

Advanced

November 13, 2012
Cultural Anthropology
Professor Sharla Blank

It is eleven o'clock on a bitterly cold night when I enter into a room and am engulfed by sensual red lights, a hazy cloud of smoke, and throbbing club music. Brown and burgundy couches line the outside of the room as chairs and tables occupy its center. A kitchen at one end of the room gives off the aromas of Middle Eastern foods such as grape leaves and ^{freshly} newly baked pita bread. Groups of people from all ethnicities are joined together around several smoke-bearing machines as they laugh and phlegmatically interact. This is the hookah experience that I encountered on November ^{10th} ~~tenth~~ at the Genie Hookah House on 4009 SW 21st St. in Topeka. This is a culture. ^{okay}

Smoking hookah contains every element to manifest itself ^a as form of culture, which is the taken for granted but powerfully influential understandings and codes that are learned and shared ^{good} by members of a group. It is foremost a shared activity; a group phenomenon. No one within the hookah lounge is alone and everyone has a group that they are affiliated with. It is taken for granted then that if you enter you will either be bringing friends or joining someone there. In this setting being by yourself comparatively draws as much attention as you would be given if you go into a classroom and take a seat directly beside a person when twenty other seats are available. It breaks the unspoken code. ^{good}

There is no biological gene passed down through our lineage, which makes us hookah smokers. Rather it is socially learned through enculturation. Only through observation, imitation, direct communication and inference are we able to become a part of the group. You observe a small water-filled base extending into an upward pipe, which opens into a small bowl filled with sheesh (a sugar/tobacco product) and covered with aluminum foil. On top of the bowl sets a

glowing coal. A number of separate tubes project from the base of the hookah machine and as you breathe in or "take a drag" the smoke from the coal on the tobacco is being pulled down and filtered through the water before you breathe it in through the tube.

You try to imitate those in your group, who range between the ages of 18 to twenty ²⁸five, but you are disappointedly only able to exhale a small amount of smoke. Then a more knowledgeable and usually older member will direct you with a tip such as "Breathe out first, then suck in hard through the tube, so that the smoke will go all the way to your lungs. And keep your chin down for a better drag!" Likewise some things are picked up through inference. You become aware of the size of drag you can take without becoming too light headed that you need to lie down. Also if you are drinking sugar water, you will be able to smoke for a longer period of time without being ^aaffected and needing to take a break. If both you and someone else are holding tubes then you must be aware if they take a drag on theirs so that you can plug the end of your tube with your thumb to allow them to acquire a deeper inhalation.

I found it very interesting that people would be united through drugs and I was continually drawn back to what I knew concerning the Yanomami and how the men would come together to smoke "the green stuff". It was ritualistic and most likely they enjoyed it due to the obvious biological side ^aeffects that would displace them from reality. Hookah in turn relaxes you so that everything from a stressful day seems a little less important as you dwell in a happy moment of no worries and inner contentment. It is like the calm after a raging storm of a workday.

Good comparison

Kinesics, which is body language, plays a major role in shaping this cultural atmosphere. Overall, it is a very laid back and chill as everyone moves at a comfortably slow pace. It is almost as if it is permissible to let your guard down and just do whatever you want. For example

if you want to sit in a close contact sensual position with a girl, no one is going to judge you.

Whereas if you did that in a college cafeteria, the looks of dismay would be unending.

Interestingly, girls are outnumbered one to three making it a male-dominated environment.

Perhaps this is because girls are generally more concerned about their image and less likely to participate in something that alters their mood and state of being.

Hookah originates from the Middle East, which explains the reason for it being a collectivist practice. That is, the focus is put on the group and not the individual, as is customary in most ~~Eastern~~ countries. You are not going there for yourself, but to be with others and consequently the good of the group is always in the back of your mind. So when choosing a flavor of sheesh, it is common to throw out an opinion or suggestion, but unanimous group consent is needed before a final decision is reached. The individual starts to fade and the group becomes its own person.

In conclusion, I found that smoking hookah becomes a rite of passage into adulthood just as being able to smoke the tobacco products was a sign of transference from boyhood to manhood in the Yanomami culture. There are three phases involved in a rite of passage: separation, liminality, and incorporation. (Kottak) Until you reach the legal age of adulthood, one is separated from partaking in hookah. Once you are eighteen and you go to a hookah lounge for the first time you may undergo a liminal phase where you are not yet part of the group since you do not follow the unspoken rules. Perchance if you act in too formal of an attitude or cough when trying to inhale the hookah, you will not be seen as part of the group. *define please*

However, over time you will be able to develop a feeling of social solidarity and equality. Only then will you enter the final phase of incorporation. (Kottak) After going to the hookah lounge a number of times there is a social acknowledgement and familiarity with the owner and

acceptance from the other frequent attendees. People recognize ^{your} face from previous weekend nights and will become friendlier with you. I met a lower class African American man there around the age of twenty whose nickname is Turtle, at least that is what he is called by his 'homeys'. In any other setting we would've never interacted, but here we were equals with one common purpose—to relax, to be part of a group, and to enjoy ourselves.) yes

So what is it that makes one manner of action or practice acceptable ⁱⁿ at one space in time yet deplorable in another? Our entire world is formed, molded together by our culture. It sweeps us up at birth and blazes the path that we take in life. It is in the air we breathe, the land we walk on, and the people we love. Our culture is everything to us. Yet it is not a constant but an ever-changing factor. For as Einstein says, 'Change is the only constant in time!' Therefore, while realizing no one culture is better than another, we maintain the right ^{as American} to choose what cultural practices we assimilate into our lives. I have found hookah to be an exceptionally pleasurable culturally bound activity, which I would encourage anyone to share in.

Great paper. You do a great job of explaining how this practice is actually based on sensory comparisons to other groups we've discussed in the course. This was a fun & interesting paper to read. Nice use of course terms throughout the paper.