

Competitive Exams: Types of Society

Types of societies are categories of social groups that differ according to subsistence strategies; the way that humans use technology to provide needs for themselves. Although humans have established many types of societies throughout history, anthropologists tend to classify different societies according to the degree to which different groups within a society have unequal access to advantages such as resources, prestige or power. Virtually all societies have developed some degree of inequality among their people through the process of social stratification-the division of members of a society into levels with unequal wealth, prestige or power. Sociologists place societies in three broad categories: Pre-industrial, industrial, and postindustrial.

Pre-Industrial Societies

In a pre-industrial society, food production; which is carried out through the use of human and animal labor; is the main economic activity. These societies can be subdivided according to their level of technology and their method of producing food. These subdivisions are hunting and gathering, pastoral, horticultural, agricultural and feudal.

Hunting and Gathering Societies

The main form of food production in such societies is the daily collection of wild plants and the hunting of wild animals. Hunter-gatherers move around constantly in search of food. As a result, they do not build permanent villages or create a wide variety of artifacts and usually only form small groups such as Bands and Tribes, however some Hunting and Gathering Societies in areas with abundant resources (such as the Tlingit) lived in larger groups and formed complex hierarchical social structures such as chiefdoms. The need for mobility also limits the size of these societies. They generally consist of fewer than 60 people and rarely exceed 100. Statuses within the tribe are relatively equal, and decisions are reached through general agreement. The ties that bind the tribe are more complicated than those of the bands. Leadership is personal-charismatic-and for special purposes only in tribal society; there are no political offices containing real power, and a chief is merely a person of influence, a sort of adviser; therefore, tribal consolidation for collective action are not governmental. The family forms the main social unit, with most societal members being related by birth or by marriage. This type of organization requires the family to carry out most social functions; including production and education.

Pastoral Societies

Pastoralism is a slightly more efficient form of subsistence. Rather than searching for food on a daily basis, members of a pastoral society rely on domesticated herd animals to meet their food needs. Pastoralists live a nomadic life, moving their herds from pasture to another. Because

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their food supply is far more reliable, pastoral societies can support larger populations. Since there are food surpluses, fewer people are needed to produce food. As a result, the division of labor; the specialization by individuals or groups in the performance of specific economic activities; becomes more complex. For example, some people become craftworkers, producing tools, weapons, and jewelry. The production of goods encourages trade. This trade helps to create inequality, as some families acquire more goods than others do. These families often gain power through their increased wealth. The passing on of property from generation to another helps to centralize wealth and power. In time, hereditary chieftainships; the typical form of government in pastoral societies; emerge.

Horticultural Societies

Fruits and vegetables grown in garden plots that have been cleared from the jungle or forest provide the main source of food in a horticultural society. These societies have a level of technology and complexity similar to pastoral societies. Some horticultural groups use the slash-and-burn method to raise crops. The wild vegetation is cut and burned, and ashes are used as fertilizers. Horticulturists use human labor and simple tools to cultivate the land for one or more seasons. When the land becomes barren, horticulturists clear a new plot and leave the old plot to revert to its natural state. They may return to the original land several years later and begin the process again. By rotating their garden plots, horticulturists can stay in one area for a fairly long period of time. This allows them to build semipermanent or permanent villages. The size of a village's population depends on the amount of land available for farming; thus villages can range from as few as 30 people to as many as 2000.

As with pastoral societies, surplus food leads to a more complex division of labor. Specialized roles that are part of horticultural life, include those of craftspeople, shamans (religious leaders), and traders. This role specialization allows people to create a wide variety of artifacts. As in pastoral societies, surplus food can lead to inequalities in wealth and power within horticultural societies; as a result, hereditary chieftainships are prevalent. Economic and political systems are developed because of settled nature of horticultural life.

Agricultural Societies

Agricultural societies use technological advances to cultivate crops over a large area. Sociologists use the phrase Agricultural Revolution to refer to the technological changes that occurred as long as 8, 500 years ago that led to cultivating crops and raising farm animals. Increases in food supplies then led to larger populations than in earlier communities. This meant a greater surplus, which resulted in towns that became centers of trade supporting various rulers, educators, craftspeople, merchants, and religious leaders who did not have to worry about locating nourishment.

Greater degrees of social stratification appeared in agricultural societies. For example, women previously had higher social status because they shared labor more equally with men. In hunting and gathering societies, women even gathered more food than men. However, as food stores improved and women took on lesser roles in providing food for the family, they became

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more subordinate to men. As villages and towns expanded into neighboring areas, conflicts with other communities inevitably occurred. Farmers provided warriors with food in exchange for protection against invasion by enemies. A system of rulers with high social status also appeared. This nobility organized warriors to protect the society from invasion. In this way, the nobility managed to extract goods from the lesser persons of society.

Cleric, Knight and Peasant; An Example of Feudal Societies

From the 9th to 15th centuries, feudalism was a form of society based on ownership of land. Unlike today's farmers, vassals under feudalism were bound to cultivating their lord's land. In exchange for military protection, the lords exploited the peasants into providing food, crops, crafts, homage, and other services to the owner of the land. The caste system of feudalism was often multigenerational; the families of peasants may have cultivated their lord's land for generations.

Between the 14th and 16th centuries, a new economic system emerged that began to replace feudalism. Capitalism is marked by open competition in a free market, in which the means of production are privately owned. Europe's exploration of the Americas served as one impetus for the development of capitalism. The introduction of foreign metals, silks, and spices stimulated great commercial activity in Europe.