

## What is Culture?

Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, beliefs, and behavior. This consists of language, ideas, customs, morals, laws, taboos, institutions, tools, techniques, work of arts, rituals, and other capacities and habitats acquired by a person as a member of society.

The Magisterium of the Church explains culture as “the set of means used by mankind to become more virtuous and reasonable in order to become fully human. In its fullest sense, culture means opening up to the divine, and ultimately, a religious dimension.” Based on this Church definition, it is clear that culture is meant to serve human persons.

Sociologists categorized culture into material and non-material culture. Non-material culture consists of language, values, rules, knowledge, and meanings shared by members of society. Material culture is the physical object that a society produces – tools, streets, homes, and toys, to name a few.

Culture is passed on to the next generation by learning not through the genes or heredity. “Culture” includes all human phenomena which are not purely results of human genetics.

## Characteristics of Culture

- 1. Culture is shared and transmitted** – According to Geert (2005), culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group of people from another. It is shared by and transmitted among the members of a social group. Generally, culture is transmitted by means of ideas. The acquired learning of culture is passed on to succeeding generations primarily through language and other symbolic means of communication.
- 2. Culture is learned and acquired** – Not all things shared generally by people in a particular group are cultural. Culture is not automatic. It is acquired through experiences. No one is equipped with a particular language, values, or knowledge.
- 3. Culture is a social phenomenon** – Culture is often perceived as a social phenomenon. Cultural practices and beliefs are shaped through the interactions of individuals living in the same social environment. Generally, culture is a product developed by people interacting in a group. It is social due to the natural tendency of humans to be social, whether voluntary or not.
- 4. Culture gratifies human needs** – Patterns of culture exist and persist because they continue to satisfy human needs. People tend to habitually use systems that satiate their basic human desires in all aspects of life.
- 5. Culture is dynamic** – It is dynamic and not static. It changes over time. These changes may come in the form of discoveries, inventions, or cultural adoption.
- 6. Culture is integrated** – Certain features or elements that make up a particular culture are not random – they are integrated. The components of culture – attitudes, values, ideas, and moral norms are integrated into a whole system for individuals in the same social environment to share.

## **The Human Person and Culture**

As a moral agent you are born into a culture, a factual reality you have not chosen. You are not born nothing. It may be said that the Aristotelico-Thomistic tradition is one dominant, if not the most dominant culture. This Aristotelico-Thomistic culture is a Greco-Roman culture, which has influenced and shaped the moral life of those who have been exposed to it. Those who have been born into this culture, educated under this culture, are persuaded that there is God, that a divine order and law keep and govern the world, which includes you.

But what happens when there are different cultures with their own different views of man's direction and destiny? For instance, the Greek culture introduced the idea of perfection. In terms of numbers, a perfect thing is 100%; in terms of figures, it is a whole circle. A perfect thing has no privation, no lack, no absence of being.

What if a new culture redefines perfection as any created and present model, which may be recreated, remolded like clay? Any change in the model may be perceived as the creation of a new model of perfection, not the actualization of what was lacking. Every created model is a perfection in its own rights.

## **Enculturation, Inculturation, and Acculturation**

Cultures change or evolve. There are various ways by which culture change – by enculturation, inculturation, and by acculturation.

Enculturation, an anthropological term coined by J.M. Herskovits. However, it was Margaret Meads who defined the term as “*the process of learning a culture in all its uniqueness and particularity*”

*...Enculturation is a process of learning from infancy till death, the components of life in one's culture. The contents of this learning include both the material and non-material culture. The latter refers to values while the former refers to tools such as hoe or mask. In the said process of learning, a person grows into a culture, acquires competence in that culture and that culture takes root in that person and becomes the cognitive map, the term of reference for acting.*

For instance, African girls (South of the Sahara) grow up learning that as a woman, she has less rights and privileges as the African man. For instance, a man can marry more than one woman while she cannot. While the African wife cannot share her love with other men, the man can share his with other women in the system. It turns women into an appendage, a property of the man – one of the man's laborers.

Another marriage practice that shows that the African woman is the property of the husband and his family is levirate marriage. Levirate marriage is a marriage between the widow and the brother of her deceased husband. Therefore, at the husband's death, the woman is generally expected to

stay on (as property of the family) without any choice in the matter. She raises children to immortalize the deceased husband's name.

This is enculturation in concrete terms. The African girl shows up and becomes a woman through the said process of enculturation. This enculturation process has both cognitive and emotional elements. The girl child who later becomes a woman, has less privileges than the African man. This learning takes place through example, direct teaching and in patterns of behavior. What is learned becomes her cognitive map, her term of reference that directs her behavior.

Another term is inculturation. Inculturation refers to the "missiological process in which the Gospel is rooted in a particular culture and the latter is transformed by its introduction to Christianity."

In the special assembly of the Synod in 1985, Pope John Paul II defined inculturation in *Redemption Mission*, n. 52, as ...

*the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures. This means that inculturation is characterized by a dual movement, i.e. a dialogical movement towards cultures via the incarnation of the Gospel and the transmission of its values, and a movement towards the Church that involves the incorporation of values that comes from the cultures the latter encounters. Therefore, a fruitful cross-fertilization can follow.*

In other words, inculturation raises two related problems, that of the evangelization of cultures (rooting the Gospel in cultures) and that of the cultural understanding of the Gospel. It was this movement that led Pope John Paul II to say in 1982, "the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a requirement of culture, but of faith... Faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely reflected upon, or faithfully experienced."

This means that inculturation is not an action but a process that unfolds over time, one that is active and based on mutual recognition and dialogue, a critical mind and insight, faithfulness and conversion, transformation and growth, renewal and innovation.

*Inculturation is a two-way process: it roots the Gospel in a culture and introduces that transformed culture to Christianity. For example, to root the Gospel in the African culture is to initiate two events. The first event is to transform the African culture of oppressing women into a culture where men and women are treated as human persons equal in dignity, rights and privileges. The second event is to develop the African culture's latent potential towards the human development of the woman, created like her male counterpart in the image and likeness of God. The other aspect is to introduce the woman and her transformed culture to Christianity, for*

*example, by allowing the woman a meaningful place among the agents of inculturation.*

Acculturation is another big term. It is the “cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture”. It is also explained as the merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact. Immigrants to the United States of America become acculturated to American life. Refugees and indigenous peoples (IP) likewise adapt to the culture of the dominant majority.

There are cultural practices that should be stopped because of the painful harm they do. The practice of human sacrifice has somehow been stopped. But the circumcision of women still goes on in some parts of the world, like Africa. Some approaches have been successful, like what one NGO tried to introduce to Africa. It is called buying in. To gradually stop the circumcision of women, the approach was to buy in, like introducing into the place good health facilities and other forms of assistance to alleviate their economic hardships in return to their stopping the practice

### **How Culture Shapes the Moral Agent**

Culture definitely affects the way we evaluate and judge things. Consider the African women not as privileged as the African men described in the earlier section of this lesson. Some societies consider it alright gathering vegetables at the backyard of their neighbor, considering the act as getting a share. In such societies, the act would not be called stealing. In most societies, the act is stealing. In ancient times, human sacrifice was not wrong. Today it is a criminal act. In some culture like Islamic culture, and African culture having several wives is allowed. In other culture, its concubinage or adultery.

Culture has a very long-lasting hold on an individual. A person may have become highly educated, may have obtained a doctorate degree, educated with Christian values of forgiveness, but if he comes from a society with a cultural vengeance (“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”) having a sense of obligation to make an act of revenge when a member of his tribe has been harmed by another tribe, he becomes ultimately vindictive and joins his tribe seeking vengeance. No amount of graduate education can prevent him from doing this.

### **Cultural Views**

**Ethnocentrism** is the tendency to perceive and judge others according to one’s cultural standards. In this cultural view, a person sees their culture as the yardstick for judging behaviors of others in other social contexts. For example, people not exposed to the Filipino cultural habit of using their bare hands when eating may see this as unhygienic.

**Xenocentrism** is the tendency to value other cultures more highly than theirs. Fascination with other cultures and contempt for their culture can be traced back to a culture’s colonial experience through cultural brainwashing such as through media.