian cult in Rome angered the Romans, who did not hesitate to feed them to the lions in the Coliseum. But the resilient nature of the Christian philosophy attracted more followers, until a Roman general named **Constantine**[3] was promised victory over his adversaries and the crown of Rome, should he become a Christian. He followed the advice and triumphed in the battle and later became Emperor Constantine. More wars were fought in the name of Christianity by later Roman emperors, to win Christian converts all over the Roman world. Having had a fiery start in and around the Mediterranean Sea, Christianity soon spread to Northern and Eastern Europe. It became the state religion of Armenia in 301, of Ethiopia in 325, of Georgia in 337, and then the State church of the Roman Empire in 380. Although Christian philosophy is 'gentle,' yet its spread was anything but so. Crusaders fought two hundred years of war in the 11th and 12th centuries to wrest control of Jerusalem from the other aggressive religion, Islam. Christian armies converted /slaughtered thousands of people not only in Europe and the Middle East, but also in South America, Africa and India, fighting for their faith and – last but not least – riches! Having thus expanded throughout the world during Europe's Age of Exploration, Christianity became one of the world's largest religions.

Islam also has its roots in the Middle East – Arabs and Jews are said to be 'cousins,' descendants of the sons of the same Father. Early in the seventh century AD, according to legend, Prophet Muhammad claimed that God had revealed the Koran to him; below is a depiction of Muhammad receiving his first revelation from Angel Gabriel[4]:

---

[3] **Emperor Constantine (272 – 337AD)** transformed the ancient Greek colony of Byzantium into a new imperial residence, Constantinople, which would be the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for over one thousand years.

[4] Source: the book Jami' al-tawarikh by Rashid-al-Din Hamadani, published in 1307 AD, Ilkhanate period. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

Prophet Mohammad and his followers waged wars on the 'infidels,' winning converts in Arabia and beyond. The map below depicts the spread of Islam in the course of military conquests by Prophet Mohammad (the darkest colour) and his successors, the **Caliphs** [5](lighter colours).

In just about one hundred years, Arabs had conquered all lands from Spain to Western India, forcefully converting their people to Islam:

The Arab aristocracy during the first caliphates (632-750) viewed Islam as a religion for Arabs only; and expected the non-Muslim majority (Dhimmis) to pay taxes to the Muslim Arabs. Non-Arab converts (*mawali*) could never achieve social and economic equality with the Arabs. The descendants of Prophet Muhammad's uncle Abbas eventually rallied discontented *mawali* and poor Arabs against those rulers and overthrew them in 750, inaugurating the **Abbasid dynasty**.

---

[5] Caliph: A leader of an Islamic polity, regarded as a successor of Muhammad and by tradition always male [Middle English calife, from Old French, from Arabic alfa, successor (to Muhammad), caliph, from alafa, to succeed] Source: http://www.thefreedictionary.com/caliph

Part III. What Shapes Culture?
Islamic Golden Age (750 – 1258 AD)
Under the Abbasids, Islamic civilization flourished, with the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad as its capital. Philosophy and sciences thrived, in sharp contrast to the intellectual stagnation of medieval Europe (Avicenna, al-Farabi, Ibn Al-Haytham, who is often referred to as the "world's first true scientist," etc.). The interaction of different cultures, brought together under Arab rule, stimulated a creative revival – Indian mathematics and astronomy, Greek philosophy and science had been translated and preserved for posterity by Arab scholars. The world's first public hospitals and mental asylums were established during this time; the world's oldest degree-granting university, the University of Al Karaouine in Morocco, was founded in 859 AD).

The spread of Islamic power, however, incensed medieval Christian clerics who felt threatened by the sheer numbers of Muslim converts. The Christian Church depicted Islam as the religion of the antichrist, and Muslims as libidinous and subhuman.[6]

The Crusades

In 1095 an assembly of churchmen called by Pope Urban II met at Clermont, France. Messengers from the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus had urged the pope to send help against the armies of Muslim Turks. On November 27 the pope addressed the assembly and asked the warriors of Europe to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims. The response of the assembly was overwhelmingly favorable. Thus was launched the first and most successful of at least eight crusades against the Muslim caliphates of the Near East.

'Deus Vult!' ('God Wills It!') was the battle cry of the thousands of Christians who joined crusades to free the Holy Land from the Muslims. From 1096 to 1270 there were eight major crusades and two children's crusades, both in the year 1212. Only the First and Third Crusades were successful (from the Crusaders' point of view). In the long history of the Crusades, thousands of knights, soldiers, merchants, and peasants lost their lives on the march or in battle (please see Appendix III Reading 3: The Crusades for maps and details of the Crusades).

---

[6] Source: Wikipedia

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

The 'Causes' of the Crusades

After the collapse of Charlemagne's empire in the first half of the 9th century AD, Christian Europe was frequently attacked by Magyars, nomadic people from Asia, who pillaged eastern and central Europe until the 10th century. From about 800 AD, frequent Viking raids also devastated Northern Europe and even threatened Mediterranean cities. But the greatest threat came from the spread of Islam in the centuries following the death of Prophet Muhammad. The map on page 105 shows how, by the 8th century, Islamic forces had conquered North Africa, the eastern shores of the Mediterranean as far as India, and most of Spain. Islamic armies established bases in Italy, greatly reduced the size and power of the Byzantine Empire (the Eastern Roman Empire) and besieged its capital, Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire, which had preserved much of the classical civilization of the Greeks and had defended the eastern Mediterranean from assaults on all sides, was barely able to hold off the enemy.

In the 11th century, the Church became more centralized, having curtailed the power of local kings to appoint bishops and other important clergy. The Pope thus got the power over all the European kings, which enabled them to whip up political and popular support for the first Crusades.

At the same time, Europe's population and trade between cities had been growing; its human and economic resources could now support new military enterprises on the scale of the Crusades. A growing population and more surplus wealth also meant greater demand for goods from elsewhere. European traders had always looked to the Mediterranean; now they sought greater control of the goods, routes, and profits.

History abounds with examples of how ideas/ ideology are used by powerful figures and social institutions to incite the masses to violence. The popes used their newly acquired political power to pursue the economic interests of the Church by mobilizing armies of Crusaders to fight for (the wealth of) the Holy Land. Currently, we are witnessing a new flare-up in the clash between Christianity and Islam (the former US President George W. Bush openly called his 'War on Terror' a *Crusade*). At the heart of the conflict, however, are economic interests/ grievances – ideological 'frills' are only used to camouflage them.

3.4 Ideology – the product of human minds

Ideas are the products of human minds; they do not exist in the physical world (There is nothing that is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so). Ideas are, however, a powerful force in the physical world, because they are used ideas to mobilize groups of people to act in an organized way. The more people subscribe to an ideology, the more powerful they and their ideology become in the society.

Ideologies, as Marx rightly pointed out, are largely driven by economic (survival) interests, by our animal instinct of self-preservation. Social conflicts, wars are often

presented as clashes of ideologies; more often than not, they are caused by clashing economic interests. For instance, the 2010 violence between the indigenous Birom people and the 'settler' Hausa population in the Plateau State of Nigeria was 'dressed' to look as a clash of religions (Christian vs. Muslim); in reality, it was the struggle for economic and political power between the two communities.

When examining events and happenings in human societies, we must look beyond ideology and focus on the economic interests of the parties involved.

Religious Beliefs Defy Logic

"All religious beliefs seem weird to those not brought up in them," writes Richard Dawkins, the British scientist and author. As an example, he quotes Boyer [7] who had done research on the Fang people of Cameroon; these people "believe that witches have an extra internal animal-like organ that flies away at night and ruins other people's crops or poisons their blood. It is also said that these witches sometimes assemble for huge banquets, where they devour their victims and plan future attacks. Many will tell you that a friend of a friend actually saw witches flying over the village at night, sitting on a banana leaf and throwing magical darts at various unsuspecting victims" (Dawkins: 1998). Boyer continued with a personal anecdote:

> I was mentioning these and other exotica over dinner in a Cambridge college when one of our guests, a prominent Cambridge theologian, turned to me and said: 'That is what makes anthropology so fascinating and so difficult, too. You have to explain how people can believe such nonsense.' … Which left me dumbfounded…

Assuming that the Cambridge theologian was a mainstream Christian, he probably believed some combination of the following:

- **In the time of the ancestors, a man was born to a virgin mother with no biological father being involved.**
- **The same fatherless man called out to a friend called Lazarus, who had been dead long enough to stink, and Lazarus promptly came back to life.**
- **The fatherless man himself came alive after being dead and buried three days.**
- **Forty days later, the fatherless man went up to the top of a hill and then disappeared bodily into the sky.**
- **If you murmur thoughts privately in your head, the fatherless man, and his 'father' (who is also himself) will hear your thoughts and may act upon them. He is simultaneously able to hear the thoughts of everybody else in the world.**

---

[7] Pascal Boyer (fl. c. 1990-2000) is a French anthropologist, and Henry Luce Professor of Individual and Collective Memory at Washington University in St. Louis. He advocates the idea that human instincts provide us with the basis for an intuitive theory of mind that guides our social relations, morality, and predilections toward religious beliefs. Boyer and others propose that these innate mental systems make human beings predisposed to certain cultural elements such as belief in supernatural beings. Boyer has conducted long term ethnographic fieldwork in Africa, where he studied the transmission of oral epics, and has held teaching and research positions at several universities.

> - **If you do something bad, or something good, the same fatherless man sees all, even if nobody else does. You may be rewarded or punished accordingly, including after your death.**
> - **The fatherless man's virgin mother never died, but 'ascended' bodily into heaven.**
> - **Bread and wine, if blessed by a priest (who must have testicles), 'become' the body and blood of the fatherless man.**

What would an objective anthropologist, coming fresh to this set of beliefs while on fieldwork in Cambridge, make of them?" (Dawkins: 2006).

Destutt de Tracy argued that all theological science "comes from God (if it is true), or is a dream (if it is false); thus, it is either above or below human reason, and in both cases does not belong with the products of human reason" (Destutt de Tracy: 1972).

Marx called religion 'the opium of the people'; indeed, it helps people deal with things they cannot understand and, therefore, are afraid of. And so, despite the extraordinary advances of science, religions are still deeply ingrained in the collective minds of most societies and play an important role in the cultures of the world.

3.5 On Social/Cultural Differences

In this course on Language, Culture, & History, we have emphasized our common humanity – "Mankind are so much the same in all times and places…" We have seen the '*common denominator*' in the **universal human needs** and in **symbolic thinking** (the mechanism of human understanding, generalization). And yet,

> **Mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing new or strange.**
>
> ~ David Hume

If mankind are so much the same in all times and places, then how come we have so many different cultures and languages?

We have already found some answers to this question; with regard to language, for example, we remember that words are *signs* of ideas (i.e., meanings, 'encoded' in sound and used by the people of a group/society). Because ideas have no physical substance, their physical forms (words) are arbitrary, subject to speakers' tastes and habits. For that reason, when human communities live in relative isolation, they all develop their own communication 'codes.' Here in Papua New Guinea, we can see how languages gradually develop differences by looking at the dialects of neighbouring villages. The people of the Marsh Lagoon in NCD, they say, historically spread from the village of Velerupu (now known as Gavuone) to other parts of the Aroma Coast; because the various groups subsequently communicated more amongst their own subgroups, each village developed their own ways of speaking, and

Part III. What Shapes Culture?

language use in all the different locations became different. The physical *forms* of language that people use grow differently on different 'soil,' as do all of the people's other habits, ideas and ways of behaviour (societies also have 'personalities' – just as different individuals within one society may have different views, habits and opinions).

What happens in a particular society, then, is the result of the interplay of multiple influencing factors, on multiple levels:

1. **Physical environment**: climate, terrain, etc. For example, if people live by the sea, they may traditionally use fishing to satisfy their needs; similarly, if they live in a warm climate, they will not have to wear warm clothes to keep them from freezing, etc.
2. **Historical events**: common experiences (natural disasters, wars, interaction with neighbouring communities, etc.). Just like individuals are shaped by their life experiences, communities of people, their collective consciousness, are also affected by common past /experiences.
3. **Beliefs /Ideologies**: just like in every society there are all kinds of opinions and beliefs, so amongst the different societies, people have collectively developed different religions, traditions, biases, prejudices and superstitions, etc.
4. **Science and Technology**: Science is culture-free: 2 + 2 = 4 in all human cultures. All societies are affected by the scientific knowledge and the new tools (technologies) they develop (or adopt). This is how political commentators came up with the term 'leap-frogging into the 21st century' when describing the remarkable social and cultural transformation in previously very traditional societies – all because of the spread of new technologies. We here in PNG have also leap-frogged into the future, thanks to the Internet and other digital communication technologies (EFTOPS, Digicel – any other examples?)

All these factors impact the way of life of individual societies; all of them impact the *form* of exchanges that hold them together, those tangled 'webs of significance' – economic, linguistic and ideological.