**Culture**

**Definition**

Before going any further, it may be important to note that common people often misuse the concept of culture. Some misconceptions about the to term culture include:

**1.** Many people in the western world use the term culture in the sense that some people are more "cultured" than others. This basically emanates from the idea associated with the root word of the term culture, “kulture” in German, which refers to “civilization". Thus, when one is said to be “cultured”, he or she is said to be civilized. For sociologists and anthropologists, "culture includes much more than refinement, taste, sophistication, education and appreciation of the fine arts. Not only college graduates but also all people are ‘cultured’.

**2.** A second commonly used misconception is that which equates “culture" with things which are colorful, customs, cloths, foods, dancing, music, etc. As Kottak (op. cit p.525) argues, “… many [people] have come to think of culture in terms of colorful customs, music, dancing and adornments clothing, jewelry and hairstyles…. Taken to an extreme, such images portray culture as recreational and ultimately unserious rather than something that ordinary people live everyday of their lives not just when they have festivals”.

**3.** A third misconception about what culture is and what it constitutes is that which may be entertained by many common people here in Ethiopia. This misconception is similar to the second one, but it differs from it in that most people here think culture (as conceptualized in its local language for example, bahil in Amharic) is that which pertains to unique traditional material objects or non – material things of the past. According to this view, the cultural may not include things (material or non – material), which are modern, more ordinary, day-to – day, life aspects. Here, the simple, ordinary social, economic and other activities, ideas and affairs are regarded as not cultural or somewhat “less cultural" although not clearly stated.

The concept of culture is one of the most widely used notions in sociology. It refers to the whole ways of life of the members of a society. It includes what they dress, their marriage customs and family life, art, and patterns of work, religious ceremonies, leisure pursuits, and so forth. It also includes the material goods they produce bows and arrows, plows, factories and machines, computers, books, buildings, airplanes, etc.

The concept of culture has been defined by hundreds of times by sociologists and anthropologists, emphasizing different dimensions. However, most often scholars have focused on eh symbolic dimension of culture; that culture is essentially symbolic.

**Basic Characteristics of Culture**

**1.** Culture is organic and supra-organic: It is organic when we consider the fact that there is no culture without human society. It is supra organic, because it is far beyond any individual lifetime. Individuals come and go, but culture remains and persists Calhoun (op cit).

**2.** Culture is overt and covert: It is generally divided into material and non-material cultures. Material culture consists of any tangible human made objects such as tools, automobiles, buildings, etc. Non material culture consists of any non-physical aspects like language, belief, ideas, knowledge, attitude, values, etc.

**3.** Culture is explicit and implicit: It is explicit when we consider those actions which can be explained and described easily by those who perform them. It is implicit when we consider those things we do, but are unable to explain them, yet we believe them to be so.

**4.** Culture is ideal and manifest (actual): Ideal culture involves the way people ought to behave or what they ought to do. Manifest culture involves what people actually do. 5. Culture is stable and yet changing: Culture is stable when we consider what people hold valuable and are handing over to the next generation in order to maintain their norms and values. However, when culture comes into contact with other cultures, it can change. However, culture changes not only because of direct or indirect contact between cultures, but also through innovation and adaptation to new circumstances.

**6.** Culture is shared and learned: Culture is the public property of a social group of people (shared). Individuals get cultural knowledge of the group through socialization. However, we should note that all things shared among people might not be cultural, as there are many biological attributes which people share among themselves (Kottak, 2002).

**7.** Culture is symbolic: It is based on the purposeful creation and usage of symbols; it is exclusive to humans. Symbolic thought is unique and crucial to humans and to culture. Symbolic thought is the human ability to give a thing or event an arbitrary meaning and grasp and appreciate that meaning Symbols are the central components of culture. Symbols refer to anything to which people attach meaning and which they use to communicate with others. More specifically, symbols are words, objects, gestures, sounds or images that represent something else rather than themselves. Symbolic thought is unique and crucial to humans and to culture. It is the human ability to give a thing or event an arbitrary meaning and grasp and appreciate that meaning. There is no obvious natural or necessary connection between a symbol and what it symbolizes.

Culture thus works in the symbolic domain emphasizing meaning, rather than the technical/practical rational side of human behavior. All actions have symbolic content as well as being action in and of themselves. Things, actions, behaviors, etc, always stand for something else than merely, the thing itself.

**Elements of Culture**

Culture includes within itself elements that make up the essence of a society or a social group. The major ones include: Symbols, values, norms, and language (See Henslin and Nelson, 1995; Calhoun et al. 1994).

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**Language**

Language, specifically defined as a system of verbal and in many cases written symbols with rules about how those symbols can be strung together to convey more complex meanings, is the distinctive capacity and possession of humans; it is a key element of culture. Culture encompasses language, and through language, culture is communicated and transmitted. Without language it would be impossible to develop, elaborate and transmit culture to the future generation.

**Values**

Values are essential elements of non-material culture. They may be defined as general, abstract guidelines for our lives, decisions, goals, choices, and actions. They are shared ideas of a groups or a society as to what is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, desirable or undesirable, acceptable or unacceptable, ethical or unethical, etc., regarding something. They are general road maps for our lives. Values are shared and are learned in group. They can be positive or negative. For example, honesty, truth – telling, respect for others, hospitality, helping those in need, etc are positive values. Examples of negative values include theft, indecency, disrespect, dishonesty, falsehood, frugality, etc. The Hippocratic Oath in medical profession dictates that practitioners should among other things, keep the secrets of patients, provide them whatever help they can, do no harm to patients willingly, etc. This is an example of positive value.

Values are dynamic, meaning they change over time. They are also static, meaning they tend to persist without any significant modification. Values are also diversified, meaning they vary from place to place and culture to culture. Some values are universal because there is bio- psychological unity among people everywhere and all times. In other words, they emanate from the basic similarity of mankind’s origins, nature and desires. For example, dislike for killing people, concepts and practices of disease management, cleanliness, personal hygiene, cosmetics, incest taboo, etc.

**Norms**

Norms are also essential elements of culture. They are implicit principles for social life, relationship and interaction. Norms are detailed and specific rules for specific situations. They tell us how to do something, what to do, what not to do, when to do it, why to do it, etc. Norms are derived from values. That means, for every specific norm, there is a general value that determines its content.

Individuals may not act according to the defined values and norms of the group. Therefore, violation of values and norms and deviating from the standard values and norms are often common. Social norms may be divided into two. These are mores and folkways

**Mores:** Are important and stronger social norms for existence, safety, well-being and continuity of the society or the group or society. Violation of, and deviation from these kinds of norms, may result in serious reactions form the groups. The strongest norms are regarded as the formal laws of a society or a group. Formal laws are written and codified social norms. The other kinds of mores are called conventions. Conventions are established rules governing behavior; they are generally accepted ideals by the society. Conventions may also be regarded as written and signed agreements between nations to govern the behaviors of individuals, groups and nations.

**Folkways:** Are the ways of life developed by a group of people. They are detailed and minor instructions, traditions or rules for day-to-day life that help us function effectively and smoothly as members of a group. Here, violating such kinds of norms may not result in a serious punishment unlike violating mores. They are less morally binding. In other words, folkways are appropriate ways of behaving and doing things. Examples may include table etiquette, dressing rules, walking, talking, etc.

Conformity to folkways usually occurs automatically without any national analysis and is based upon custom passed from generation to generation. They are not enforced by law, but by informal social control. They are not held to be important or obligatory as mores, or moral standards, and their violation is not as such severely sanctioned. Although folkways are less binding, people have to behave according to accepted standards. Some exceptional behaviors are regarded eccentric behaviors.

Folkways are distinguished from laws and mores in that they are designed, maintained and enforced by public sentiment, or custom, whereas laws are institutionalized, designed, maintained and enforced by the political authority of the society. Folkways in turn may be divided into two sub types: fashion and custom.

**Fashion:** Is a form of behavior, type of folkways that is socially approved at a given time but subject to periodic change. Adherents combine both deviation and conformity to norm of a certain group.

**Custom:** Is a folkway or form of social behavior that, having persisted a long period of time, has become traditional and well established in a society and has received some degree of formal recognition. Custom is a pattern of action shared by most or all members of a society. Habit is a personality trait, where as the custom is a group trait. Fashion and customs can be differentiated in that while custom changes at slower rate, fashion changes at a faster rate.

**Culture Variability and Explanations**

**Cultural variability** refers to the diversity of cultures across societies and places. As there are different societies, there are different cultures. The diversity of human culture is remarkable. Values and norms of behavior vary widely from culture to culture often contrasting in radical ways (Broom and Sleznki, 1973). For example, Jews do not eat pork, while Hindus eat pork but avoid beef. Cultural diversity or variability can be both between societies and within societies. If we take the two societies, Ethiopia and India, there are great, sharp cultural diversities between the two societies. On the other hand, within both societies, there is remarkable cultural variability. Cultural variability between societies may result in divergent health and disease conditions. For example, variations in nutritional habits are closely linked to the types of diseases. The prevalence of tapeworm among raw-meat eating people may be a case in point.

We use the concept of subculture to denote the variability of culture within a certain society. Sub culture is a distinctive culture that is shared by a group within a society (Stockard, 1997). We call it sub culture, because groups (with their sub cultures) exist within and as a smaller part of the main, dominant culture. Examples of subculture could be the distinctive culture of university students, street children and prostitutes in Addis Ababa, the culture of medical professionals, etc.

Why cultures vary from society to society? Sociologists, anthropologists, cultural geographers and other social scientists have studied the causes for cultural variations among (between) societies. Various arguments have been provided the variation, including geographical factors, racial determination, demographic factors, span of interest and mere historic chances. Those who argued for racial determination believe that cultural variation is genetically determined. Geographic factors include: climate, altitude, and so forth. Included in demographic factors are changes in population structure, population increase, etc., whereas by span of interest is meant cultures vary as people's interest in life also varies. Cultural variation is due to mere historical chances; a particular group of people may develop a culture as it is exposed to certain historical circumstances and opportunities.

However, no one explanation is sufficient by itself; anthropologists now reject particular deterministic explanation such as those based on race; rather cultural variations are accounted for by more holistic explanations.

**Ethnocentrism, Cultural Relativism and Culture Shock**

**Ethnocentrism**

We often tend to judge other cultures by comparison with our own. It is not logically possible and proper to underestimate or overestimate or judge other cultures on the basis of one's cultural standard. Ethnocentrism, in general, is an attitude of taking one's own culture and ways of life as the best and the center of all and on the other hand, regarding other ethnic groups and cultures as inferior, bad, full of errors, etc. It is the tendency to apply one's own cultural values in judging the behavior and beliefs of people raised in other cultures. It is a cultural universal. People everywhere think that familiar explanations, opinion, and customs as true, right, proper and moral. They regard different behavior as strange or savage (Macionis, 1997; Hensllin and Nelson, 1995).

**Cultural Relativism**

Every society has its own culture, which is more or less unique. Every culture contains its own unique pattern of behavior which may seem alien to people from other cultural backgrounds. We cannot understand the practices and beliefs separately from the wider culture of which they are part. A culture has to be studied in terms of its own meanings and values. Cultural relativism describes a situation where there is an attitude of respect for cultural differences rather than condemning other people's culture as uncivilized or backward (Stockard, 1997).

Respect for cultural differences involves:

• Appreciating cultural diversity;

• Accepting and respecting other cultures;

• Trying to understand every culture and its elements in terms of its own context and logic;

• Accepting that each body of custom has inherent dignity and meaning as the way of life of one group which has worked out to its environment, to the biological needs of its members, and to the group relationships;

• Knowing that a person's own culture is only one among many; and

• Recognizing that what is immoral, ethical, acceptable, etc, in one culture may not be so in another culture.

Cultural relativism may be regarded as the opposite of ethnocentrism. However, there is some problem with the argument that behavior in a particular culture should not be judged by the standards of another. This is because in its extremeness, it argues that there is no superior, international or universal morality.

To sum up the issues of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, the concepts involve difficult choices, dilemmas and contradictions regarding cultural exchanges and relationships between and within societies. The dilemmas and contradictions become clear when we see that the traditional anthropological position maintains that every cultural beliefs and practice, including for example the ones which are termed as “harmful traditional practices” in Ethiopia, are part and parcel of the general cultural system of a society and therefore they should not be judged and undermined by any outsider. On the other hand, the dilemma is taken to the extreme cultural relativism appears to entail a fallacy, in that it implies that there are no universal cultural or moral standard by which actions and beliefs have to be judged. Yet still, even cultural anthropologists accept the idea that there are some cultural standards which are universally found everywhere, expressed for example in the world’s major religions.

In any case there may be no ready made solutions to this dilemma; however, what we can at present maintain is that cultural diversity has to be respected and yet international standards of justice and human rights have to be taken into account.

**Culture Shock**

Culture shock is the psychological and social maladjustment at micro or macro level that is experienced for the first time when people encounter new cultural elements such as new things, new ideas, new concepts, seemingly strange beliefs and practices. No person is protected form culture shock. However, individuals vary in their capacity to adapt and overcome the influence of culture shock. Highly ethnocentric people are exposed widely to culture shock. On the other hand, cultural relativists may find it easy to adapt to new situations and overcome culture shock (Henslin and Nelson, 1995).

**Cultural Universals, Alternatives and Specialties**

**Cultural Universals**

Although there are as many different and unique cultures as societies, there are some cultural practices that are universal. Amid the diversity of human cultural behavior, there are some common features that are found in virtually all societies. Cultural universality refers to those practices, beliefs, values, norms, material objects, etc., which are observed across all societies in the world, or across different social groups within a society.

For example, every culture has a grammatically complex language. All societies have some recognized form of family system in which there are values and norms associated with the care of children. The institution of marriage, religious rituals, and property rights are all cultural universals. All societies have some form of incest prohibition. Anthropologist have identified variety of more cultural universals including the existence of art, dancing, bodily adornments, games, gift giving, joking and rules of hygiene. Cultural universals condition behavioral similarity among individuals in a given society or across societies. They do not allow differences in actions and behaviors, lifestyle, attitude, behaviors, etc.

**Cultural Alternatives and Specialties**

There are many different options for doing the same thing. For example, care for a patient is a universal aspect of cultures; but the way people care for patients varies. There are many diverse ways of doing the same thing. This is called cultural alternative. In other words, cultural alternatives refer to two or more forms of behavior in a particular society which are acceptable in a given situation. These alternatives represent different reactions to the same situations or different techniques to achieve the same end. Cultural alternatives are (also) the types of choices that allow for differences in ideas, customs and lifestyles. Modern industrialized societies offer far more cultural alternatives than had many societies of the past.

On the other hand, cultural specialties refer to the specific skills, training, knowledge, etc. which is limited to a group or specific members of society. They are those elements of culture which are shared by the members of certain social groups but which are not shared by the total population. Cultural specialties cause.

**The Concepts of Culture Lag and Culture Lead**

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When culture change occurs, the change is usually not evenly distributed across material and non-material dimensions of culture. The rate of change is not balanced. Material culture may change at a faster rate than non- material culture. The growth in science and technology in western, industrialized societies for example, does not seem to be matched by the necessary changes and appropriate adjustment of adaptive culture. That is non-material culture changes slowly. This condition is terme.

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