

Cultural Idiom as an Ecologic Factor: Two Studies

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The objective of this paper is to present, from an ecological point of view, certain aspects of social organization which can be considered as adaptive in terms of their flexible arrangements to the varying conditions of the environment. Two different tribal societies are here considered: the first involves the Walbiri speakers of Central Australia, while the second deals with the pastoral nomads of Southwest Asia. Both occupy relatively similar ecological zones.

The framework of operation and reference in the two respective social systems is the kinship structure, which constitutes a fundamental mechanism, both direct and indirect, for most relations within the different units of culture (e. g., economic, political, and social). This mechanism interacts with the various clusters of the social structure, and responds to relevant changes within the ecosystem by its ability to articulate socioeconomic arrangements in situations of restricted access and limited distribution of desirable, biologically and culturally, commodities.

1. The Walbiri

The Walbiri exist in an environment, which is still economically and technologically relatively inaccessible to non-aborigines. The ability to survive is a fair indication of their biological success under rigid conditions of the physical milieu, where demographic factors are as crucial in shaping the size of the group as is the abundance of food supplies. The productivity of the region controls the area size needed to sustain one individual, what in turn, effects the density, and consequently, the size of the community. In their quest for natural sources of nutrition, the Walbiri, as non-producers of food, must fission periodically to achieve greater areal distribution in order to reduce the density load per given resource area, since the band (minimal camping unit) is limited by the lowest productive capacity of the environment. Such a subsistence pattern presupposes an accurate knowledge of the biota - a fact which is reflected in their behavior and a high level of differentiation