

FOUNDATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURE

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Summary

Culture could be pragmatically defined as everything, which is handed on within a society by means of tradition rather than biologically by means of DNA. Any attempt to understand the characteristics of human culture in general and of any specific culture in particular needs to analyze its configurations and patterns, the way in which various elements within a culture are arranged, and what kind of a relationship they have with each other.

All particular and actual cultures possess the same general categories: language, art, social organization, religion, technology, and so on. All cultures are based on tradition.

Without handing on the collective wisdom and knowledge in some form or another no culture would survive more than one generation. Cultures are forms of organizing our lives and giving them meaning.

1. Characteristics of Culture

There is a certain confusion about the concept culture, because, on the one hand, it is used in a very broad definition which includes all human activities, on the other hand, in a very restrictive definition which excludes anything but the highest elements of intellectual and artistic activity. This confusion has increased since "culture" has become a fashionable term not only in the human sciences, but also in everyday talk. Since the beginnings of such disciplines as cultural history, the definition and compass of culture has become more and more unstable. Since the nineteenth and early twentieth century culture was seen to encompass more and more not only intellectual, aesthetic, juridical and moral phenomena, but also habits of eating, clothing and engineering skills, so much so that some high cultures of the past were no longer seen as having a culture, because they had few railways and telegraphs and no orderly police department. On the other hand, in a restrictive (mainly Eurocentric) discourse only those languages were called culture languages which had produced outstanding poets and thinkers, whose writings were easily accessible to Europeans. That excluded most oral societies and many of those, which existed in suitably exotic distances from the European metropolis (For a detailed history see *Theory and History of Culture*).

What made matters worse was that thinkers, like Leopold Ziegler, separated culture from civilization. Civilization for them is practical behavior in order to live well and is based on illusion, whereas culture is the totality of all human relationships to the spirit of the world, which is objectively present but without consciousness, and which comes of its own will to self-consciousness in human beings. A central concept of this kind of elitist understanding of late nineteenth-century culture is the concept of tragedy. A culture which has no sense of the tragic is no culture. Such concepts, quite common in Europe and abstracted from the limited experience of European cultural history, again attempt to devalue other cultures which do not fit this one-sided image. In contrast to this Eurocentric image, Herder insisted that all peoples have culture, and that the European concept of culture did not really contribute to the happiness of the people and glorified many traits which were mere luxury and decadence. In any case, how many really participated in what one could call "high culture"?

In order to characterize culture, I will neither use the always subjective evaluations of the greatness or otherwise of exceptional cultural heroes or activities nor simply identify culture with the technical know-how of Western societies. Culture could be pragmatically defined as everything which is handed on within a society by means of tradition rather than biologically by means of our DNA. (cf. Herder's and Tyler's views in *Theory and History of Culture*). Thus culture encompasses not only the intellectual culture, the arts, sciences, religion and philosophy, but also the material culture. Architecture and eating habits, tools and inventions form as much part of any culture as the family structures, the rules, regulations and laws, and the political organization of a society. Thus, if we want to characterize a culture or compare it with another, we need to take all of these elements into consideration. (see *Culture: The Human Way of Life*)

Any attempt to understand the characteristics of human culture in general and of any specific culture in particular needs to analyze the way in which various elements within a culture are arranged, and what kind of a relationship they have with each other.

Configuration and pattern, especially the latter, are concepts closely related to culture area and culture type. To use these terms, means to view culture not in terms of its individual components or traits, but as meaningful organizations of traits: areas, occupations, configurations or patterns. Clark Wissler's "universal culture pattern" was a recognition of the fact that all particular and actual cultures possess the same general categories: language, art, social organization, religion, technology, and so on.

To understand one's own culture and the configuration of elements in it, presupposes some knowledge about the configuration of other cultures, because many of the inherent patterns of one's own culture are not usually made explicit and thus remain essentially unconscious. Interest in other cultures is not a recent phenomenon; the study of cultures can thus be traced to very early in human history. The Scythian Prince Anacharsis in the sixth century B. C., for example, was probably not the first one to have shown a critical interest in Greek conventions, lifestyle and culture. Especially societies which were trading with distant partners had to show an interest in other cultures simply to survive in an otherwise alien and often hostile environment. Such curiosity, on the one hand, gave rise to many prejudices and misunderstandings, which people nurture about those of a different culture. But the close contact with other cultures also gave rise, at least in the more open-minded, to the idea that humanity was a unity, despite all superficial differences. Next to the traders, it was above all some of the religious missionaries who crossed cultural boundaries and who spread the idea of a unity of human history and the unity of the human species. Christianity, for example, spread the belief in a revelation and redemption which was directed to all members of humanity. Unfortunately, in practice Christians did not always act according to such sublime insights. While such curiosity was beneficial in that it counteracted narrow nationalist feelings and sectarian narrow-mindedness, it could also be used to postulate that there was currently one dominant culture and that all human beings had to aspire to this culture. It is necessary, therefore, to point to the diversity of actual cultures within the general unity of cultures, and in this way to counteract the claims of any one culture to be regarded as the pinnacle of human development.

It was and still is common for dogmatic thinkers, be they religious or social thinkers, to claim insight into the unity and final goal of world history, whether such a goal is sanctioned by chiliastic religious ideas or by secularized concepts of a final utopian stage of humanity. History as the drama of salvation, as seen in Christian philosophy, or history as a cyclical movement (Spengler and Toynbee), overlook the manifold empirical differences in the content and development of cultures. The common features of cultures are extremely general, such as the fact that all cultures have organized social life in one way or another, that they all have developed some form of law and justice, that they all show some kind of hierarchy even in the most democratically organized societies. But as soon as we deal with the content and meaning of these arrangements, or with the understanding which people have of their own culture, we are confronted with great variations of these basic general themes.

1.1. Tradition

All cultures are based on tradition. Without handing on the collective wisdom and knowledge in some form or another, no culture would survive more than one generation.

But what is handed on and how this is done is again extremely variable. In every society a vast amount of practical and theoretical information is handed on within the family. But even small societies on the scale of large families have institutions which hand on certain forms of sacred and social knowledge. Initiation schools are the earliest forms of teaching outside the family structure and serve among other goals to create a bond among those belonging to the same age group. Such forms of handing on traditions can be further formalized in the shape of apprenticeships, army training, regular religious instruction in churches, schools and universities.

Knowledge can be passed on from one generation to another in a number of ways. It is passed on by speaking and also through writing. It can also be taught without words by showing people how to do things. The skills for survival such as hunting, building houses, making clothes, tools, medicine and religious practices were taught by telling and showing one another how to do these things. Singing, telling stories and acting out plays are also ways of handing down knowledge through the oral tradition. For example, Australian Aboriginal traditional knowledge refers to aspects of information about the land and its resources, or about traditional spirituality and medicine. However, all cultures change, and as they do, new knowledge is added and some knowledge is lost. More and more of Aboriginal children's education comes from books rather than from elders. The elders do not play as important a role as they used to in passing along their knowledge to younger people. In some communities the children do not speak the language of their parents, which makes it difficult for elders to teach them. These changes mean that a great deal of important traditional knowledge is being lost. This is a crisis for many reasons. The knowledge that is being lost can provide people with a sense of identity.

1.2. Teaching

In the human species individuals are equipped with fewer instincts than is the case in many non-human species, and they are born without culture. Therefore an infant must learn a very great deal and acquire a vast number of conditioned reflexes and habit patterns in order to live effectively, not only in society but also in a particular kind of sociocultural system. This process, taken as a whole, is called socialization (a secondary socialization in a foreign culture is called acculturation). Education in its broadest sense may properly be regarded as the process by which the culture of a sociocultural system is impressed or imposed upon the pliant, receptive infant. It is this process that makes continuity of culture possible. Education, formal and informal, is the specific means of socialization. By informal education is meant the way a child learns to adapt his behavior to that of others, and to become a member of a group. By formal education is meant the intentional and more or less systematic effort to affect the behavior of others by transmitting elements of culture to them, be it knowledge or belief, patterns of behavior, or ideals and values.

Much education is effected in an unobtrusive way, without teacher or learner being aware that culture is being transmitted. Thus, in myths and tales, certain characters are presented as heroes or villains; certain traits are extolled, others are deplored or denounced. The impressionable child acquires ideals and values, an image of the good

or the bad. The growing child is immersed in informal education constantly, whereas the formal education tends to be periodic.

Many sociocultural systems demarcate rather sharply a series of stages in the education and development of full-fledged men and women. First there is infancy, during which perhaps the most profound and enduring influences of a person's life are brought to bear. Weaning ushers in a new stage, that of childhood, during which boys and girls become distinguished from each other. Puberty rites transform children into men and women. These rites vary enormously in emphasis and content. Sometimes they include whipping, isolation, scarification or circumcision. Very often the ritual is accompanied by explicit instruction in the mythology and lore of the tribe and in ethical codes. With marriage come instruction and admonition, appropriate to the occasion, from elder relatives and, in more advanced cultures, from priests. In some sociocultural systems men may become members of associations or sodalities: men's clubs, warrior societies, secret societies of magic or medicine. In some cases it is said that in passing through initiation rites a person is "born again." Women also may belong to sodalities, and in some instances they may become members of secret, magical societies along with men. The training and initiation into the secrets of the craft among blacksmiths seems to have been one of the earliest forms of formalized apprenticeship and schooling. Similarly the training and initiation of shamans or other forms of natural healers was a very formalized procedure in most early societies. The practical aspects of war had to be taught to every new group of young adults. And the temple schools very early organized the instruction of priests and clerics.

An important question, which is of interest to all religions and to all moral philosophers, is whether human beings are perfectible by education and self-education. While many religions and moral philosophers have devised disciplines of meditation and behavior which attempt to improve individuals, the philosophers of the Enlightenment were convinced that the general progress of humanity would entail an improvement of the human race. While, however, there is undoubtedly considerable progress in the material comfort of at least those human beings who are participating in the scientific, technological and political advancement of modern life - and many millions are still excluded from nearly any benefits of this progress - the moral perfectibility of human beings seems to be an elusive goal. While some traditions and thinkers therefore place paradise at the beginning of history and describe history as a constant process of decadence, the utopian thinkers imagine a golden age in the future, when a perfect humanity will finally reach its goal of living a life which is worth living. To the utopian thinker, undeniable improvements in the quality of life are merely steps towards that ever unattainable utopia at the end of history, where many religions have also placed the return of paradise.

2. Material Culture

It was archaeologists, dealing only with material artifacts and lacking written documents when dealing with prehistoric finds, who understood the importance of material culture as a means of characterizing a culture. While their interest from the Renaissance to the twentieth century centered on artistic objects and while they borrowed many of their descriptive methods from art history, archaeologists soon began to understand that every

object of a prehistoric society had a story to tell about that culture. The way ordinary people built their houses and how they lived in them soon began to interest them as much as the temples and palaces of princes and kings. Everyday objects are as much of interest to the archaeologist as gold and silver treasures. As archaeologists refined their methods, they understood that not only the objects themselves, but also their spatial relationship to houses, palaces, temples, etc. and their spatial relationship among themselves have a story to tell about the culture investigated. Material objects also tell us about the relationship between cultures, when, for example, Indian objects are found in East African archaeological sites, testifying to a regular trade across the Indian Ocean before the arrival of Europeans.

Where we have material artifacts, buildings, tools and cult objects only, we cannot, however, know certain key aspects of every culture, such as the language used, the concepts available in that language, its philosophical, moral and religious concepts and its everyday habits. Sometimes pictures tell us part of the story, although pictures allow even more interpretative leeway than written documents, and are usually not a very reliable guide to the conceptual space of a culture and its relation to the world and the spiritual sphere.

2.1. Eating culture

In his short stories Kafka has explored again and again how the act of eating and the inculcation of table manners is used in the family to discipline children. To sit upright, who is allowed to talk and who not, to use fork and knife, or to eat only with the right hand or with chopsticks demands a certain amount of body control, but the important thing is that the child submits to the control of an authority, represented by the father.

All societies also determine what can be considered food and what is not edible; however, the range of foods considered edible varies widely from society to society. Rice and potatoes, for example, are fairly recent additions to Western European tables. Local eating cultures use such elements as algae, fungi, raw fish, frogs' legs, snails, grubs etc. Sometimes other cultures view these eating habits with the utmost suspicion, which expresses itself in such derogatory names as "frogs" for Frenchmen and "krauts" for Germans. While horsemeat is used for food products in Italy and France, it is not considered human food in Germany, except under the most exceptional circumstances. Rats and dogs, although mammals like sheep and cows, are not acceptable to many people. Beef is not eaten for religious reasons by Hindus, while pork is forbidden to Jews and Muslims. The rules of religious fasting demand that Catholics do not eat meat during certain periods of the year.

Such strict rules also have the function of creating barriers between nations and cultures, since those subject to these rules are forbidden to eat food which they do not consider to be prepared according to these rules. Thus they are unable to partake in one of the most intimate social gatherings with non-members of their own culture, unless they in turn adopt the eating habits of their hosts.

Globalization has brought with it the export of foodstuffs and culturally defined eating habits worldwide. Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Italian and Mexican food is available in

most metropolitan areas, while American style fast foods have made inroads everywhere. While the local cuisine continues to exist, many people consider the invasion of foreign foods as a threat to their identity, while those cultures, in which eating habits are closely related to their religion, reject the food habits of other cultures outright.

2.2. Housing

All members of the human species have developed some form of shelter against the weather and against wild animals and other dangers of the outside world. While in the beginning human beings often simply used existing shelters such as caves and rock overhangs, others constructed simple shelters out of naturally available material. Even the simplest temporary hut anticipates, as Herder has said, the art which created the Greek palace. The vast majority of human beings live in shelters which are variations of a few basic types: the tent, the round or square hut or house, and more recently in the mass-constructed, high-rise dwellings of the large cities.

In their details, however, houses were quite distinct, serving the economic and social life of their inhabitants. The Black Forest house which gave shelter not only to humans, but also to domesticated animals against the harsh winters of the mountainous region is quite different from the sun-drenched Italian townhouse or the boathouses in the Amazon river region. But besides their individual houses, the character of a city is determined by its use and organization of spaces, be it open squares, parks, the ensemble of individual and distinct houses, the nature of streets and their organization around certain key points.

The unique cultural identity of a city is often embodied in its large public buildings: temples and palaces. Built with the sweat and blood of the masses, the luxurious buildings of the princes and priests were originally a burden on those who had to pay for them in one form or another. Most of these buildings are now the property of democratic states and serve as administrative buildings as well as museums accessible to all. As the rich had access to the most expensive building materials and the best artisans and artists, these buildings today are often preserved as national treasures.

The industrial revolution, colonialism and post-colonialism brought with them a far-reaching uniformity of dwelling styles and a destruction of the national individuality of dwelling forms. In basic form a flat is very much the same whether in New York, Tokyo, Shanghai or Berlin. Where older forms of living have been saved from this general uniformity, in the countryside or in the center of old cities, they have been renovated like museum pieces. Nevertheless, such remnants often show an urban living culture in many ways more humane than the uniform high-rise buildings of global modernity.

2.3. Tools

While some animals, especially some of the apes, use tools, and on occasion even make tools, human beings have been considered as toolmakers par excellence. They do not only use tools on occasion but also create a whole range of tools for various purposes, from the early rough rock tools to the most advanced medical machines of today. While

some cultures and many individuals, even in highly complex cultures, still work on the principle of the do-it-yourself enthusiast, who uses whatever is at hand, modern industrial cultures are characterized by the fact that their tools are invented on the basis of a coherent understanding of natural laws and the development of science and technology.

The availability or lack of certain tools does have a great impact on the everyday life of people. The absence of the wheel in Meso-American cultures demanded other forms of work quite different from the work organization in Middle-East high culture. The invention of industrial machines from the steam engine to the computer has revolutionized everyday life, first in Europe and now all over the world.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Horn studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992), the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.