

Amish Community and Culture – A Review

The America of the Amish, the prescribed video here is an excellent example of what anthropologists explain as ‘culture’ which is a way of living and doing things in which the meanings, values and symbols are shared between the members of the community (Smiley and Smiley 2014).

The video describes the lives of the Amish people, who devout Christians following strictly a traditional way of life, which is described by the producer as “anachronistic society” (Zoulou 2006). Their rejection of the modern way of living and conscious choice of simple, frugal and old-fashioned way of life amidst the modernised settings of Ohio, Pennsylvania offers a contrasting study of cultures. It is rather an example how culture is consciously practiced through some ritual-like actions in life-style adaptations while others are spurned as unnecessary and disruptive to the principles of the community.

The video also brings out beautifully the modes of “enculturation” or the method of “learning the socially acceptable ways of meeting biological needs and expressing ones-self. It's the process by which an older group transmits cultural norms to a younger group.” (Smiley and Smiley 2014) In the video we see that even small children help their parents in the farms, milking the cows and farm activities. An Amish man responds in the affirmative that he is indeed happy about the way things were for him and otherwise he wouldn't have been there (Zoulou 2006). While all this may appear harsh to us, the Amish may view the outside world life-styles as wasteful. This gives rise to the cultural misunderstandings referred to by Bailey (1997).

The scene that shows the horse cart waiting for the ultra-modern luxury sedan passing by on the crossing road stand out as an epitome of opposites, which so characteristic of the cultures that they stand for: the luxury sedan, modern, impatient and aggressive while the old horse-drawn cart is slow and patient, and lets the car pass before it slowly but surely carries on with its journey. Culture is symbolically depicted by the vehicles respectively.

Just as the Birhors of India mentioned in the case study (Smiley and Smiley 2014) and the Kapaukuan culture of Papua New Guinea, the Amish too have strict rules and regulations. Like for example, the average children of an Amish family is about eight. This compensates for the lack of mechanization as it becomes necessary to provide for the labor required to manually manage the farm and field work and maintain equipment.

The video shows subtly that everything is not exactly smooth and there are pressures from the younger generation to change – change is slow to come to the Amish society, with no one permitted to marry outside the society or go into the outside world. Another thing that struck me is the gendered division of labor and subjugated roles played by women within the society.

In sum, the video is a balanced illustration of the difficult yet peaceful, laborious yet happy, simple yet fulfilling, but in some aspects rigid and unbending life-styles of the Amish community.

References

Bailey, Benjamin (1997) “Communication of Respect in Interethnic Service Encounters”. *Language and Society* 26 (3):327-56.

Smiley, G. Susan and Smiley, E. Francis (2014) (please mention the text book here)

Zoulou Compagnie, Sarl. (2006). *The America of the Amish* [DVD]. Films Media Group. Princeton, New Jersey.