



Mahidol University
International College

ICIR 227 Approaches to Culture and Society

Course Description & Aims

‘Culture’ is foundational for the human condition – it distinguishes us from other primates, and – as ‘cultural identity’ – from fellow humans in other societies. Consequently, ‘culture’ is also a perilous idea: together with history it provides a basis for nationalist ideologies and inter-group conflict. It facilitates communication and understanding by devising symbols and value systems, and at the same time it divides in- from out-group based on the very same frameworks of meaning. It can be regarded as the expression of collective identities, a set of customs and mores, values and ideas – or as a tool of domination and exploitation. What exactly is ‘culture’? And how can cultural variation be explained and assessed? This course introduces and discusses a range of foundational anthropological approaches to the study of culture and society. Students will compare different conceptualizations of ‘culture’ and develop a critical understanding of related issues, ranging from value systems and language use to the understanding of rituals, social drama and cultural identities. The course examines early paradigms in the study of social life and outlines the development of more critical approaches to the configurations of culture. Students will learn to distinguish evolutionist and diffusionist approaches to cultural variation, and discuss the merits and challenges of cultural relativism. They will compare functionalist and cultural materialist theories and contrast them with the insights of symbolist and interpretive reasoning. The relationship of methodology and epistemology in the study of culture and society are explored and students will engage with an application of anthropological theory to selected case studies.

Culture in the modern world; the study of symbol; how culture is defined and created; modernity, post-modernity, and technoculture; dominant and minority cultural forms; gender, sexuality and ethnicity; globalism and post-colonialism; the culture of everyday life. Students will describe; explain; analyze approaches to culture and society.

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Assessment

Active Class Participation	10 %
Quizzes	10 %
Group debate	10 %
Midterm Examination	30 %
Final Project Presentation	20 %
Final Project Report	20 %

Course Learning Outcomes

At the completion of the course the student will be able to:

1. understand major theoretical approaches to culture and society;
2. explain, interrelate and interpret a wide range of cultural phenomena;
3. relate aspects of culture and social organization to selected case studies.

Part I	Foundations and Concepts
Week 1	Introduction
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Course Organization</i> • <i>Preliminary Remarks: The Idea of 'Theory'</i>
Week 2	Approaching 'Culture'
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is Culture? Comparing Concepts and Approaches</i> • <i>Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives</i>
Part II	Theoretical Approaches
Week 3	Evolutionism and Diffusionism
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>From Evolutionism to Sociobiology</i> • <i>From Diffusionism to Culture Area Theory</i>
Week 4	Cultural Relativism
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Legacy of Franz Boas</i> • <i>Cultural Relativism and Human Rights</i>
Week 5	Cultural Materialism and Functionalism
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Marvis Harris' Cultural Materialism</i> • <i>Functionalist Traditions and Malinowski's 'Theory of Needs'</i>
Week 6	Symbolist, Structuralist and Interpretive Approaches
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Victor Turner and the Concept of Liminality</i> • <i>Clifford Geertz and Interpretivism</i>
Week 7	Midterm Review
	Midterm Examination
Part III	Methodology and Application
Week 8	Emic and Etic Perspectives
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Methodological Debates in Anthropology</i> • <i>Bronislaw Malinowski and Participant Observation</i>
Week 9	Fieldwork and Its Challenges
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman in Samoa</i> • <i>Workshop on Case Study Preparation</i>
Week 10-12	Case Studies
Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Gestures and Practices</i> • <i>Language and Meaning</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Religious Rites</i> • <i>Rituals of Everyday Life</i>
Week 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cultural Identities</i> • <i>Exploring Subcultures</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cultural Identities</i> • <i>Exploring Subcultures</i>

Assessment Methods and Criteria

1. Active Class Participation [10 %]. – Students are expected to actively and regularly take part in class discussions. It is important to keep up with the reading materials in order to be able to do so. Core readings are clearly indicated (in **bold** letters) in the detailed lecture schedule at the end of this syllabus, all others are further reading suggestions. Relevant readings will be made available to students electronically and/or in form of a study pack.

2. Quizzes [5 x 2 %]. – From Week 2 to Week 6 students will write a short pop-up quiz in the beginning of selected classes. The quizzes will address a key issue of the reading materials in a simple and straightforward manner, asking students to briefly explain a particular concept.

3. Group Debate [10 %]. – In the second session of Week 4, students are divided into two groups and given 30 minutes to develop arguments for their respective positions: one of the

groups will have to defend a strong stance of cultural relativism, whereas the other should engage with critical assessments of the problematic position of cultural relativism vis-à-vis the universalist notion of human rights. Afterwards both groups are discussing the merits and limitations of cultural relativism with each other. The level of participation and the quality of contributions to this debate – both during the preparation in small groups and during the open-floor debate – will be assessed.

4. Midterm exam [30 %]. – In Week 7, students will take an in-class exam that is divided into two parts. The first part [20 points] consists of ten short-answer questions that ask students to briefly explain some of the theoretical concepts discussed in the first half of term. Answers can be concise, but must be precise and attend to all aspects of the question (read the questions carefully!). The second part of the exam [10 points] consists of three essay topics to choose from. Students are asked to write a structured argumentative essay with relevant reference to conceptualizations of culture and associated theoretical frameworks.

5. / 6. Final Project [40 %]. – A large portion of marks will be awarded to students' final project, which consists of a presentation (in Week 10-12) and a brief report (of 1000-2000 words, due at the end of Week 13). In their final projects, students will have to apply anthropological theory and/or methodology to a selected case study of their choice. The case study topic should be drawn from one of three stipulated topical realms and must be clearly focused. Possible topics include the discussion of a particular ritual, a cultural pattern, a gesture, a culturally patterned personality trait, or the exploration of a particular cultural space. A list of topic suggestions will be provided in class and the instructor will give advice to students who struggle to narrow-down their interests. Both the presentation and the project report must include the following aspects: (1) a brief introduction of the cultural phenomenon in question, including its background and context, (2) an analysis and discussion of the cultural phenomenon in question based on anthropological theory and/or methodology, (3) a reflection regarding the use of theory and/or methodology in its application to the case study, indicating its limitations or bias and/or demonstrating its analytical strength. Presentations and reports need to be clearly structured and argumentative. Feedback given after the presentation should be used to improve the case study project.

Part I: Foundations and Concepts. – During the first two weeks of classes, basic conceptual foundations for this course are introduced. This includes the general framework of 'theory' as well as concepts of 'culture' across the social sciences. Students will develop a systematic and differentiated understanding of related concepts and the history and characteristics of anthropology in order to be equipped for an exploration of cultural theory and its application to case studies.

Introduction

Topic description: What is 'theory'? After a general introduction into course contents, the weekly schedule and the course requirements, students will be reminded of general aspects of theory and theoretical approaches. The relationship of ontology, epistemology and methodology will be introduced in order to build upon this framework throughout the term when comparing diverse anthropological approaches to the understanding of culture and society. This general introduction is aimed to foster a more differentiated understanding of epistemological principles in relation to the contents studied in this course.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will develop a clear and systematic understanding of the concept of 'theory' and its relationship to ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Activity:

- Brainstorming and plenary discussion of the concept of “theory”.

Approaching ‘Culture’

Topic description: It is difficult to define what exactly the term ‘culture’ refers to. Developing key aspects of the term from its etymology (Latin *colere*), we explore the diverse usage of the term from a cross-disciplinary perspective, highlighting common features such as its contrast with ‘nature’ – such as in agriculture, aquaculture etc. – consequently arriving at more technical anthropological definitions that regard culture as the very basis for the human condition. In this context we discuss a selection of classical definitions, including those by Edward Tylor, Franz Boas and Clifford Geertz to reach a conceptual understanding of foundational aspects of culture that inform theoretical approaches in anthropology. Based on this general conceptualization of culture we explore culture’s complex relationship to society and social structure and develop a framework to understand the different traditions of sociology and anthropology in their attempts of ‘approaching culture(s)’.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will become aware of some key aspects of the concept of culture and be able to understand and analyze different definitions of culture.
- Students will develop an awareness of conceptual differences in approaches to culture and begin to critically discuss them.

Activity:

- Students assemble in small groups to discuss selected anthropological definitions of culture. Findings and suggestions of the groups are then briefly presented and discussed in a plenary debate.

Readings:

- **John R. Baldwin, Sandra L. Faulkner and Michael L. Hecht, “A Moving Target: The Illusive Definition of Culture,” in: John R. Baldwin, Sandra L. Faulkner, Michael L. Hecht, et al. (eds.), *Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across the Disciplines* Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006, pp. 3-26.**
- Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952.
- Alan Barnard, “Orang Outang and the Definition of Man: The Legacy of Lord Monboddo,” in: Han F. Vermeulen and Arturo Alvarez Roldán (eds.), *Fieldwork and Footnotes: Studies in the History of European Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 95-112.

Part II: Theoretical Approaches. – In the duration of five weeks (Week 3-6, concluded by a midterm review and examination in Week 7), major theoretical approaches to culture and society are explored and discussed, ranging from early paradigms such as evolutionism, diffusionism and cultural relativism to functionalist, cultural materialist and symbolist/interpretive theories. Class discussions focus on critical comparisons of these diverse approaches and their attempts to explain cultural variation and the dynamic workings of culture. In their exploration of these theoretical frameworks, students will be guided by structured class discussions (including a group debate in Week 4) and will gradually develop the ability to critically assess and discuss the differences of anthropological theories in relation to epistemological and ontological principles.

Evolutionism and Diffusionism

Topic description: The development of anthropology as a “science of culture” is closely tied to the exposure of European society to “out-of-the-way places” in the age of high colonialism. Early systematic approaches to an understanding of cultural dynamics have been strongly influenced by the 19th century paradigm of evolutionism that attempted to reconstruct the history of humankind not only biologically – Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* – but also culturally. Considering its historical context, we explore and discuss the evolutionist paradigm and its influence for the social sciences, focusing on Edward Tylor’s theory of “survivals” and Lewis Henry Morgan’s seven-stage model of cultural evolution. Differences of unilineal, multilinear and universal evolutionism will be introduced and assessed, and the evolutionist project of explaining cultural variation based on the idea of different evolutionary pace will be critically discussed in relation to later sociobiological offshoots of this early approach. – In the second session of the week we consider the development of early opposition to evolutionist ideas in terms of diffusionist approaches towards culture. Diffusionists aim at an explanation of cultural variation based on the idea of cultural borrowing within “culture circles,” an idea that was later accommodated in the development of “area studies”.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will gain some foundational understanding of early paradigms in the study of culture and society and be able to relate them to their historical context.
- Students will start to conceptualize major differences in macro-scale approaches towards cultural variation and explore the relationship of cultural theory to ontological and epistemological foundations.

Activities:

- Plenary discussion of assigned readings.
- Students are split into two groups and assigned either the evolutionist or the diffusionist perspective to explain cultural variation across the globe. In a subsequent plenary session both groups reenact the early debate between evolutionist and diffusionists and try to convince the opposing fraction of their own stance’s advantages. *NB: This group debate serves, at once, as an exercise to prepare the (assessed) group debate of Week 4.*

Readings:

- **Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.**
 - **Chapter 3: “Changing Perspectives on Evolution” (pp. 27-46).**
 - **Chapter 4: “Diffusionist and Culture-Area Theories” (pp. 47-60).**
- Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. 3rd edition. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2009.
 - Chapter 1: “Edward Tylor: The Evolution of Culture” (pp. 5-17).
 - Chapter 2: “Lewis Henry Morgan: The Evolution of Society” (pp. 18-32).

Cultural Relativism

Topic description: The move from a monolithic concept of human culture towards a pluralistic conceptualization of cultures has been an important hallmark in developing our contemporary understanding of cultural variation. This foundational ontological development is most closely associated with the work of Franz Boas and his cultural relativist approach. We will explore and discuss the contributions of Franz Boas and his students to the development of modern cultural anthropology, with some focus on Margaret Mead’s “culture and personality” approach, but also critically discuss the impact of strong – ‘normative’ and ‘moral’ – versions of cultural relativism. Whereas Boas’ students maintain that the cultural relativist approach has made “the world safe

for human differences” (Ruth Benedict), later generations of anthropologists have argued that “cultural relativism is nothing more than an excuse to violate human rights” (Shirin Ebadi). The broader debate of relativism versus universalism in approaches to culture will be introduced and critically discussed in a group debate during the second session of the week.

Activities:

- Students are divided into two groups and given 30 minutes to develop arguments for their respective positions: one of the groups will have to defend a strong stance of cultural relativism, whereas the other should engage with critical assessments of the problematic position of cultural relativism vis-à-vis the universalist notion of human rights. Afterwards both groups are discussing the merits – and limitations – of cultural relativism with each other. – *Note that students’ participation and performance in this group discussion is part of the assessment for this course (10 %).*
- Plenary discussion of assigned readings.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will gain a differentiated understanding of the cultural relativist tradition in the study of culture and society.
- Students will begin to critically assess and discuss the impact of cultural theory – in this case, the merits and limitations of the cultural relativist paradigm.

Readings:

- **Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.**
 - Chapter 7: “From Relativism to Cognitive Science” (pp. 99-119).
- **Richard Ashby Wilson, “Human Rights,” in: David Nugent & Joan Vincent (eds.), *A Companion to the Anthropology of Politics*. Malden, MA et al.: Blackwell, 2004, pp. 231-247.**
- **Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. 3rd edition. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2009.**
 - Chapter 3: “Franz Boas: Culture in Context” (pp. 33-45).
 - Chapter 8: “Margaret Mead: The Individual and Culture” (pp. 104-116).

Cultural Materialism and Functionalism

Topic description: Departing from the earlier paradigmatic approaches of evolutionism, diffusionism and cultural relativism, we now aim to conceptualize the relationship between culture and social structure by comparing two contrasting, yet equally systematic perspectives. Our discussion starts with Marvin Harris’ criticism of cultural theory as “unscientific” and his suggestion of a systematic analysis based on the material conditions of culture and society. His concept of infrastructure, structure and superstructure is introduced and discussed, and later during the week compared to Bronislaw Malinowski’s “theory of needs”. In class discussions of selected quotes from their major contributions to the study of culture and society, we explore the similarities and differences of cultural-materialist and social-functionalist approaches and contextualize their insights with Émile Durkheim’s contributions to the functionalist tradition in sociology.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will gain a differentiated understanding of cultural materialism and functionalist traditions in the study of culture and society.
- Students will be able to compare and critically discuss the contributions of cultural materialism and functionalism vis-à-vis earlier approaches in cultural theory.

- Students will be able to relate systematic approaches regarding the material – and biological – conditions of culture to our earlier debates of the nexus of culture and nature.

Activity:

- Plenary discussion of assigned readings.

Readings:

- **Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. 3rd edition. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2009.**
 - **Chapter 15: “Marvin Harris: Cultural Materialism” (pp. 204-216).**
 - Chapter 4: “Émile Durkheim: The Organic Society” (pp. 46-59).
 - Chapter 10: “Bronislaw Malinowski: The Functions of Culture” (pp. 134-146).
- **Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.**
 - **Chapter 5: “Functionalism and Structural-functionalism” (pp. 61-79).**

Symbolist, Structuralist and Interpretive Approaches

Topic description: Leaving the focus on material conditions of culture behind, this week explores the symbolic work of culture for the formulation of identity. Based on Clifford Geertz’ notion of culture as a “web of significance that we ourselves have spun” – and in which we are then “suspended” – we interrogate the meaning of signs and symbols, rituals and “social drama” (Victor Turner). This move towards a symbolist and interpretive approach towards culture and society is contextualized with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure’s work in sociolinguistics and his concept of the “sign” based on the arbitrary relationship of a “signifier” and a “signified”. We discuss the notion of culture as elusive and transient and its impact for an understanding of social worlds and cultural features.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will gain a differentiated understanding of symbolist and interpretive approaches in the study of culture and society.
- Students will be able to compare and critically discuss the contributions of these approaches in relation to cultural materialist and functionalist traditions in cultural theory.
- Students will develop a clear understanding of the impact of cultural theory in relation to its ontological and epistemological foundations and be able to discuss this relationship by comparing different traditions in the study of culture and society.

Activities:

- Plenary discussion of assigned readings.
- Students assemble in small groups to engage in a thick-decription exercise. Each group is given a Youtube-link for a video that depicts a ritual activity; based on these clips – and in relation to Clifford Geertz’ concept of “thick description” – students prepare a brief piece of anthropological writing that is later presented and discussed in a plenary debate.

Readings:

- **Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists*. 3rd edition. Lanham: Alta Mira Press, 2009.**
 - **Chapter 18: “Victor Turner: Symbols, Pilgrims, and Drama” (pp. 247-258).**
 - **Chapter 19: “Clifford Geertz: An Interpretive Anthropology” (pp. 259-271).**
 - Chapter 20: “Mary Douglas: Symbols and Structures, Pollution and Purity” (pp. 272-287).
- Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- Chapter 8: “Structuralism, from Linguistics to Anthropology” (pp. 120-138).
- Chapter 10: “Interpretive and Postmodernist Approaches” (pp. 158-177).

Midterm Review and Exam

Topic description: A review of the materials of the first half of the course, in order to prepare students for the midterm examination. – The format and expectations of the midterm exam will be introduced in detail and students are then given the opportunity to ask questions about any of the topics covered during week 1-6. A review sheet will be provided prior to the review session as a basis for preparation.

Activity:

- After the midterm exam, anonymized copies of exam booklets will be distributed to students alongside with the assessment rubrics used by the instructor. Each student is asked to peer evaluate one exam based on the official rubric as a mechanism to ensure impartiality and to develop an awareness for assessment methods used in the IRGA program. Student and lecturer scores of the midterm exams will later (in Week 8) be compared and discussed.

Part III: Methodology and Application. – The last part of the course shifts the focus of our inquiry from a discussion of theoretical frameworks towards methodological questions and the application of theory and methodology to selected case studies. The exact topics of these case studies depend on student interest, however, they should fit into one of these three categories: (1) Gestures, Practices and Utterances; (2) Rites and Rituals; (3) Cultural Identities and Subcultures. – Students are expected to begin working on their final projects and present their results during Week 10-12. The projects can be based on fieldwork exercises and/or the application of anthropological theory to aspects of culture.

Emic and Etic Perspectives

Topic description: To initiate a discussion on methodologies in the study of culture and society, we briefly review the manners in which relevant data has been generated in the development of anthropological theory – from early “armchair anthropology” and its reliance on secondary data towards the explorative, yet often limited field-research of Franz Boas and his disciples. Comparing the contrasting interpretations of Samoan culture by Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman (and aided by a documentary on Mead’s field-research in Samoa) we will start to discuss the impact of methodology towards cultural theory.

During the second session of the week, special attention will be given to the development of a systematic fieldwork methodology by Bronislaw Malinowski, which remains imperative in contemporary anthropological studies. The key features of Malinowski’s methodology will be introduced and analyzed, with a focus on his concept of participant observation. In this context, the difference between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ approaches towards an understanding of culture and society will be discussed, with reference to the decidedly ‘etic’ approach of Marvin Harris’ cultural materialism.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will explore the basic tenets of contemporary anthropological field-research in relation to its historical context.
- Students will understand and critically assess the difference between emic and etic approaches in the study of culture and society.
- Students will begin to relate some foundational methodological questions to the cultural theories explored earlier in the term.

Activity:

- Plenary discussion of assigned readings and the Margaret Mead-documentary.

Readings:

- **Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. 7th edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960 [1922].**
 - **Chapter 1: “Introduction: The Subject, Method and Scope of This Inquiry” (pp. 1-25).**

Documentary:

- *Tales from the Jungle: Margaret Mead and the Samoans*, BBC 2007.

Fieldwork and Its Challenges

Topic description: Based on our discussion of Malinowski’s systematic fieldwork methodology we will engage with a critical assessment of its limitations. In particular, ethical concerns in the endeavor of ‘full’ participant observation in particular contexts will be considered, and the question of identity and bias in endeavors to develop empathy and understanding for different ways of life will be discussed. Our analysis will be informed by the post-mortem publication of Malinowski’s diaries from the field and the critical response that it has generated in the anthropological community. With a focus on Clifford Geertz’ critique of Malinowski’s contributions to anthropological methodology, we explore alternatives to participatory field research and discuss Geertz’ own interpretive approach based on “thick description” and the idea of “reading” cultures as texts.

The second session of this week is reserved for a practical workshop for the preparation of students’ final projects. Students are provided an opportunity to discuss problems and challenges they face in their application of theoretical approaches and/or methodological insights to the case studies they have selected as a basis for their final projects.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will develop a differentiated understanding of the problems associated with the method of participant observation.
- Students will discuss the limitations of contemporary anthropological field-research methodologies and explore alternatives.
- Students will be able to relate particular methodological questions to the cultural theories explored earlier in the term and critically discuss the impact of methodology for diverse understandings and conceptualizations of culture and society.

Activities:

- Plenary discussion of assigned readings.
- Interactive workshop to prepare students’ final projects.

Readings:

- **Clifford Geertz, *Life among the Anthros and Other Essays*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010.**
 - **Part I, 1967: “On Malinowski” (pp. 15-20).**
- **Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. Basic Books, 1983.**
 - **Chapter 3: “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” (pp. 55-70).**

Documentary:

- *Tales from the Jungle: Malinowski and the Trobriand Islanders*, BBC 2007.

Case Studies

Topic description: The last three weeks of the term are reserved for presentations of student's final projects. The case studies chosen should be drawn from three thematic realms, namely (1) Gestures, Practices and Utterances [Week 10], (2) Rites and Rituals [Week 11], and (3) Cultural Identities and Subcultures [Week 12]. Brief conceptual introductions will be provided to each of these topics in the beginning of the week, followed by student presentations and a discussion of their findings.

Expected learning outcomes:

- Students will demonstrate their understanding of relevant anthropological theory and methodology.
- Students will succeed in their attempts to apply anthropological theory and/or methodology to selected case studies.
- Students will demonstrate awareness of limitations regarding the transferability of theoretical insights and/or applicability of anthropological methodology.

Activities:

- Student presentations, followed by plenary discussions.

Readings:

In preparation for their final projects, students are expected to take initiative in allocating relevant readings on their own (2-3 articles, in addition to a selection of 2-3 relevant core readings from the materials provided earlier in the term). Assistance and suggestions will be provided by the course instructor if necessary and upon request.