

Teaching Early Societies (as a prelude to environmental anthropology)

In introductions to cultural anthropology, teaching hunter-gatherer societies might seem like a necessary (although boring) pitstop on the way to the exciting, recent ethnographic studies. For me, the “early societies” week in the syllabus is one of my favorites. While students might be reading about the Azande or the Trobrianders, I use this activity to remind them how these seemingly outdated perspectives are pertinent to their own relations with the environments around them.

I like to teach this week as if it were a prelude to environmental anthropology, encouraging my students to think about the ways they engage with their immediate environments, in this case the college campus. I find that this activity is also an opportunity for some of my quieter students and kinetic learners to shine among their peers. My objective for this lesson is to have students understand that the way society is structured shapes their environmental engagements and imaginaries.

This activity can be conducted several ways depending on how much time you have or your objectives for the class. The first iteration is fairly simple, teaching the hunter-gatherer perspective with a competitive spin. The second is to teach hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and agricultural societies in comparison to one another. This iteration is more complicated and takes more time, but it makes for better discussions and a more wholistic perspective.

First Iteration: Hunter-gatherers

I separate my students into small groups, usually four or five students depending on the class size. Each group is a hunter-gatherer society, and as a team they have two tasks. First, they must research what local edible foods they may forage for, and what animals they may hunt. I generally give them fifteen minutes for this part of the activity. All of their potential food sources must be native and local to the area – no invasive or introduced species. With ten minutes left to the activity, each group elects one person to leave the classroom, tasked with finding something edible on campus (no, they may not buy or find processed food) and bringing it back to share. Groups not able to bring back anything edible fail as a society.

I had a student once bring back a poisonous plant. Her society died. In another class, one of my quietest students rolled off with his skateboard, coming back within eight minutes, and with nine oranges! His knowledge of the campus environment earned him applause from his society.

Second Iteration: Comparative early societies

In the more complex iteration of this activity, I separate my students into small groups (4-5 each), but groups are separated into either hunter-gatherer, pastoral, or agricultural societies.

- 1) Hunter-gatherers have the same tasks I detailed above.
- 2) Pastoral societies must research where on campus they would be able to raise animals, and how long this would take. The group must provide data on where and what they would raise, and why. In the first ten minutes of this activity, the group elects one

person to scout the nearby campus, taking photographs of the animals they see and bringing them back to the group for analysis.

- 3) Agricultural societies must plan where they would plan crops, what crops they would plant, and how many people these crops could feed. This society must research local weather and soil conditions in order to make these decisions. This group may elect one member to scout possible growing areas, this person has ten minutes to take photos of places and plants that the group could use to plan their society.

The group research and scouting part of this exercise takes about 15-20 minutes. I always bring students back together after this activity in a group discussion, asking them to reflect on how their perspective of the campus environment changed as a result of their tasks. I usually give them three-five minutes to do this in their small groups before we discuss as a class. Below are some possible questions for the class discussion.

Discussion questions:

- What are some of the challenges you faced when planning your society?
- What kind of political or legal conflicts would you have encountered based on your society's plan?
- What kind of social conflicts might you have encountered?
- How far in the future did you have to think when you were planning your society?
- How did you see the campus environment as you were planning your society, and how is this different than how you see it on a daily basis?
- Which type of society do you think would best flourish here (on this campus, in this city, in this state)? And why?
- What type of society do you – as a college student today – live in?
- How does this shape the way you understand your environment (on campus)?