

INTERPRETING CULTURE

Dr. P. Jeyalakshmi

Assistant Professor (English)
AEC&RI, Kumulur
TNAU

Culture is generally believed to be something closely associated with religion, rituals, language and artistic expressions of a group of people. But in cultural studies the meaning is encompassing and comprehensive. It represents the totality of human life. Culture manifests itself in material and non-material forms. The commodities that we utilize in our day-to-day life for physical comfort are part of material culture. They include materials related to food, clothing, shelter and transport facilities of a group of people. While other abstractions such as religion, language, rituals, values, ethics, codes of conduct and norms of behaviour constitute the non-material part of culture.

Both forms of culture interact with each other. Culture also has spatial and temporal dimensions because time and space determine different aspects of culture. Material and non-material cultural forms shape each other and the total way of life of a group of people. For example, the exiting achievements in the information technology have a strong influence on people's perception of time and space. Scientific advancements have literally shrunk the globe and distance has become negligible.

Culture as a Semantic Order

Culture can also be described as a system of encoding and decoding, in which one writes and the other interprets. Culture is a medium in which meaning is generated. Every single word gains meaning within a specific culture. For example, words gain different meanings at different points of time. The interpretation of the meaning varies with its context and time. This is the reason for the 'modern' critics' dismissal of the past texts as inefficient and politically non-committal. They refuse to accept the temporal dimension of culture and the specifics of the conditions of production.

Culture shapes the human consciousness in such a way that they follow the ideas meanings, beliefs, values that has been deeply embedded in their collective unconscious, as members of the society. This in fact determines human nature. But some anthropologists believe that people are reduced to mere creatures due to this cultural determinism that they are unable to control their behavioural pattern, in the process of meeting the demands of cultural set up. This ethnocentric belief rather closes other ways and culture and results in a sort of reductionism in which "other ways" of life appear as a distorted mirage of one's own way of life.

To reinforce the values of culture that is handed over from one generation to another people employ symbols that have been used by their predecessors. These symbols constitute representations that are particular to a culture and are understood by those who belong to it. Symbols stand on the periphery of cultural circle as they are seen and observed by all and are subject to constant changes. Apart from this there are archetypal characters and heroes who serve as role models of behavioral patterns of cultural representations. The rituals and traditions that people follow are also manifestations of culture. All these cultural patterns are either consciously practiced or unconsciously imbibed in the subconscious of the people.

Culture as a Network of Power:

There is a close relationship between culture and power hierarchy of a society. Culture becomes a medium or a network through which different forms of power operate and are legitimized. For example, culture becomes hegemony as it sets a behavioural pattern and imposes codes of conduct on certain sections of people. The relationships between life partners, the domination of the male partner over the female, the 'expected' docility, submission and passiveness of the female in most of the cultures show the power affiliation of culture. Culture distinguishes people from one category to another.

These differences in culture rather end up in fear of the 'other' and that follows conflict and violence. Where there is more fear there is more chances for violence. These cultural boundaries though man-made and

ephemeral instills in one the consciousness that theirs is their right way, though no way can be branded as right or wrong. These we term ethnocentrism, patriarchy, capitalism etc. The domination of the male members is prevalent in other fields of culture too. For instance, most capitalists are men. History has seen men enforcing dictatorship on citizens and women are not on the scene, when it comes to practicing tyranny. Culture evolves power. Culture is a mechanism through which power operates. It operates through law and orders institutions, political institutions etc.

Nature of Culture

Culture is not a fixed and rigid phenomenon. It is always in a state of flux. Culture constantly shapes is shaped by language, human creativity, and the changing order and forms of power. Culture like language, is acquired through social life. It is transmitted from one generation to another. As there is change there is also continuity in culture. Thus, the power affiliation that culture has also continues to be prevalent throughout generations.

Managing cultural differences is a great art and demands much patience and tolerance to learn the ways of the other culture. This is highly essential in corporate world. Even people belonging to the same culture carry several layers of mental programming within themselves. The cultural differences within a nation on the basis of ethnicity, religion, linguistic differences lead to confusions and chaos. Apart from theses the gender differences, the generation gaps that exist between grandparents and parents that between the parents and the children within a family. There are other social cultural differences that people come across in educational opportunities and occupation. Measuring the cultural differences with unbiased yardsticks and finding the other meaning of our own selves in the 'other' would help us a great deal in putting an end to cultural conflicts and enhance a peaceful co-existence.

