

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

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### Summary

Cultures are relatively constant formations, which survive for a length of time while individuals enter and leave that structure. The cultural heritage of any one of those formations can be seen on the one hand as a structure, as a set of rules to be enacted by individual members of distinct groups, which ensures its own survival by socializing individuals into a specific culture; on the other hand as the specific way in which actors create and produce beliefs, values, rituals, behavior patterns and other means of social life; and finally as the accumulated cultural "wealth" of that community: its theatre, music, literature, architecture, visual arts, dance etc. Cultural heritage, whichever model one follows, is not transmitted automatically. It requires a process of learning and acquiring skills, of the actualization or critical assimilation of the body of knowledge and artistic expression. Socio-cultural systems, like other kinds of systems, must have means of self-regulation and control in order to persist and function. In human society these means are numerous and varied. This organization specifies rights, duties, and obligations of one class of relatives to another. Codes of ethics govern the relationship of the individual to the well being of society as a whole. While cultures differ in respect of the degree that individuals internalize the values and rules of that culture, all cultures need to strive towards an order that is accepted by most if not all the individuals in that society. While the understanding of our cultural heritage as a structure of rules tends to portray cultures as timeless entities, one needs to understand that cultures are always characterized by this interplay between rules deemed to be ancient and immutable and the strategies of indi-

viduals who live in time and who attempt to achieve their goals by at the same time adhering - or seeming to adhere - to the rules and subtly bending them in their favor. While all cultures need the stability of certain rituals and conventions, the actions of individuals in cultures can rarely be described as a simple fulfillment of their conventional duties. On the other hand each individual strategy cannot succeed unless it takes into account the rules, values and conventions of a particular culture.

### **1. Cultural heritage as a discipline not an inheritance**

Cultures are relatively constant formations, which survive for a length of time while individuals enter and leave that structure. The cultural heritage of any one of those formations can be seen on the one hand as a structure, as a set of rules to be enacted by individual members of distinct groups, which ensures its own survival by socializing individuals into a specific culture; on the other hand as the specific way in which actors create and produce beliefs, values, rituals, behavior patterns and other means of social life; and finally as the accumulated cultural "wealth" of that community: its theatre, music, literature, architecture, visual arts, dance etc.

Cultural heritage, whichever model one follows, is not transmitted automatically. It requires a process of learning and acquiring skills, of the actualization or critical assimilation of the body of knowledge and artistic expression. In the human species individuals are equipped with fewer instincts than is the case in many non-human species. Humans are born cultureless. Therefore an infant *Homo sapiens* must learn a very great deal and acquire a vast number of habit patterns in order to live effectively, not only in society but in a particular kind of socio-cultural system, be it Tibetan, Eskimo, or French.

Thus in many societies juridical and mythical texts are recited during initiation ceremonies to make sure that each member of the community becomes acquainted with the fundamental heritage of his or her own culture (see *Memorists*); other societies have institutionalized such learning in churches, mosques, schools and universities. Puberty rites, for example, transform children into men and women. These rites vary enormously in emphasis and content. Sometimes they include whipping, isolation, scarification, or circumcision, on the assumption that he who is not beaten or tortured will not learn these rules effectively. Very often the ritual is accompanied by explicit instruction in the mythology and lore of the tribe and in ethical codes. Such rituals as confirmation and Bar Mitzvah in modern Western culture belong to the category of puberty rites. Time (needed for learning this heritage) is thus a constitutive dimension of the social reality of any culture, and there is thus in most cultures a progression from not yet initiated, to initiates, and masters. When the meaning of cultural artifacts is lost and the will to preserve them and use them is weakened, a culture becomes a "dead" culture, although it can be rediscovered and revitalized at a later stage.

Socio-cultural systems, like other kinds of systems, must have means of self-regulation and control in order to persist and function. In human society these means are numerous and varied. This organization specifies rights, duties, and obligations of one class of relatives to another. Codes of ethics govern the relationship of the individual to the well being of society as a whole. Codes of etiquette regulate class structure by requiring individuals to conform to their respective classes. Custom is a general term that embraces

all these mechanisms of regulation and control and even more, and this is a core element of the cultural heritage of each human society. There is in each culture a certain force, both a physical force, and moral and social constraints, which limits or even eliminates the inclination of individuals to deviate from the rules imposed on them by culture, a force which Kant called discipline and distinguished from the inner activity which he called culture. This inner activity is enshrined in various objects, artifacts and stories, which we call art, which very often are more durable than constraints and physical force, precisely because they do not force themselves on us, but work by gentle persuasion. Because they often transcend the culture in which they have been created, they can and often do become the cultural heritage not of one specific culture but of humanity as a whole.

While cultures differ in respect of the degree that individuals internalize the values and rules of that culture, all cultures need to strive towards an order that is accepted by most if not all the individuals in that society. Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth century Arab philosopher, talks in his *Muqadimah* of a vision of social order, which he called *asabiyah* (group solidarity), and described it as the drive towards a coherent social order. All societies have a vision of what that social order should be like, be it the *humanitas* of European classical and Renaissance culture, be it the *ubuntu* (the quality of being a person in a social context) of Bantu-speaking peoples. Very often this ethical vision is enshrined in a complex of religious concepts. The Torah talks of the "way of the Lord", Christians speak about "Jesus is the way", the Qur'an calls "show us the straight way", Hinduism speaks about the "three ways to salvation", and Buddhism about the "noble eightfold path". It is that "order" which most human beings see as the most desirable function of a culture, and usually they prefer the kind of order that they have become socialized into. As long as human beings are living with other human beings this cultural heritage forms their mind and their actions. Plotin's belief that those who are "pure" and have no truck with anything concerning the body are necessarily free of culture, is thus not sustainable: even the hermit in the desert or the solitary Robinson Crusoe on his island follow certain strategies which are possible within a certain culture, and which would be unthinkable outside that culture.

Like language, a cultural heritage is part of the external milieu in which we always already find ourselves, which makes available to us certain roles: childhood, fatherhood, motherhood, leadership, priesthood, the position of teacher and learner, etc. Depending on birth and circumstance individuals can take positions of ascribed or achieved status, or for a specific period don the "mask" impersonating a god or ancestor. Culture determines what it means to be a slave or a king, to carry a title or to occupy a position according to our birth, actions or circumstances within all the ones allowed in that society. All human societies are divided into classes and segments. Class is defined as one of an indefinite number of groupings each of which differs in composition from the other or others, such as men and women; married, widowed, and divorced; children and adults. Segment is defined as one of an indefinite number of groupings all of which are alike in structure and function: families, lineages, clans, and so on. On more advanced levels of development there are occupational classes, such as farmers, pastoralists, artisans, metalworkers, and scribes, and territorial segments, such as wards, barrios, counties, and states. Assuming one's place in one's culture means to assume a position with respect to all the divisions that are possible within that culture. One of the functions of segments in general is the

fostering of solidarity. Myths, songs, poems, dance and drama elaborate the meaning of these roles, and sculpture, images and architecture embody them in a visual way. Loosing one's culture thus means loosing the orientation provided by these segmentations and the meaning ascribed to them.

Our diverse cultural heritages are fields of force that allow us to act within certain rules (which we can alter to a certain extent by our activities) in the same way, as language is a set of rules that allow us to speak and think. Knowledge derives from and makes possible social control, thus power is not merely repressive, and it is also creative. Yet there is a sense in which individuals feel the discipline imposed by a culture as a discipline similar to that of the prison, and this feeling gives rise to countless dreams of anarchic utopias, free of the force of society. Rousseau was not alone in dreaming of humankind before civilization. Now, the discipline of a prison does represent a continuation and intensification of what goes on in more ordinary places, the home, the school, the army etc.: there is an even more strict time schedule, a rigid routine, the prisoner is always in the eye of authority, and subject to examination and inspection. But being a member of society is nevertheless not the same thing as being in prison. Following a convention is not always equivalent to submitting to a power. However, because culture enforces a discipline there is always also a certain "discontent" with culture as such, and each culture has to content with these anarchic tendencies. The feeling, which was articulated by Marx, that the tradition of all past generations is weighing like a nightmare on the brains of the living, can give rise to revolutionary movements. In every culture there is a greater or lesser tension between the need to be secure in the order imposed by a culture and the meaning transmitted in its cultural heritage, and the need to transgress and explore beyond the confines of this tradition. The field of rules therefore nearly always allows for a number of exceptions: there are often periods when nonconformist behavior is allowed, certain individuals can play the fool, the enfant terrible, the wild man or woman. There are often moments when women are allowed to assume roles which are traditionally thought to be male, or when a member of the lowest class can become a "fools' king" for a few days. The controlled breakdown of order in such events as carnivals and similar festivities is therefore part of culture itself.

## **2. Cultural heritage - impersonal social and historical rules**

Structures of action and language are only maintained by being renewed constantly in action and speech. Any action requires a background language of practices and institutions to make sense. Language is that which first opens up an arena for action and communication by letting things appear *as* something, and it is only within such an interpretative structure that we can speak of a cultural heritage. Language can therefore be understood to be the very core of a cultural heritage, and it is for this reasons that users of minority languages have often fought bitter struggles to maintain and to use their language.

Acquiring one's own cultural heritage or understanding the heritage of another culture involves becoming competent in this system and becoming familiar with a given set of (probably unacknowledged) value-assumptions. Individuals who have not been educated in a social environment different from their own culture from very early on never acquire the ease and matter of course competence of acting within the rules of that culture, which

characterizes those who have grown up in that culture. Moving from a rural to an urban environment, where the traditional values and behavior patterns have been replaced by structures imported from elsewhere, can bring about a rapid dilution or even destruction of the inherited cultural values. Depending on the situation of the individual this can be experienced as an increase in freedom or as a fundamental loss of rootedness. In the latter case a "Romantic" desire to return to the roots of one's culture can bring about a variety of "fundamentalist" nationalist or religious movements.

Many sociologists and historians, like Marx, Weber, Parsons, Lévi-Strauss, and Althusser, have emphasized structure over agency or subject, and have denied that the human subject has an explanatory role. Our cultural heritage, they maintain, is such an extremely complex system of relations, that it leads one to wonder how, given that no one person can have conceived it in its entirety, it can be so subtle in its distribution, its mechanisms, reciprocal controls and adjustments. These sociologists were interested in the rules of formation common to the development of political, economic and everyday social phenomena and the apparently unrelated sciences of natural history, economics, and grammar. They view culture not in terms of its individual components, or traits, but as meaningful organizations of traits: areas, occupations, configurations (art, mathematics, physics), or patterns (in which psychological factors are the bases of organization). Clark Wissler's "universal culture pattern" was recognition of the fact that all particular and actual cultures possess the same general categories: language, art, social organization, religion, technology, and so on. These structures and rules which pervade every sphere of a culture, they say, exist mostly on an unconscious level, and the members of a culture are in general unable to explain them or their inner coherence, and the final ruse of these rules consists in their ability to make us forget that we have an interest to follow these rules: to be seen to be in conformity with the rules not only promises us immediate profit in exchange for following the prescribed way of acting, but also a secondary profit in the prestige and respect, which is awarded to those who seem to follow the rules out of pure and interest-free respect for those rules.

While most people indeed do not form a conscious, coherent and complete image of the rules of their culture, and few ever explore every aspect of their cultural heritage, people in general, however, do use their cultural heritage and their inherent rules in a strategic and tactical way. Their strategies are directed not only towards immediate profit and prestige. All the time these direct strategies - e.g. to win prestige by a profitable marriage - are overlain by the indirect strategy to fulfill the demands of the official rules of a culture, and in this way to acquire the additional prestige given to those who behave in an irrefragable manner. To act according to the prescribed form does not only mean to have the "law" on one's side, but also to establish group support: by giving one's own interests the form which makes them acceptable to the group and thus honor the values of the cultural tradition, one honors those customs which are treasured by the group.

While the understanding of our cultural heritage as a structure of rules tends to portray cultures as timeless entities, one needs to understand that cultures are always characterized by this interplay between rules deemed to be ancient and immutable and the strategies of individuals who live in time and who attempt to achieve their goals by at the same time adhering - or seeming to adhere - to the rules and subtly bending them in their favor. While all cultures need the stability of certain rituals and conventions, the actions of

individuals in cultures can rarely be described as a simple fulfillment of their conventional duties. On the other hand each individual strategy cannot succeed unless it takes into account the rules, values and conventions of a particular culture.

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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.