

Study unit 4: Man's Interaction with the Environment

4.0 Man's relationship with his environment

In human geography there are two major themes in the relationship between man and environment, the first one emphasizes the role of physical environment, in 'structuring'; or influencing human activities. The second one emphasizes the role of 'culture' in structuring the Physical environment. This is evidenced by the propositions that brought in by different Geographers, and they include: The concept of Determinism, The concept of Possibilitism and The concept of Probabilism.

4.1 The concept of determinism:

This concept is also called 'Environmental, Climatic or Geographic Determination'. It emphasizes that Physical environment rather than Social conditions determine the culture and 'well-being of man'. It also implies that the differences of the environment in which man interacts, the behavior of man's activities to develop are determined or influenced by such environment. Environmental determination originates back when a Pre-Geographer known as Strabo wrote that "Climate influences the Physical disposition of different places"

Climate is the most dominant of the most influenced in controlling man's activities in the environment. Climate influences the physical mind set of individuals which in turn defines the behavior and culture of the society that those individual form, e.g. The White people believe that, people living in Tropical climate are stupid, lazy, relaxed attitudes and promiscuous. In other words the environment dictates what man does in the environment hence human actions, work and creation are consoled by the physical environment, that is, the work people do is related to the environment where they live or where they are. Example, the Pygmies in Congo forest are gatherers or hunters in the environment where they live, also people living in temperate forests are Lumberers, those living in Coastal areas are fishermen while those living around fertile soils end up being farmers. People in the semi arid areas such as the Fulani of Nigeria, Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, Karamajong of Uganda are Nomads or Pastoralists, i.e. They have to move around for pasture and water.

Key proponents or people associated with determinism were Charles Darwin (1859), in his book “Origin of Species” stated that Plants and animals adapt to their environment; and he also said that People just like plants and animals adapt to the environment, he came up with the idea that there are natural laws that govern man’s behavior in the area. That people have to struggle to survive, i.e. “Survival of the fittest” He therefore came up with the Cause-Effect relationship.

(a) Ellen Churchill Semple said that “Man is the product of the earth’s surface.” This means that man is not merely a child of the earth, dust of her dust but the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body, given him his problems for navigation, irrigation and at the same time whispered or offered list for their solutions. According to the view of determinism, individuals build up knowledge by encountering the world through their senses and are able to translate their responses to the environment. They are at the mercy of environmental stimuli. Hence, this rather crude view of human behavior has come under fierce criticism and has been partly replaced by Possibilism and Probabilism.

4.2 The concept of Environmental Possibilism

This concept came up as a result of Environmental Determinism. This philosophy is seen in contrast to Environmental Determinism and declares that “Although environmental conditions do have an influence on human and cultural development, people have varied possibilities in how they decide to live in a given environment.” It urges that as far as the relation between man and the environment is concerned, it is a man who makes the decision and choice and has the freedom to do what he wants in the environment.

According to this view the environment does not dictates on man’s activities. They (Possibilists) came up with the statement by Lucien Febure (1922) which said “There are no necessities, only possibilities.” This means that in the environment there are many opportunities and man decides on which opportunity to take. To Possibilists, the environment is not mandatory; man makes his decision and follows them. Possibilists believe that man can do anything despite environmental limitations. Where environmental limitations constraint his development, technology can enhance his use of the environment. The Possibilists

include: Isaiah Bowman (USA), Cal Saver (USA), Vidal de la Blanche (France), Hettner (Germany) and Jean Bruhness (France)

In Possibilism emphasis is on free choice by man, the essence of Possibilists view that the environment may limit but does not directly cause Socio-cultural variations, that is, Environmental cultures may explain why some cultural features do not occur in a particular setting, e.g the access of agriculture in the Arctic region, but they may not explain why it did not occur in other areas.

4.3 The Concept of Probabilism:

This concept lies between environmental determinism and possibilism. This is a view that in some areas of science, we may settle hypothesis with reasonable degree of probability without being able to obtain knowledge. Probabilism is flanked by the more dogmatic view that we can achieve certainty on one side and the more skeptical view that we can't given assign probabilities on the other side. According to Probabilists where as nature can shape man, on the other hand man may decide on what to do with nature, depending on who has a strong force, is a two sided flow of possibilities. Therefore, Probabilists agreed that although man can make his choice, the environment to some extent causes some limitations on his choice, eg. Man cannot grow cotton in the North pole (it is a cold region) that is, Determinism; he may attempt the green house farming, that is, Possibilism; but it cannot be done on large scale, that is Probabilism.

Self-Review Questions (SRQ) For Study Session 4

1. Mention two major themes in the relationship between man and environment
2. Explain the three concepts that demonstrate man's interaction with the environment