Religious Cults & Practitioners
Just as societies vary from place to place, so will religious beliefs. Because of this, it makes sense that societies will create a variety of religious institutions.
Because beliefs about the supernatural vary across cultures, anthropologists have used the terms “cult” and “practitioners” to describe beliefs about the supernatural. Although, most Americans would define “cult” as a small group of people who have strange or extreme beliefs, this is not the definition of cult used by anthropologists.

What is a cult?
What is a practitioner?
An organized system of cultural beliefs and practices that pertain to supernatural powers.

Not a group of people but a structure or set of religious beliefs within a religion.

Most religions that we see are a combo of several types of cults.
Religious Cults & Practitioners

Compare and contrast the 4 types of cults and the various practitioners that they use.
Did you read?
Complexity

Society

Religious Structure

More specialized

Less specialized

I

C

S

E
Individualistic Cults
Individualistic Cults

Individuals intentionally seek out spirits and supernatural powers to protect and help them in their endeavors

This is done on one’s own, there are no religious specialists or practitioners
Individualistic Cults

Contact with the supernatural is **direct** and **Personal** as needed (hunting, health, weather, etc.)
Individualistic Cults

The concepts of animism & animatism are very common.

Vision quests are common in this type of cult.

Young men in search of Supernatural power, put themselves through rigorous physiological tests to appeal to the spirits.

*If the young men are successful the spirits will contact the him and serve as his personal (individual) spiritual guide*
Individualistic Cults

Individualistic cults are common among H&G societies, but they only make up one type of cult within their culture.

They are combined with Shamanistic and Communal cults.

These cults can be seen in all types of societies.
Shamanistic Cults
Shamanistic Cults

Are similar to individualist cults
many people have a direct, personal
link with the supernatural

But they also have a Shaman (medicine man) that can help in times of need.
Shamanistic Cults

• Shamans are a **part-time** religious practitioners

• have a special relationship w/ the SN

• If a society only has only 1 type of religious practitioner, it will be a Shaman

• have many jobs

  • heal

  • speak to spirits (medium)

• can cause SN harm to other groups
Shamanistic Cults

Shaman gain their skills in many ways

- Apprenticeship or training
- Enduring sacrifice and hardship
- Miraculous life experience

Generally have high status (if successful)

Remember…
Shaman lead a “normal” life most of the time and only part time religious practitioners.
Shamanistic Cults

Shamanistic cults often have people within the society that are seen as Witches and Sorcerers.

Shamanistic cults are frequently in H & G societies (low tech, low complexity)

But can be seen in all types
If you were a shaman

• Create a business card that you would handout as if you were a shaman

• Include your
  – Name
  – Specialties
  – & day job
  – Due Friday
  – Stand up stretch and then brainstorm
    (2 minutes)
Communal Cults
Communal Cults

A cult that has people act as a group to perform religious rituals at times.

Like Shamanistic cults, they have no permanent religious leader, but they often have witches, mediums, and shamans.

Mediums are part-time practitioners that serve as a link to the spirit world, may have healing properties.
Communal Cults

**Ancestral**

- Ancestors protect (spirit)
  - Tradition
  - Clan
  - ancestors must be appeased
  - Based on **Animism**

**Totemistic**

- Mystical relationship with a totem
  - a symbol of groups' Characteristics
    - Totem has power (animatism)

Communal cults are frequently seen in Ag societies (a little more complex)
Ok, stand up and stretch

• Find a partner
• Explain to each other how shamanistic and communal cults are similar and how they are different
Shamanistic + worship as a group = Communal
Ecclesiastical Cults
Ecclesiastical Cults

The defining feature of an Ecclesiastical cult is that it has a **full-time religious practitioner.**

These practitioners are referred to as **priests.**
Ecclesiastical Cults

Priests differ from other practitioners

- They receive specific training (long process)
- They are full-time
- Frequently wear different clothing to distinguish themselves
- They are of high status
- Often receive this status through birth
Ecclesiastical Cults

Priests (clergy) create a religious hierarchy or bureaucracy.

• official leaders of the religion.
• high status
Ecclesiastical Cults

The clergy perform rituals for the whole of society and become the official leaders of the religion.

These rituals can be calendrical or for crisis.

For this they are often supported by the community.
Ecclesiastical Cults

• Are generally in civilizations that have high levels of social stratification, economics, and political structure (big jump in complexity)

• Use massive amounts of resources

• Closely linked to political rule
  Divine Right, Mandate of Heaven
  Theocracy
Ecclesiastical Cults

• Frequently ecclesiastical cults have all types of practitioners
  
  Shaman, Witches, Priests, Mediums

• Societies with ecclesiastical cults may also elements of individual, shamanistic, and communal cults woven within them.
So what is the relation between society and the type of cult that they use?

List the cults from least complex to most complex?

What does each add to make it more complex?

What kind of cults are your indigenous cultures? Explain!
The Quiz I would have given at the beginning of class

1. Name all 4 cults in order of complexity (2 points)

2. What is the only cult that has priests?

3. In what kind of society do we see communal cults?

4. What do we add to a Shamanistic cult to get a Communal cult?

5. Is it possible to see evidence of all the cults in one society?
Religious Cults & Practitioners

Compare and contrast the 4 types of cults and the various practitioners that they use.