

# Evolutionary School of Thought in Cultural Anthropology

## An Analysis

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### **Abstract**

The main purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the evolutionary school of thought used in cultural anthropology. Here, I have tried to assess the significance of this school as a theoretical guideline of studying culture and society. I considered both the classical and neo-evolutionary thoughts and identified the short-comings of them. I tried to argue that despite some limitations evolutionary school can still contribute a lot to the study of culture and society. I think that the school will continue to serve our academic purpose; and as long as it does this job, it will remain functionally useful to the concerned academicians.

### **Introduction**

The main focus of interest of cultural anthropology is culture. How can we study culture? How can it be interpreted? In response to these questions several schools of thought<sup>1</sup> have developed in cultural anthropology. Evolutionism is one of these schools. Like other schools, evolutionism provides theoretical guidelines for research in cultural anthropology. This paper is not a general and historical account of the contributions of all the evolutions, rather it has a particular objective. The main purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the significance of evolutionism. In order to make the study precise, I shall particularly concentrate on classical evolutionism and neo-evolutionism. Finally, I shall try to briefly evaluate both the types of evolutionism.

### **Classical Evolutionism**

Evolutionism refers to a gradual change or transformation. When we talk about social or cultural evolution we mean a slow or gradual change of society and culture. It is a natural process of change which occurs without any plan, will or revolution. Evolution is not a form of radical transformation. It is usual, natural, automatic and gradual. We do not see this change every moment. But, with the passage of time we notice that certain spheres of society and culture have changed.

Evolutionism is one of the important schools of thought in cultural anthropology. It is a theoretical orientation which gives us an insight to see, understand and explain cultural

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phenomena from the point of view of evolution. Since society and culture are ever-changing phenomena and changes are usually gradual (not always radical or revolutionary) we need to study cultural elements and social phenomena from historical and evolutionary perspective. The evolutionists give importance to cultural history and therefore, they call for research on past and present and to make laws for future trend of any socio-cultural issues. Thus, if an evolutionist wants to study the marriage system and its associated rituals he/she will argue upon research on the past and present of marriage system and its rituals. Such a study will give an account of the evolution of marriage system and its rituals. This study may also focus on the future trend of marriage and try to discover the sequence of transformation.

Early anthropological research was governed by an evolutionary thought, a notion, as well as a theoretical orientation.<sup>2</sup> According to this orientation; culture usually evolves or develops in a uniform, systematic and progressive manner. It was thought that most human societies follow the same course of history. They pass through the same series of stages of development to reach a common goal. It was also generally assumed that the sources of socio-economic change were present within the culture itself and the sources were there from the beginning. It was also thought that the course of development was determined internally i.e. the route or the road-map was decided by the internal mechanism of a culture itself. It means, the transformation of culture was natural and usual, not planned.

Classical evolutionism has certain characteristic features. *First*, it is unilinear in nature. It means culture and society evolve step by step. *Second*, evolution occurs from simple to complex. *Third*, since there is a belief in psychic unity of mankind, evolutionists notice similarities in culture i.e. people of different societies find almost same solutions to same problems. It means there are similarities of thought. *Fourth*, classical evolutionism does not give importance to cultural diversities. *Fifth*, in each higher stage of society and culture classical evolutionists notice the remnants, relics or survivals of previous society and culture. *Sixth*, most of the societies are subject to this unilinear evolution.<sup>3</sup>

Edward B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan are two towering figures whose writings on evolutionism are classical and basic. I would therefore, record some of their evolutionary ideas on society and culture. Both of them suggest that culture usually evolves in a uniform and progressive way.

According to Tylor culture evolved from simple to complex (an idea which was also found in H. Spencer's thought). Tylor thought that all societies passed through three stages of development from savagery to civilization through barbarism.<sup>4</sup> If it is so, progress is possible for all societies. If all societies follow the same course of development then why do we notice cultural variation? The answer provided by Tylor and other evolutionists is simple. They thought that different contemporary societies were at different stages of evolution. In this sense, the "simpler" peoples and their society of today are yet to reach "higher" stages. The survivals, or the traces and evidences of earlier customs of the contemporary advanced societies have already passed through the evolutionary stages of development. Once the clay made pots were in use. Today, we use metal-made pots. But we still notice people to prefer dishes made of clay.<sup>5</sup> It means the clay-made pots are survivals,

and it is the evidence that the contemporary society has left the earlier stage of pottery and evolved into final stage of civilization. Tylor also spoke of psychic unity of mankind. By this he means the parallel evolutionary sequences in different societies. It also means the basic similarities among human being and it indicates that different societies and people often find same solutions to the same problems independently. However, Tylor did not neglect the practice of borrowing of culture an important aspect of cultural diffusion.<sup>6</sup>

Tylor also talked about the evolution of religion. According to him, animism, the first form of religion paved the way of ancestor worship, nature worship, fetishism all of which are polytheistic beliefs and practices. Gradually, polythesism (belief in plural gods) led to the emergence of monotheism, belief in one god.<sup>7</sup>

Morgan's *Ancient Society* is a comprehensive account of the evolution of society and culture. Like Tylor, he also thought that society has passed through three stages of development i.e. from savagery through barbarism to civilization. However, Morgan added more thoughts to Tylor's sequences of evolution. He divided both savagery and barbarism into three phases of development. They are (i) lower status of savagery; (ii) middle status of savagery; (iii) upper status of savagery; (iv) lower status of barbarism; (v) middle status of barbarism; (vi) upper status of barbarism.<sup>8</sup> Morgan did not divide the stage of civilization which begins with art of writing.

Morgan also showed gradual evolution of marriage and family. According to him, monogamian family (based on monogamy i.e. marriage between a male and female), as we notice today was unknown in earliest stage of human society. Like some other authors (e.g. Briffault) Morgan said that man lived in promiscuity in the earliest phase of human society, and it was followed by consanguine family (based on marriage between brothers and sisters own and collateral), the first form of family in human history.

However, with the passage of time, marriage between brothers and sisters was prohibited and society experienced the second form of family, called punaluan (based on marriage between a group of brothers and a group of girls, or a group of sisters with a group of boys). Morgan's consanguine and punaluan families are based on group marriage which does not get support from many contemporary anthropologists. Morgan said that the next stage of family was syndyasmian family (based on marriage between a male and female). He said that syndyasmian family was a temporary pair family and did not last long. It would break down usually after the birth of one child. The next form of family which appeared in human history was patriarchal family where a male could marry more than one wife and the power of family was at the hand of husband. Patriarchal family as it is found in Morgan's theory was just like polygynous family based on marriage between one man with more than one woman. According to Morgan, the contemporary monogamian family is the final stage of development which is relatively permanent and stable, and it is based on marriage between one husband and one wife.

If we look at Morgan's evolutionary stage of family we notice that the family gradually becomes smaller in size. Morgan's theory of the evolution of family is not

supported by enough data. Westernmark rejected the idea of promiscuity. Many simple societies do not allow group marriage nor they allow brother-sister marriage in group. Morgan also has drawn our attention to his evolutionary idea of the ownership of property and its pattern of inheritance.<sup>9</sup> According to him, there was no private property in the earliest phases of human society. Individual's right to property was in terms of possession not of ownership. Therefore, the deceased individual's property (bow, arrow etc.) was distributed among the clan members. In the next stage of evolution the property of deceased person was distributed among his/her agnates, near kins and affines. Finally, with the appearance of private ownership deceased person's property began to be distributed among his/her children. Morgan's idea of the evolution of property and its inheritance seems to be very interesting and systematic. But, evolution is not so smooth and unilinear.

Morgan also suggested a theory of the origin and evolution of state. According to him, in the earliest phase of human history there was social, but not political organization. Man began to live in family and kin-based social organization. Gradually, with the emergence of private property political organization appeared in society which was an essential condition of state-formation. To him, kin-based social organization could no longer meet the requirements of society, and the emergence of state was inevitable.<sup>10</sup>

Is classical evolutionism beyond criticism? The answer is no. Some of the shortcomings of the classical evolutionism are noted below:

(i) The classical evolutionary theories of Tylor, Morgan and other 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers is largely rejected today.<sup>11</sup> The evolutionary school of thought cannot satisfactorily explain the cultural variation. It cannot say why some societies are still in "upper savagery" and others are in "civilization". (ii) Tylor's "psychic unity of mankind" does not account for cultural variation. (iii) Classical evolutionism cannot explain why some societies have regressed or have become extinct. (iv) Not all societies which have reached the stage of civilization have passed through all stages. (v) The 19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionism is basically unilinear which is far from reality. It is interesting but not objective to say that most of the societies follow similar course of development. It is difficult to think that most societies have followed the same route of development. While many anthropologists rejected Morgan's theory of evolutionism, Karl Marx and F. Engels were very much impressed with it. Morgan's theory of the origin and evolution of family, property and state were appreciated by Marx and Engels. They found elements of primitive communism in Morgan's theory. Therefore, Morgan was appreciated by Marx and Engels but the non-Marxist Scholars did not like Morgan's approach.

### Neo-evolutionism

In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Leslie A. White added an idea to the classical evolutionism. This idea what he called "basic law" of cultural evolutionism is his greatest contribution to the evolutionary approach to the study of culture.<sup>12</sup>

According to him, culture evolves as a result of the exploitation of energy. The more the energy is consumed, the more the society and culture will advance. In other words,

a more advanced technology gives us control over more energy and this control leads to the cultural expansion and change.<sup>13</sup> He also says that culture is "an energy capturing system". It means society sustains, continues and changes by capturing and using energy.

Leslie white is not beyond criticism. The criticisms brought against Tylor and Morgan are also applicable to him. White suggested a type of technological determinism. For, he said that culture evolves and advances only by capturing and using energy. By saying this, he has denied the environmental, historical, psychological and individual influences on cultural evolution. White's 'basic law' does not explain the reason why some cultures evolve and advance while others do not, or even become extinct. Again, White's theoretical position avoids the question why only some cultures and societies become able to increase their power of capturing energy, and many others cannot do it.

One of the leading neo-evolutionists is Julian H. Steward who significantly contributed to the theory of cultural change. Steward divides the evolutionary scheme of thought into three schools.<sup>14</sup> These (a) unilinear, (b) universal and (c) multilinear. According to him, Tylor and Morgan's approach to culture is unilinear one. For, both of them formulated some specific stages of cultural evolution which can easily be compared with a ladder. The stages of socio-cultural evolution are like the steps of a ladder which is unilinear in nature. The classical 19<sup>th</sup> century evolutionary thought places particular cultures on the steps of a sort of an evolutionary social ladder. Universal evolutionists are those who are concerned with culture in a broader sense. They are not concerned with any particular individual culture. Leslie White is though to be a universal evolutionist. For White was not concerned with any individual culture. Rather, he was concerned with culture in a very wider sense, and therefore he suggested his 'basic law' of cultural evolution. This 'law' has thought to be applicable to all societies and cultures. Steward claims to be a multilinear evolutionist. Steward deals with the fact that cultures do not follow one specific line and therefore evolution cannot be unilinear, rather it may follow more than one line or route in its journey to progress. Steward was concerned with specific cultural differences and similarities, and therefore he was critical of White's theoretical position.

Since White did not consider the influences of environment, Steward was not satisfied with White's explanation of cultural evolution. Therefore, he termed White's universality or generalities of culture as a vague one. On the other hand, white was also critical of Steward and said that he (Steward) fell down into the trap of historical particularism where he paid too much attention to specific cases and particular cultures(s).<sup>15</sup> Thus, we notice and academic debate between White and Steward. In fact, White and Steward stood against each other.

This debate came to the notice of Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service who were students and colleagues of both White and Steward. Sahlins and Service tried to resolve the debate by combining the views of while and Steward. In doing so, Sahlins and Service gave equal importance to both of them and recognized two kinds of evolution. One is specific (that of Steward) and the other is general, (that of White).<sup>16</sup>

Specific evolution is concerned with particular sequence of change and adaptation of a particular society in a given environment. On the other hand, general evolution is



concerned with the general progress of human society from lower to the higher form by capturing higher amount of energy. Here, specific evolution is similar to Steward's multilinear evolution and general evolution corresponds to White's universal evolution. To what extent are Shalins and Service successful in their efforts to integrate the opposing views of White and Steward? Ember and Ember say that the synthesis made by Sahlin and Service serves the purpose of integration of the views, but it does not provide us a way of analyzing why general evolutionary progress occurs in society. However, this synthesis seems to have gone one step further in the history of anthropological theories.

Some of the neo-evolutionists suggest the way to account for the evolution of particular cultures and it gives importance to the adaptation of a culture with the environments around it.<sup>17</sup> This trend was unknown to early or classical evolutionists.

### **An Evaluation of the School**

It is true that classical evolutionism has some weaknesses which I have discussed before. Many anthropologists have talked about the limitations of evolutionism. One of the common charges against classical evolutionism is that it is unilinear. The critiques say that culture does not move forward stage by stage. However the critiques did not do justice to Morgan and Tylor. Tylor and Morgan have suggested the evolutionary stages of human society. But they are not rigid and dogmatic in their analysis of cultural evolutionism. They did not claim that each society will have to pass through the evolutionary stages they suggested.<sup>21</sup> Their scheme of evolution may be considered as an "ideal type" which may or may not fit everywhere. It can be viewed as an ideal scheme, and evolution is not always uniform and it may follow different courses.<sup>18</sup>

In many sectors of human society, we notice an 'evolutionary trend'. It does not mean that one society or culture and for that matter any particular socio-political institution will have to strictly follow the stages of evolution without exception. We notice evolutionary trend in political and economic spheres of society. Anthropologists talk about band, tribe, chiefdom and state. It is not clear whether band evolves into tribal organization, and the later into chiefdom, and finally chiefdom into state. But, clearly these forms of political organizations (band, tribe, chiefdom and state) give an impression of a trend of evolution.

While discussing the issues of economic anthropology, many anthropologists are found to deal with forging, horticulture, pastoralism, agriculture and finally industrialism. Neo-evolutionists have tried to correct the errors of classical evolutionism and have adopted certain principles. According to them, (a) evolution does not always mean progress or development; (b) evolution is not necessarily unilinear. It can follow different courses of development, and therefore, evolutionism is often multilinear as claimed by Steward; (c) all the institutions and organizations of a society do not evolve or change in the same rate of progress; and therefore, there may always be a cultural lag as proposed by Ogburn.<sup>19</sup> These economic systems also give us an idea of evolutionary transformation. It is not logical to say that an advanced agricultural society evolves into foraging society, but it is quite logical to say that foraging or hunting and gathering societies may gradually become agricultural societies. (d) Evolutionism is not social Darwinism and, conflict is not always a necessary

condition for evolutionary change. Man can and do initiate and bring change by implementing policy and planning, and by coordinating and integrating the necessary factors of changes. (e) Evolution has no definite goal. Since idea of progress varies from person to person and society to society, there cannot be any definite goal of evolution. However, everybody will agree that a society with the art of writing is more advanced than a society which has no knowledge of art of writing.

Neo-evolutionists have given importance to the variation of environmental factor which influences culture and society. It seems that neo-evolutionism is quite sound enough to study culture and its transformation. Therefore, we have enough reasons to say that evolutionism can still play a significant role in describing and analyzing culture and society.

### **Conclusion**

In fact, evolutionism is one of the ways of looking at culture. It is a theoretical perspective that provides us a method of studying culture. It gives us all necessary guidelines to record, described and analyzes society and culture. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, when anthropology was growing and gradually developing as an independent discipline, evolutionism nurtured, cared and guided it properly. Morgan and Tylor, the two outstanding figures gave the foundation of anthropology in USA and Britain respectively.

Classical evolutionism had been duly and properly revised and modified subsequent anthropologists, like Julian H. Steward and Leslie A. White about whom I discussed before. The debates between these two contributors have also been resolved by M. Sahlins and E. Service.

One of the universal realities is that so society is static. Societies are always evolving developing and transforming into new shape. So long this reality is a fact, the role and significance of the evolutionary school of thought in anthropology will be appreciated, admired and followed by the anthropologists and others concerned with this discipline.

**Notes and References:**

1. *Evolutionism, functionalism and diffusionism are the main schools of thought in cultural anthropology.*
2. See C.R. Ember and M. Ember, *anthropology*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India (1994).
3. For more information see V.S. Upadhyay & G. Pandey, *History of Anthropological Thought*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co. (1993)
4. See C. R. Ember and M. Ember (1994) p. 174
5. Ibid, p. 174.
6. Ibid, p. 174.
7. For detailed information see Victor Barnouw, *An Introduction to Anthropology*. Vol 2. Ethnology. Homewood Illinois: The Dorsey Press (1982).
8. Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr. & Co. (1877).
9. Ibid (1877).
10. Ibid (1877).
11. See C. R. Ember & M. Ember (1994) p. 175
12. IBid, (1994) p. 180.
13. Ibid, (1994) p. 181.
14. Se C.R. Ember & M. Ember (1994).
15. Ibid, (1994) p. 181.
16. Ibid, (1994) p. 181.
17. Ibid, (1994) p. 181
18. David Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University Press (1964).
19. Dee Wall Malefijt, *Images of Man: A History of Anthropological Thought*, New York: Alfred A Knopt (1974).
20. W. Ogburn, *Social Change*. New York: Viking (1922).