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ABSTRACT

Designed for use as supplementary instructional material in a cultural anthropology course, this learning module examines concerns that should be addressed when using ethnographic films to explore cross-cultural perspectives. Beginning with a brief discussion of the purpose of ethnographic films, the filmmaker's perspective is discussed, stressing the need for viewer analysis of how a culture has been portrayed. The module further asserts that since most ethnographic films provide incomplete information about sex and age roles, student viewers should be aware of the imbalanced presentation of those roles in many films. The cultural state (i.e., the overall status and position of a cultural group within the larger society) and the ethnographic present (i.e., the culture's contemporary situation) are discussed as important aspects to be included in ethnographic films. Finally, the filmmaker's obligation to provide the viewer with information about special circumstances affecting the film's validity, and the educational usefulness of ethnographic films, are discussed. (LAL)

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**Ethnographic Film**

**A Modular Approach**

**Cultural Anthropology  
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# ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM ANALYSIS



## Introduction:

This module has been prepared as a guide to a specific area within Cultural Anthropology. Your task will be to read the materials, perform the tasks at the end of the module, and to cross check your answers with the information in the module upon completion of the performance activities. It will be your responsibility to keep up with the reading assignments in the textbook, and to take lecture notes, and film notes.

The module is designed to give you a basis for mastering a specific amount of information, and has been field tested with over 1000 students who have demonstrated by their performance on examinations, that the modular approach can increase the probability of student mastery. The theoretical perspective which is employed is based upon cognitive psychology, gestalt psychology, behaviorism and programmed learning.

Ethnographic films are useful in examining cross cultural perspectives. This module examines some of the concerns that should be addressed when ethnographic films are utilized, and notes areas for student examination. Films can be likened to the specimens used within laboratory classes, however, most films are not complete in regards to their treatment of all aspects of a culture.

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FILM

Anthropologists utilize films to capture the spirit of various cultures. The underlying purpose of most ethnographic film production is the documentation of a particular group's way of life, or the recording of a specific event. Ethnographic films are a traditional part of undergraduate anthropology curricula. However, students often lack the anthropological perspective and film evaluation skills necessary to understanding and utilizing the information contained in such films. As a result, students tend to judge ethnographic films for their artistic and entertainment qualities rather than for their usefulness in illustrating anthropological models.

Many of the more recent ethnographic films have been produced for popular consumption as well as for scientific or educational use. As a consequence, films that are commercially viable and attractive to a diverse audience sometimes exclude ethnographic material that the general public might consider controversial, thus lessening the film's value as a pure scientific document. Clearly, the needs of anthropologists are distinct from the viewing needs and tastes of general audiences. Nonetheless, ethnographic films can enrich the cross-cultural knowledge of both students and the general public.

The Film-Maker's Perspective

There are numerous ways to film ethnographic subjects.

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In evaluating an ethnographic film, it is important to examine the rationale for the particular film approach utilized. The viewer should analyze how a culture, society, or event has been portrayed. Some films appear to be objective, clinical and detached; others are obviously biased. In a number of instances, information gained during the film-making process subsequently has been used to manipulate behavior within the subject culture. The Canadian government, for instance, has used film-making as a tool for community organizing and development. The resultant films are vastly different from the commercial, entertainment-oriented productions. Some films are too subjective for general use in anthropology.

#### Sex and Age Roles.

The majority of ethnographic films provide incomplete information about sex roles by failing to give equal attention to the tasks, status and traits of both sexes. Classic films are no exception: most anthropologists would consider films such as "Dead Birds" or "The Hunters" as valuable records of two cultures, and would recommend them for educational use. However, unless student-viewers are informed in advance that the films are not adequately balanced in terms of sex role portrayal, they may develop highly inaccurate impressions of life within these cultures. As with sex roles, age roles generally are not accurately documented in ethnographic films. Examining how the day to day activities,

responsibilities, and expected behaviors of group members are tied to both age and sex roles is vital to understanding any culture.

### Cultural State

It is important for film-makers to examine the overall status and position of a cultural group within the larger society. In recording the lifeways of a primitive group, the ethnographic film-maker should portray any related social and/or economic exploitation. Ignoring poverty, disease or oppression lessens the overall value and validity of the production, and deprives the viewer of an honest, accurate picture of the present reality, thus perpetuating misunderstandings, and blocking the dissemination of accurate cross-cultural information.

### Ethnographic Present

The producer/exhibitor should provide the viewer with some historical information about the culture being recorded, as well as information about the culture's contemporary condition. This helps the viewer avoid confusion about whether the film is based in the past or present. Many viewers assume that life portrayed in an ethnographic film represents present reality. Because the subject culture may be vastly different from the viewer's own, it is often difficult for the viewer to find cues to help him/her determine whether the film is contemporary or from an earlier time.

### Summation

To maximize the educational utility of ethnographic films, it is essential that the film-maker and exhibitor provide the viewer with information about any special circumstances, motives or techniques that may affect the film's validity and/or objectivity. It is also the student-viewer's responsibility to utilize the film as an educational tool, and to analyze its contents for anthropological, not entertainment, values.

### Film Observations

Anthropologists use ethnographic films as tools, just as biologists use specimen slides and microscopes. Films simulate both laboratory and fieldwork experience. Anthropologists have created conceptual categories to facilitate the organization of data. These classification tools can be applied to information contained in ethnographic films. Recording the behaviors and traits of a culture on a film observation guide, and relating this information to categories within an appropriate economic model, can increase the educational usefulness of ethnographic films for the student. Films allow students to study a variety of traits and make cross-cultural comparisons. In addition, students can use films to practice data-gathering techniques, and can observe actual field conditions and practices. Analysis of the films can be used to demonstrate the variations in perceptions that occur when different individuals record and interpret the same information.



Performance Activities

Please fill in the blanks:

- 1. The underlying purpose of most ethnographic film production is the D \_\_\_\_\_ of a particular group's way of life.
- 2. The overall status and position of the cultural group within the L \_\_\_\_\_ S \_\_\_\_\_ is important to examine.
- 3. Some H \_\_\_\_\_ information about the culture being recorded should be provided.
- 4. It is the student-viewer's responsibility to utilize ethnographic films as E \_\_\_\_\_ tools, not merely for entertainment.
- 5. Students can use films to practice D \_\_\_\_\_ G\* \_\_\_\_\_ techniques.

