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## An Integral Understanding Of Culture: A Philosopher's View

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### **Abstract:**

*A lot of thinkers begin their inquiries emphasizing on culture and the effects of cultural differentiation. This is made clear by the attempt of contemporary thinkers to concentrate on certain problems which are culturally bound. This accordingly serves as a first step towards an integration of the world's systems. Based on this integration, the demand for intercultural studies shows forth. A good inquiry into intercultural dialogue must carry within it a good knowledge of culture and as such must concentrate on the well being of each culture under examination as the foundation of every moral life and worldview. This is what this work tries to examine. Like Martin Heidegger who tries to raise the question of "being" before going into the analysis of things that are being, this work is aimed at raising the question: what is culture? This question goes a long way in trying to streamline every research on culture by understanding what culture is and further pointing out how it enhances national development.*

**Key words :** Culture – Integral – Development- Philosophy

### **1.Introduction**

The understanding of personhood, one's immanent metaphysics and the idea of phenomenal inquiry into existence generally is rooted in culture. Culture explains, a great deal, the reason why one acts the way one does. It is also from culture that one can explain one's worldview. This is well understood by many philosophers especially in the early contemporary period. They hinged the philosophical studies on culture. Wittgenstein saw philosophy as a problem solving activity.<sup>1</sup> By the above, philosophy, is properly seen to be rooted in culture, which it studies. Some salient issues in the interaction between culture and philosophy is clearly brought out by G.H. Gadamer who saw culture as the background of all philosophical inquiry (see Georg Hans Gadamer Truth and Method rev. ed. New York: Continuum press ltd. 1993).

From the above, it becomes clear the role which culture plays in human existence. Culture shapes man. It makes man read into his environment as to understand what exactly informs a people's life style and how the people's worldview cuts into their lifeworld (by the analysis of their existential structure). Suffice to say that culture explains man as a thinking (rational) being and as an existential being.

Following the above, this work attempts to make inquiry into culture with a view to seeing:

- What culture is actually and how it operates.
- How culture can enhance global development

### **2.Explaining Culture**

Culture is a word, etymologically, driven from the Latin language from the word 'cultura' meaning to cultivate. This connotes growing of personality. This entails forming the 'seed' of an individual's character and life into the societal structure. By cultivation, one is schooled in the beliefs and practical attitudes of a particular group of people who own the culture (who are doing the implantation). This, at the end of the day, succeeds in bringing the new people into the life and beliefs of a particular group. George Simmel in line with this explained:

- [That] culture referred to the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history.<sup>2</sup>

The understanding of culture as cultivation is dated back to Cicero's work Tusculan Disputations where he (Cicero) wrote of a cultivation of the soul or 'cultura animi' as such he uses this agricultural metaphor to explain the development of the 'soul' in the philosophical sense. The soul of course, was viewed technologically as one of the natural highest ideal for human development.

The above cultivation- soul metaphor was advanced further in the modern epoch by Samuel Pufendorf. For Pufendorf, the idea of the cultivation – soul analysis is great but this time around, philosophy, as Cicero would postulate, is no longer man's natural perfection.

The cultivation-soul analysis of culture acquires most of the later modern meanings it has from the 18<sup>th</sup> century German thinkers. These thinkers 'attempted at developing Rousseau's criticism of modern liberalism and enlightenment. These German thinkers especially Humboldt saw two concepts of culture from these:

- Culture as folk spirit
- Culture as cultivation of inwardness or free individuality.

The former [i] is predominant in our contemporary use of the term culture. However, the second still plays a large role in what culture tries to achieve namely; the full expression of the unique authentic self. Thus Edward Taylor sums up culture function/intent as “a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know all the matter which most concerns us; the best which has been thought and said in the world.”<sup>3</sup> This introduces the most common definition of culture as a people’s way of life. The understanding of culture as ‘a people’s way of life’ encompasses the people’s tradition, social systems and worldviews. These bring the people as a unique whole in the face of the universe. Nwosu advanced this common understanding saying that culture is:

- the Gamut of the knowledge, beliefs customs, traditions and skills that are available to the members of a society [...]. They are designs, prescriptions and responses which are deliberately fashioned to guide all aspects of a people’s life.<sup>4</sup>

Nwosu’s analysis presents culture as an ‘Organon’ (instrument). Culture is made available, according to Nwosu above, to form fashion and guide all aspects of a people’s life. The understanding of Nwosu’s definition opens our minds to the understanding of culture further and intrinsically as involving arts, and artifacts, tradition and behavior in the widest sense of it. The definition given by Nwosu is further validated by Geertz’s originatory explanation of culture and the structure of culture as a linear, historically transmitted concept. According to Geertz, culture is seen as that which

- Denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men by to communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about an attitude towards life.<sup>5</sup>

Geertz’s definition projects a primordial historicity culture and as such intrinsically differentiates it from nature. Culture is different from nature by its historicity. The historicity of culture is tied to the temporality of human existence. Culture, as such can be said to change and vary from one age to another (thanks to culture interaction). On the other hand, nature is tied to an ‘absolute reason.’

The ‘absolute reason’ is believed to be responsible for natural laws/principles. It determines such order in the universe and regulates the world history even though this absolute reason is a-historical. Culture is so determined by the events of nature. As structured by the ‘absolute reason.’ By this determination, culture fits into a pre-simulation of nature which has been put together systematically by the ‘absolute reason’ from which comes the transient and other lower reasons.

What this means is that the ‘absolute reason’ so made the lower reason that created culture in such a manner that culture is purely attuned to the structure of nature. As such no culture is unnatural. Every action within a cultural milieu that appears to run counter to nature is seen as evil all the same. Henry Simpson buttresses this idea thus:

- The real understanding of culture with all its attributes is built to suit the dictates of nature. Thus culture is always natural [...] culture is so attached to nature that any phenomena within a culture milieu that is acclaimed unnatural is seen as evil.<sup>6</sup>

Culture is the part of the human milieu which man created by himself. Since we view culture as such, the avenues for cultural exhibition or expression and the various elements of culture – religion, language, world view and so on show culture as a metaphysical ‘signified’ and as such is a working hypothesis like evolution or relativity.<sup>7</sup> Okere emphasized that no one can see culture but it helps explain observable facts. Culture is therefore a theory designed to yoke together these heterogeneous elements into one common system, purposely vaguely described as a people’s way of life.<sup>8</sup>

Explaining the above systematically shows explicitly that culture is a community’s identity. It is not synonymous with the community. Culture is human. Evaluating the nature of culture, describes the nature of man who created it, as a being with culture. Aristotle, in this vain, emphasized the difficulty extricating man from culture explaining man as ‘a political animal’. The political nature of man makes it exceptionally weird to see man living outside the community and culture. Man grows into culture as such culture is learnt.

The last phrase above – ‘culture is learnt’, describes the nature of culture as man made, capable of being imbibed, and developmental. However, we may not limit culture to a learned activity since we emphasize that culture is specific to man. Fred Voegelin argues along this line stating that “if culture is reduced to learned behaviour then all the animals have culture”.<sup>9</sup> His arguments were validated by the observed activities of animals especially the primates. It has been observed that since there is some notable cognitive skills, knowledge of permanent objects, cognitive mapping and categorization of objects, and possession of problem solving capacity, by animals; and since one can find among them (animals) evidence of shared social skills recognition of members of each social group, respect relationships in rank and kin, and some (no matter how limited) ability to predict future actions, then, in the wide sense of it, they have a culture.

One may, following the above, conclude that the denial of culture among animals is an unfair rational judgement set up by man to continually place himself as superior to animals even when it is evident that there is a great level of equality. To avoid this condemnation, many thinkers came up with their ideology insisting that culture may never have been as old as man but came in the course of evolution. Just as advancement in signs and technology became complex with the passage of time so did culture generate and advance through time and so participation in complex social organ.

The above may have given a temporary solution to this current problem of culture and cultural possession. However Tomasello insisted that where these complex and specie unique behavioural practices and the cognitive skills that underlie them came from is fundamental philosophical and anthropological question. This is sequel to the fact that the contemporary humans and chimpanzees are different from other species of animals, and that the evolution of this difference came within a very short period. Tomasello insists that our search must be for “some small difference that made the big difference [...] small set of adaptations that changed the process of primate cognition evolution in fundamental ways.... The answer to this question must form the basis of a

scientific definition of human culture".<sup>10</sup> The key to the understanding of the advancement of the human species over animal specie, lies in the elements of culture which comprise of advanced signs that are not adaptive to the other animals – language. There are a number of elements of culture but language seems to distinguish itself as the very foundational element. We shall as such look at language and how it embodies culture. This is not meant to be reductionist, however, but is necessary to sort out the very tenet of culture which is being tackled in this section and the other issues which shall be tackled in the subsequent sections.

### 3.Explaining Culture Through Language

The problem encountered in analyzing culture as a human possession and which has led to some issues as to whether it is at best just to conclude as such, raises the question of evolutionary development and thought which are fully explainable through language. It is clear, at least, that the advanced nature of the human specie which enabled them fall into culture results from prolonged human cognitive resources called the "ratchet effect." At this level there is proper social learning. The social learning that distinguishes man from other animals is based on two elements namely: imitative learning rather than emulate learning which is common among animals. Next is symbolic representation of experiences rather than iconic representations. The combination produces a "ratchet effect".

The above elements are carried along the stream of language. There is here a distinction between rational representation and barbaric representation. The rational deal with a ready – developed symbolic and sign structure while the latter entails just Babbling. One can, from the latter, identify culture differentiation through language difference and proper differences in representation. This 'informs the German Romanticists' – Herder, Wundt, Humboldt – understanding of language not just as cultural trait among many but rather as a direct expression of people's national character and as such culture is viewed in this condensed form. Herder remarks:

- Denn Jedes volkist volk es hat seine bational bidung wie seine sprache.... (Since every people are a people. It has its own national culture expressed in language).<sup>11</sup>

The understanding of the rationality of culture which is represented in language as the above quote explains, shows that culture requires a rational process, a historical succession implanted by the presence of consciousness of oneself and group to exist. The above can permit a habitual conglomeration for animals, following their emulative learning, and iconic representation but denies them the attribute of culture in the strict sense of it.

The above conclusion is better advanced by Boaz who peddled the rationality of culture by its complexity which leaves culture specifically to man. For Franz Boaz, the fact that the intellectual culture of a people was largely constructed, shared and maintained through the use of languages meant that understanding the language of a people was the key to understanding their culture.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Boaz expressed that the shared language of community is the most essential carrier of their common culture.<sup>13</sup> The above clears language as, not merely a means of communication (which would still bring animals into the complex structural analysis of culture), but more, an expressed rationality. Language is so interconnected to culture to the extent that they have been seen to have grown together.<sup>14</sup>

The explanation of culture and its interrelatedness with language opens to us the need for culture in the first place. It is accepted that culture sprang in time from human rationality and this is not without a purpose. Primarily, the need for culture arose from the necessity of maintaining social coherence. Culture comes up to construct social identity and maintain coherence with a social group which is too enormous for the pre-human community building methodology. This need justifies the place of culture, the nature of culture and the cultural functionality in the universe. Having set the motive of culture one wonders how far this motive is being actualized.

### 4.The Place Of Culture In Human Development

A careful view on the concept of culture, at least as this work tries to defend, shows that culture is all about the human life and the background of human action. One, for instance, who tries to know a group of people that one has never encountered, first of all goes in search of the people's cultural rudiments. When these cultural rudiments are got, the individual gets to understand them, at least, to a great measure. As such, the human culture demonstrates the problem which a people have, the way the people react to things, the people's belief system and the people's understanding of existence. Man faces his challenging world through his culture. Thus:

- In order to live, man [...] must come to terms with the external world [...] man employs his sense organs, nerve glands and muscles in adjusting himself to the external world. But in addition to this he has another means of adjustment and control. This mechanism is man's culture.<sup>15</sup>

From the above, one can decipher that culture lends man a background for analyzing his world and conquering it. The human thought speech and innovation, man's moral principles and sense of authority depends on what one is able to make of one's culture. As such, Gadamer elaborates that culture underlies the thought and rationality of a people. Hence 'no one speaks from nowhere'. It is based on this cultural mechanism, which advances human development that the world keeps advancing in thought and principles, which projects science, technology and arts. This advancement is recorded through an intercultural interaction which leads to cultural growth.

Culture is synonymous with civilization when we consider the developmental function of culture. This developmental functionality of culture is represented by Herbert Marcuse, who saw culture as falling in line with the developmental process explained as a humanizing process characterized by the collective effort to preserve human life, pacify struggle for existence or hold it down to controllable limits, secure a productive organization of society, develop the spiritual capacities of man, and minimize and sublimate aggression, brute force and misery.<sup>16</sup> Here, not only that culture is a mechanism for development, it is underdevelopment itself since culture grows and is enriched when it is 'eclectic' with other cultures.

In evaluating the place and growth of culture, one needs to understand culture from a dialectical view point. At any level which a culture is, the level must be understood as an unsteady synthesis which will become a thesis to be acted upon by an antithesis to

produce another synthesis. It is in the light of this that cultural growth is understood and development is rendered possible. The intercultural development so emphasized is what engenders world development through the intercultural dialogue called globalization. Globalization encourages development by bridging the cultural barriers. The world, here, is seen then as a 'village square' where ideas stemming from each culture are sold by barter. The world grows into one whole structure possessing one common culture; speak in one language and aiming at one common goal – the global village.

The process of globalization – an intrigue of culture – brings up a number of ideals for cultural development. Each culture brings out its best to challenge the backwardness in the world. This idea is achievable, according to Jürgen Habermas, through a better rational ideologization – which he called communicative action. By the above Habermas emphasized the interdependence of man ontologically and as such insists on the development of the social structure. According to Habermas:

- The very social nature of man became the starting point for my philosophical reflections... it is not forms of social existence in general that distinguish the man kind from other species.... Man is an animal that by virtue of being from ourselves embedded in a public network of social relationships, first develops the competence that makes a person of him... we humans learn from one another.... This image of man's position in the world expresses the intuitive sense of the deep-rooted reciprocal dependence of one person on the other.<sup>17</sup>

The interdependence of the human specie which Jürgen Habermas tries to put forward grows along the stream of communication and designs the real nature of man – a rational animal. It is based on the correct understanding of rationality that the world is understood. This understanding hides away the seeming negative paradigmatic structure of existence embedded in individualism and self – preservation and advances an inter-subjective interaction (rational) and communication, aimed at reaching a mutual understanding. As such, rationality makes it possible, according to Habermas, to establish internal relation between others' 'standards and ours' between what is valid 'for them' and what is valid 'for us'.<sup>18</sup>

We can understand from Habermas, the wonderful nature of social interaction which aids development and which breaks down the wall of retrogression and inequality prevalent in the world especially categorized in racism. It is this lack of social integration that causes problems between the capitalist societies and the mythically structured worldviews. It is a problem that results, according to Habermas, from the disintegrative effect of the prevalent lifeworld....<sup>19</sup> Habermas envisaged that cultural interaction (social integration through communicative action) develops the universe by a multiplication of the lifeworlds (lebenswelt) and which is achieved through a re-orientation of existent cultures (societies). He said:

- The concept of society has to be lined to a concept of life world that is complementary to the concept of communicative action. Then communicative action becomes interesting primarily as a principle of 'sociation' (vergesellschaftung): communicative action provides the medium for the reproduction of lifeworlds. At the same time, processes of societal rationalization are given a different place. They transpire more in implicitly known structures of the lifeworld than in explicitly known action orientations.<sup>20</sup>

Habermas' input above which is extensively discoursed (intentionally), projects how much culture grows and how far the world is advanced through culture. Not by cultural relativism, but by cultural inter-subjectivity enhanced through communicative action. The validity of culture lies in its ability to develop man – his life, well being, worldview, life world, reason and so on; and man's community. As such any culture that does not achieve this is not a culture but a mechanism for the abrogation of human identity.

## 5. Conclusion

This work so far examined the concept of culture and how culture is propagated. Culture does not just end in being a people's way of life. It dialects itself into a motion of what it will become a mechanism for man's self, authentic actualization and development. One does not need to dig too deep to understand why we tried to limit culture to man since by the understanding of what culture is, culture transcends mere conglomeration and respect of kinship and relationship. It extends to the rational understanding of one's environment made possible by the consciousness of a system – belief, epistemological, metaphysical, ethical and even interactional.

It is based on the above that each society seeks a development as to augment what they traditionally possess. This augmentation plies into development which is achieved through social interaction. Through social interaction, each culture interacting with another, advances themselves and creates a new lifeworld through a synthesis of their traditional worldview and the new culture which has mingled with it.

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