**Society**

**Definition**

The term society as mentioned earlier is derived from a Latin word socius. The term directly means association, togetherness, gregariousness, or simply group life. The concept of society refers to a relatively large grouping or collectivity of people who share more or less common and distinct culture, occupying a certain geographical locality, with the feeling of identity or belongingness, having all the necessary social arrangements or insinuations to sustain itself.

We may add a more revealing definition of society as defined by Calhoun et al (1994): "A society is an autonomous grouping of people who inhabit a common territory, have a common culture (shared set of values, beliefs, customs and so forth) and are linked to one another through routinized social interactions and interdependent statuses and roles." Society also may mean a certain population group, a community.

The common tendency in sociology has been to conceptualize society as a system, focusing on the bounded and integrated nature of society. Great founders of sociology had also focused on the dynamic aspect of society. Such early sociologists as Comte, Marx and Spencer grasped the concept of society as a dynamic system evolving historically and inevitably towards complex industrial structures.

The common tendency in sociology has been to conceptualize society as a system, focusing on the bounded and integrated nature of society. But in recent years such an approach has been criticized. Contemporary sociologists now frequently use the **network conception of society**. This approach views society as overlapping, dynamic and fluid network of economic, political, cultural and other relations at various levels. Such a conception is analytically more powerful and reflects the reality especially in the context of modern, globalizing world.

**Basic Features of a Society**

**First,** a society is usually a relatively large grouping of people in terms of size. In a very important sense, thus, society may be regarded as the largest and the most complex social group that sociologists study**. Second**, as the above definition shows, the most important thing about a society is that its members share common and distinct culture. This sets it apart from the other population groups. **Third**, a society also has a definite, limited space or territory. The populations that make up a given society are thus locatable in a definite geographical area. The people consider that area as their own. **Fourth,** the people who make up a society have the feeling of identity and belongingness. There is also the feeling of oneness. Such identity felling emanates from the routinized pattern of social interaction that exists among the people and the various groups that make up the society.

**Fifth**, members of a society are considered to have a common origin and common historical experience. They feel that they have also common destiny. **Sixth**, members of a society may also speak a common mother tongue or a major language that may serve as a national heritage.

**Seventh,** a society is autonomous and independent in the sense that it has all the necessary social institutions and organizational arrangements to sustain the system. However, a society is not an island, in the sense that societies are interdependent. There has always been inter– societal relations. People interact socially, economically and politically.

It is important to note that the above features of a society are by no means exhaustive and they may not apply to all societies. The level of a society’s economic and technological development, the type of economic or livelihood system a society is engaged in, etc may create some variations among societies in terms of these basic features.

**Conceptualizing Society at Various Levels**

As indicated above, in a general sense and at an abstract level, all people of the earth may be considered as a society. The earth is a common territory for the whole world's people. All people of the earth share common origin; inhabit common planet; have common bio psychological unity; and exhibit similar basic interests, desires and fears; and are heading towards common destiny (Calhoun, et al., 1994).

At another level, every continent may be considered as a society. Thus, we may speak of the European society, the African society, the Asian society, the Latin American society, etc. This may be because, each of these continents share its own territory, historical experiences, shared culture, and so on.

At a more practical level, each nation-state or country is regarded as a society. For example, the people of Ethiopia or Kenya, Japan are considered as a society. Going far farther still, another level of society is that within each nation-state, there may be ethnolinguistically distinct groups of people having a territory that they consider as their own. They are thus societies in their own right. Some Such society may extend beyond the boundaries of nation-states. Example, the Borana Oromo inhabit in both Ethiopia and Kenya.

**Types or Categories of Societies**

Sociologists classify societies into various categories depending on certain criteria. One such criterion is level of economic and technological development attained by countries. Thus, the countries of the world are classified as First World, Second World, and Third World; First World Countries are those which are highly industrially advanced and economically rich, such as the USA, Japan, Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and Canada and so on. The Second World Countries are also industrially advanced but not as much as the first category. The Third World societies are thus which are least developed, or in the process of developing. Some writers add a fourth category, namely, Fourth World countries. These countries may be regarded as the "poorest of the poor.

Another important criterion for classifying societies may be that which takes into account temporal succession and the major source of economic organization (Lensiki and Lensiki, 1995). When societies modernize they transform from one form to another. The simplest type of society that is in existence today and that may be regarded the oldest is that whose economic organization is based on **hunting and gathering**. They are called hunting and gathering societies. This society depends on hunting and gathering for its survival. The second types are referred to as **pastoral and horticultural** societies. Pastoral societies are those whose livelihood is based on pasturing of animals, such as cattle, camels, sheep and goats. Horticultural societies are those whose economy is based on cultivating plants by the use of simple tools, such as digging sticks, hoes, axes, etc.

The third types are **agricultural societies**. This society, which still is dominant in most parts of the world, is based on large-scale agriculture, which largely depends on ploughs using animal labor. The **Industrial Revolution which began in Great Britain during 18th century, gave rise to the emergence of** a fourth type of society called the Industrial Society. An industrial society is one in which goods are produced by machines powered by fuels instead of by animal and human energy (Ibid.). Sociologists also have come up with a fifth emerging type of society called post-industrial society. This is a society based on information, services and high technology, rather than on raw materials and manufacturing. The highly industrialized which have now passed to the post-industrial level include the USA, Canada, Japan, and Western Europe.