

Ava Clark
UWTSD
Creating Culture
Luci Attala
7 June 2021

Create an imaginary culture. Design it around the 4 concepts: belief, exchange, family, and power that we have explored in the course.



[Titled "EXPECT THE GRUNG" by Camille Sandal; Illustrated by B Seagull Burton, 2021]

INTRODUCTION

A considerable portion of the behaviors and actions people perform daily without so much as a second thought can be connected back to culture. In fact, culture is deeply embedded in some of the most important aspects of our lives – that is, the central areas that can be categorized into belief, exchange, family, and power which work together to build the foundation

for what individuals within a culture consider normal as well as what they perceive as meaningful (Brown et al. 2020, Miller 2017). In this essay I will be utilizing these four facets of culture, in addition to various elements from ethnographic examples, in order to create a fictitious culture and explicate how it functions within social institutions.

From here on out, I will refer to this cultural community as Grung, where those apart of it are therefore referred to as Grungian. Grungian culture is unique to a community residing within the tropical forests of the Amazon, a location which was inspired heavily by both the Kogi in Colombia and the Amerindian groups in the Amazon considering both have served as points of interest for me when fabricating Grungian ideals and practices (Attala 2019). Throughout this essay I will also be taking globalization into account, illustrating how Grungian culture has shifted since interacting with the mainstream world.

BELIEF

At its core, the Grung are extremely egalitarian. Because it is deeply rooted in the Grungian belief system, this mode of lifestyle is heavily emphasized in all aspects of Grungian life. Similarly to the Ju/hoansi that reside in the Kalahari desert, the Grung make no allowance for inequality and believe in promoting a “harmonious, co-operative” environment (Suzman 2017). This means that in practice, the community will often come together to ensure no one gets any special privileges and that every living being in their vicinity is treated with respect and a general open-mindedness.

This attitude is reflected in Grungian epistemology, though it should be noted that while Grungian society is not necessarily religious, it is spiritual and follows what can be classified as an eco-philosophy. Striving for unity is not limited to human beings for the Grung, and their emphasis on equality and maintaining societal equilibrium extends to the plants and animals that they live with as well. Bird-David discusses the Nayaka in South India, and their approach to understanding and interacting with their local wildlife heavily inspired the ways in which the Grung connect with their surroundings (Bird-David 2014). The other living beings in the forest, including numerous different types of plants and animals, are “regarded as sentient co-dwellers” and the Grung specifically dedicate time to support connections they create with these neighbors in the forest (Bird-David 2014, 74). In order to do this effectively, the Grung use alternative forms of communication since speaking to them as they would with other humans would not

translate well, and this means looking beyond one's own worldview in order to find ways to cultivate trust between human and non-human sentient beings. A crucial distinction to make here is that the Grung do not believe these beings to have human souls or to be reincarnated ancestral beings, but that they are simply other living creatures alongside them in the forest. It is a neutral understanding in which they are simultaneously the same in their position on earth, and therefore of equal standing, yet different in how they were constructed. These trust exercises are not as forward as it may seem, however, and often boil down to respecting each other's space and not interfering with their business as well as occasionally sharing resources should there ever be extra.

Interacting with the local plant life is a slightly more complex matter, namely in that while the intent stays the same, the execution shifts to accommodate a different form of communication. Attala (2019) highlights how plants in particular can help bring to light how "the world is one of blending and networks" by "engaging with the environment consciously" through the act of eating (Attala 2019, 49). Essentially, our body interacts with the plant as we eat and digest it, and the effects of eating it are, to some extent, the plants way of communicating. Amerindians, for example, cultivate a relationship with the Ayahuasca plant through the strong and yet often therapeutic hallucinations that occur after digestion (Attala 2019). In this way, a "mutually beneficial relationship" is created since the humans are benefiting from the plant's effects, and as a result the plants will likely receive their help in ensuring the plants continue to grow and thrive in the forest (Attala 2019, 60).

Taking all of this into account, it is reasonable to assume that the concept of balance is acutely significant in Grungian culture. Everything in existence – the good, the bad, and everything in between – resides in this universal balance, even the Grung's understanding of life and death. For the Grung, life and death occur simultaneously in parallel realms of existence, and as a result, death is not perceived as something to fear or grieve since it does not stop someone from *being* but rather shifts their reality. In essence, life and death are the two sides to the coin known as the universe. Grungian ontology focuses on this concept of the universe, described in terms that make it reminiscent of a gigantic tree, where it is detailed as a home and a center for everything in existence that supports the interconnectedness of all things within its branches. On a smaller scale, this epistemological understanding of the universe can be used to grasp how the Grung function within this belief system in their community. Because every living being is

connected, everyone shares their problems and are therefore quick to help out wherever they can in the community in order to nurture a healthier and more peaceful environment. This ideology in particular, that the individual's humanity "is inextricably bound" to the everyone else's, comes from a traditional South African principle known as *ubuntu*; Ngubane (1999) translates this simply in that "a person is a person through other people," which allows for a community like the Grung to build and maintain a reliable network of trust and support (Ngubane 1999, 131; Scheper-Hughes 2012, 166).

The Grungian perception of time is unique in its unusually complex simplicity. Their concept of balance extends even to this viewpoint in that the past and the future are not recognized as entirely relevant due to their belief that everything in time exists concurrently. When discussing Native American traditions, Barry (1993) highlights how "mythic and everyday realities" evolve simultaneously in "a test of balance" in which they see "the entire world as simultaneous" (Barry 1993, 20). While this may seem difficult to fully comprehend at first, once you can, it is easier to see how it makes for a strangely relaxed attitude in life for the Grung. This mindset requires a set focus on existing in the present, meaning that overthinking or stressing about the past or future is virtually nonexistent. In any case, this is not to say that the Grung do not adequately prepare for things ahead of time, no matter what that might entail, but simply that they maintain a strong sense of trust in their own instincts as well as their environment to help them should they ever find themselves in a dire situation.

EXCHANGE

Grungian forms of exchange are mostly categorized into traits associated with egalitarian cultures. They consciously and fiercely refrain from creating or falling into hierarchies, and this applies especially to their local economy. As is normal for egalitarian style economies, the Grung do allow for specialization in regard to jobs or skillsets, largely in part to lessen feelings of inadequacy or superiority that might result from this. Instead, everyone is expected to participate in various jobs depending on what needs to be done, and things such as hunting are done in planned rotation so as not to favor any one individual. Much in the same way as the Ju/hoansi, the Grung are remarkably familiar with their environment, and as a result are able to easily take only what they need to happily sustain themselves, and therefore rarely ever run into issues dealing with waste or surplus (Suzman 2017). They live in complete juxtaposition to Euro-

American society in this context, and work on average fifteen hours per week seeing that they do only what is necessary to support their community and, by extension, the forest and its other co-inhabitants.

Of course, this is not to insinuate they do not run into any problems at all. More recently, as a direct result of unavoidable issues like globalization and even climate change, the Grung have been forced to face entirely new problems that promptly place them at a severe disadvantage. Suzman (2017) describes the Ju/hoansi's encounters with the mainstream and the global economy as "traumatic," and goes on to illustrate how their successful egalitarian lifestyle was pushed to the fringes and driven to become a highly marginalized community as a direct consequence of modern interaction. No longer having the same freedoms to roam or even stake claim on their territory, especially when the modern world is constantly moving to expand and take what it wants, is ultimately detrimental to the wellbeing and effectiveness of Grungian customs. The Grung, just like the Ju/hoansi, "[engage] with modernity with the hand and minds of hunter-gatherers," which clashes dangerously with the capitalistic mindset and ultimately fails to help them much in this predicament (Suzman 2017). Obtaining or accumulating wealth has never been a goal for anyone in Grungian culture, in fact it has been strictly avoided, and this coupled with the lack of specialization creates for a situation in which the group being forced to participate in the global economy is entirely unprepared for the aggressively hierarchical nature of capitalism. Unfortunately, this places them in a situation that requires them to quickly adapt and learn to work with what they can in order to continue supporting their community, even if it could indirectly cause them to lose certain aspects of their cultural identity along with it.

Despite how recent events may have altered Grungian tradition, the fact remains that the Grung have well-made and intriguing exchange habits. Similarly to gift economies, in which goods or acts of value are given freely to others without expecting anything in return, the Grung place a substantial amount of emphasis on sharing within the community (Bird-David 1990). Bird-David claims that the Nayaka hunter-gatherers of South India "view their environment as giving, and their economic system as characterized by modes of distribution and property relations that are constructed in terms of giving, as within a family, rather than in terms of reciprocity, as between kin" (Bird-David 1990, 189). This may not fit into Grungian modes of exchange exactly, but it shares meaningful insight into how both perceive themselves in relation to their environment, and how that plays an impressive role in shaping their normative exchange

habits. The Grung rely on support from the forest they live in and communal help from those around them in order to meet their needs, however, taking this into account, just as sharing is considered the norm, so too is any form of gift giving.

Although they do not tend to collect many possessions considering it would be counterproductive to their living habits, holding onto a few personal items every so often is not entirely uncommon. This habit can be sufficiently compared to the Nayaka in terms of function, of which Bird-David (1990) details that in the case of these personal possessions, people are expected to ask before using or handling them and when said items are gifted, social ties between whoever played a part in the transaction would strengthen. In the case of the Grung, these personal items may be the only thing in Grungian society that can be classed akin to owning any form of property. The idea of owning property, and this includes land, is intrinsically linked with capitalism and not entirely a concept that the Grung have needed to understand or put into practice as there has never been any real need for it. In a group that is foundationally egalitarian and traditionally exhibits sharing as not only normal but expected, property owning would likely serve to divide and promote individualism, both things that the Grung put in an effort to avoid. This may seem contradictory, then, to have anything in particular that is guarded and strictly belonging to one person. In reality, these possessions are not so much considered property as they are highly important and personal; So, while another could in theory take or use said item, most do not as a show of respect and good will. This is why it remains all the more significant if any item considered personal is gifted to someone else as it shows a notable expression of trust and care.

FAMILY

The family unit among the Grung is a flexible and a relatively relaxed aspect of the community. Using the term kinship, as opposed to family, in order to highlight how these relationships function will serve as a slightly more accurate descriptor for the Grung. Instead of relationships being grouped into family, friends, and other, the Grung only have two categories: close kin and distant kin, which can be traced back to their belief that everyone in their group is not only connected but important as well (Dombrowski et al. 2013). Chapais (2014) discusses the “extensive domain of kin recognition in terms of differentiated kin types,” something incredibly interesting when taking into account the complexities of kin relationships for the Grung (Chapais

2014, 751). While two main kin distinctions exist, close and distant, there are subcategories within each that further define the exact sort of relationship each person has with another. Close kin mostly refer to the individuals who have had the most impact and presence in one's life, usually encompassing, though not limited to, what could be considered parental figure(s), siblings, and close friends. These individuals can change throughout a person's life, but instead of losing someone, it is more likely that as one grows older, they embrace more people into the group they consider close kin; This is often done through exchanging or gifting someone with a personal item, as mentioned before. Distant kin, on the other hand, are still largely deemed important and are well-liked, the only distinction being that they have not held closely personal or intimate relationships that that individual, generally deeming subcategories of distant kin unnecessary.

In the case of the Agaris of Maharashtra, their "kinship system, beliefs and practices related to marriage indicate an ethos which is relatively egalitarian," a sentiment the Grung reflect to an extent as well (Thakur 2019, 13). Unlike the Agaris, however, the Grung do not actually have anything within their community that can be classified as marriage, especially considering they tend to be relatively polyamorous and open with their sexuality. In this sense, marriage does not exist in Grungian culture, although one subsection of close kin in particular could be a just comparison: arguably one of the most valued bonds a person can make, it insinuates a deeply emotional connection with another, where there is complete understanding and trust between them. This can be entirely platonic, though, and does not usually suggest monogamy if that is not the case. Close kin units, then, who tend to live together if not near each other, create the foundation for a child's support system growing up, as opposed to the two-parent nuclear family expected in Euro-American family units. Naturally, in this scenario, Grungian children are absorbed into the close kin unit of the one giving birth and raised by the group until they reach maturity in which they likely stay in the close kin unit, or while it is uncommon, can join another. Children are treated with equal respect and recognition as the adults are, meaning they have equal say in group discussions and decisions, and they are expected to help out the group just as everyone else once they are physically able.

Chapais (2014) notes that in discussions on family and kin roles "one does not expect categories such as motherhood, fatherhood, or marriage to be cross-culturally uniform and unisemantic," which is useful to keep in mind when learning about cultures that have differing

customs and practices in regard to these subjects (Chapais 2014, 762). Grungian culture, for instance, does not align with parenting techniques that require motherhood or fatherhood, and do not exhibit expected marriage traditions either. Children are ordinarily raised with a vaguely relaxed yet informative attitude, in which they are usually trusted to make their own decisions as long as they are aware of possible consequences and how to go about doing things safely and respectfully. This means that as a general rule, close kin tend not to have much sway over the children, though they do attempt to use mistakes as learning opportunities. By putting their trust into the children, and teaching them everything they know as equals in their community, the children are expected to integrate and quickly become active members of the group.

As was briefly mentioned above, the Grung have a remarkably fluid and open view of gender and sexuality. Because Grungian culture has no particular need for gender classifications within its social institutions in order to keep the community running smoothly, “gender performativity” is allowed to freely exist “beyond the binary... without distinct limits or expectations” (Clark 2020, 5). This applies to sexuality as well, since the roles of mother and father are not pertinent nor are they considered norm within Grungian society. The only distinctions that can be made among the Grung regarding gender are in regard to physical appearance, and even then it holds extremely little importance beyond recognition of different bodily features, and this includes the ability to give birth. Grungian culture, overall, maintains a casual and accepting perception of gender and sexuality – neither concepts holding much importance for the Grung, displaying a serious juxtaposition to Euro-American culture in which both topics are highly stigmatized and debated with much fervor within the personal and public spheres (Clark 2020; Ocha 2012).

All of this, from how they delegate close versus distant kin to how they raise children to how they view gender and sexuality, while all completely normal for the Grung, clash with the expectations thrown onto various cultures by modernity. Despite most being involuntary, interactions with the mainstream have grown exponentially over the decades for the Grung, and this had led to unfortunate repercussions for them. Of course, they have never stopped making a determined effort to maintain their cultural standing and keep outside influence from disrupting their way of life, no matter how much globalization has continued to make its mark incredibly clear on smaller cultures like the Grung.

POWER

The reality of power, and what it means to hold it, when it comes to functionality within social institutions boils down to the concept of control and finds its place among various different aspects of society and social life. The problem with power in a strictly egalitarian culture, however, is that it cultivates inequality through hierarchical structures, which is something that egalitarian groups constantly work to stop at the source. In the case of the Grung, then, as well as with other similarly structured groups, traditional power dynamics could be considered atypical since, in order to maintain social equilibrium, the group has power over the individual. Even within the sphere of close kin, no individual holds more power over another and there exists no head of the household or a single person to which decisions are delegated to.

In essence, the Grung could be categorized as an acephalous society seeing as they have no central authority and rely heavily on group discussion and cooperation. Upholding secure and long-lasting kinship ties within the Grung community helps to ensure this dynamic remains successful. Grungian power structures are similar to those of the San hunter gatherers in the Kalahari Desert whose “social ethos” perpetuates a society in which there exists “no top-down authority structure, no police force, no tolerance of loud-mouths, no hint of state power,” and all resources are shared communally (Knight 2021). Nurturing an impressively interconnected web of social ties throughout the entirety of the Grungian social sphere, including all living beings in the forest, is a key aspect of Grungian culture and one they take exceptionally seriously.

Instead of the expected power dynamics, egalitarian style cultures like the Grung often exert control through reverse dominance – the group works together to stop an individual from gaining any form of power over others due to a “moralistic determination” in which it is believed that no member of society “should be allowed to dominate the others” (Boehm 1993, 228). They do this by using leveling mechanisms so as not to allow people to deviate from the expected cultural norm of the group and therefore preserve the necessary social equilibrium for egalitarian societies. The Ju/hoansi, for example, use a form of meat shaming against hunters as their leveling technique so that talented individuals do not feel better than the others (Suzman 2017). The Mbendjele BaYaka in the Congo, who are also egalitarian hunter-gatherers, use humor to mock those who display shows of pride or dominance in order to humble them and shift the situation into something funny instead of awkward or shameful, a technique the Grung also regularly make use of to keep their spirits lighthearted and relaxed (Knight 2021). Knight (2021)

perfectly describes this dynamic as coming from a place where there “is always the danger that some individual might attempt to assert personal dominance, making people feel the need to establish and re-establish their egalitarian principles repeatedly and in highly sophisticated psychological and social ways” (Knight 2021). Establishing control and acting from a place of power in an egalitarian culture such as the Grung is, while complex, confident in the notion that when everyone has power, no one person has control.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While the Grung appreciate and value a relatively relaxed lifestyle, the key foundational aspects that make up their culture – belief, exchange, family, and power – are nonetheless composed of a complex web of thought connecting together to form the Grungian society. Their belief system, rooted in egalitarianism, can help to understand how the Grung approach life and sustain their community ideals. In fact, all four pillars of Grungian society can be seen to influence and intertwine with one another to create the backbone of what it means to be a part of the Grung. Their considerate forms of exchange, their unique kin relationships, and their noteworthy power structures all impact one another and make for an interesting existence as one of the Grung.

Reference List

- Attala, L. (2016) 'Digesting 'cryptid' snakes: A phenomenological approach to the mythic and cosmogenetic properties of serpent hallucinations' in Hurn, S. (ed.) *Anthropology and Cryptozoology: Researching Encounters with Mysterious Creatures*. London: Routledge.
- Attala, L. (2019) 'I am Apple: relationships of the flesh. Exploring the corporeal entanglements of eating plants in the Amazon' in Attala, L. and Steel, L. (ed.) *Body Matters: Exploring the Materiality of the Human Body*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Barry, N. (1993) 'Chance and Ritual: The Gambler in the Texts of Gerald Vizenor', *University of Nebraska Press*, 5(3), pp. 13-22. Available at: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20736747>. (Accessed 20 May 2021).
- Bird-David, N. and Naveh, D. (2014) 'How persons become things: economic and epistemological changes among Nayaka hunter-gatherers', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20, pp. 74-92. (Accessed: 23 May 2021).
- Bird-David, N. (1990) 'The Giving Environment: Another Perspective on the Economic System of Hunter-Gatherers', *The University of Chicago Press*, 31(2), pp. 189-196. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2743592>. (Accessed 22 May 2021).
- Boehm, C. et al. (1993) 'Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy', *Current Anthropology*, 34(3), pp. 227-254. Available at: <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0011-3204%28199306%2934%3A3%3C227%3AEABARDH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-9>. (Accessed: 3 June 2021).
- Chapais, B. (2014) 'Complex Kinship Patterns as Evolutionary Constructions, and the Origins of Sociocultural Universals', *The University of Chicago Press*, 55(6), pp. 751-783. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678972>. (Accessed: 28 May 2021).
- Clark, A. (2021) *Using at least 2 ethnographic examples to illustrate your discussion, explore how non-human animals play a role in shaping cultural and/or personal behaviors*. UWTSD student essay. Unpublished.
- Clark, A. (2020) *What does 'gender' mean? Using Butler's ideas of performativity alongside ethnographic examples illustrate how gender is differently enacted around the world*. UWTSD student essay. Unpublished.
- Dombrowski, K. et al. (2013) 'Kinship, Family, and Exchange in a Labrador Unuit Communitiy',

- Arctic Anthropology*, 50(1), pp. 89-104. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24475568>. (Accessed: 27 May 2021).
- Knight, C. (2021) 'Did communism make us human? On the anthropology of David Graeber', *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2021. Available at: <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/06/field-notes/Did-communism-make-us-human>. (Accessed: 5 June 2021).
- Lang, S. (2011) 'Transformations of Gender in Native American Cultures', *Litteraria Pragensia*, 21(42), pp. 70-81. Available at: <https://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=413bf9b9-e78b-4098-bdb2-ddaf38496200%40pdc-v-sessmgr06&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZW9hZG93Qm91ZG93d%3d%3d#AN=77931669&db=hus> (Accessed: 13 December 2020).
- Miller, B. (2017) *Cultural Anthropology*. 8th Edition. Boston: Pearson.
- Ngubane, H. (1999) 'Current Politics, Development Aims, and Anthropology in Southern Africa', *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures*, 8(2), pp. 129-140. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43234858>. (Accessed: 28 May 2021).
- Ocha, W. (2012) 'Transsexual Emergence: Gender Variant Identities in Thailand', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14(5-6), pp. 563-575. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23265705> (Accessed: 13 December 2020).
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (2012) 'THE OTHER WHO IS ALSO ONESELF: Immunological risk, danger, and recognition', *American Anthropological Association*, 27(1), pp.162-167. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41336326>. (Accessed: 25 May 2021).
- Shapiro, W. (2012) 'Extensionism and the nature of kinship', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18(1), pp.191-193. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41350814>. (Accessed: 27 May 2021).
- Suzman, J. (2017) 'Why 'Bushman banter' was crucial to hunter-gatherers' evolutionary success', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/oct/29/why-bushman-banter-was-crucial-to-hunter-gatherers-evolutionary-success>. (Accessed: 29 May 2021).
- Thakur, S. (2019) 'Gender, Kinship and Marriage Practices', *Indian Anthropological Association*, 49(1), pp. 1-14. Available at:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26855088>. (Accessed 29 May 2021).