

How Do Cultures Evolve?

Various definitions have been given for culture in encyclopedias all around the world, but they all have elements of properness, perfection, spiritual and physical progress, man's virtual dignity and glory, a deserved, appropriate life along with responsible freedom and law-abiding justice in common. Over 164 various definitions exist. Having studied and evaluated the most important definitions of culture, we may provide a comprehensive one: Culture is the necessary or proper attribute of man's physical or mental activities, based on sound logic and emotions arising from sensible evolutionary lifestyles.

Culture is generally a bi-polar phenomenon; it has both external and internal natures. On one hand it concerns man's mental structure and spiritual make-up – which other living beings lack – and on the other, it has observable effects, too, which are behaviors and results physically visible.

The Four Principles of Culture

Four principles should be noted in our definition of culture:

Necessary or proper quality based on sound logic and emotions arising from evolutionary lifestyles. In other words, every cultural element must first originate from sound logic and supreme human emotions, and secondly provide man with the means for his development and perfection. If what the society calls culture does not tend to develop man or arouse his highest emotions, it will be in fact an anti-culture element. Culture is a term including values. Phenomena like greed for power, fame, selfishness and hedonism cannot be regarded as cultural elements.

Human life is worthless without a culture based on the definition given above, for without culture, life will be empty of supreme human meaning, intellect, or emotions.

The more the culture of a society relies on basic, intelligible principles and supreme human perceptions, the more lasting the culture will be.

Culture has two aspects: relative and absolute.

By absolute aspect we mean the comprehensive, general aspect of culture, such as the culture of

appreciating beauty, respect for others, and gaining knowledge, which is applicable to all human societies. The relative aspect of culture arises from the particular ways of thinking, emotions and behaviors of a certain society, like mutual respect.

Two Different Forms of Culture

We can categorize culture into two kinds: pioneer and pursuant.

Pursuant culture is the quality or lifestyle independent of proven principles; it arises merely out of people's wishes and desires, right or wrong. In other words, whimsical desires are the base of this form of culture. It includes unnecessary beauties and pleasant phenomena, ignoring what people really require. Here, immoral, prolific phenomena are regarded as culture. The culture nowadays is mainly pursuant rather than pioneer. The reason for this is that a series of the highest of cultural fundamentals have been dented:

- 1- The culture of authentic affection for one's fellow beings
- 2- The culture of finding original moral conscience
- 3- The culture of having a high aim in life
- 4- The culture of honesty, faithfulness and keeping promises
- 5- The culture of responsible freedom, thoughts and just deeds
- 6- The culture of regarding science and knowledge as sacred
- 7- The culture of cooperation and collaboration
- 8- The culture of spreading constructive, pioneer arts
- 9- The culture of truth dominating the media and avoiding omission of facts or incorrectly interpreting them
- 10- The culture of fine economy and providing all people of the living they are entitled to.

Pursuant culture can be divided into three groups:

- **Sedentary culture:** If the cultural elements of a society consist of ethnic and mental traditions, geographical conditions and qualities of the past, that culture can be considered as sedentary. In this form of culture, a series of fixed historical or environmental characteristics infiltrate deep in the society and resist any social evolution.
- **Liquid, colorless culture:** Based on no fixed mental basis or principle, it is always undergoing change.

- Self-oriented culture: Here, cultural phenomena and activities themselves are regarded as goals rather than means to get us to higher goals.

This form of 'self-goal' was quite typical of scientific, technological and economic cultures of 19th and 20th century societies. It caused stillness in the real nature of culture – providing creativity and development in the ideals of life of the human ego. The other thing it has done, which is as dangerous as the former, is that instead of being the maker and manager of technology, man has become an irresponsible part of its fatalistic trends.

A Pioneer, Dynamic, Objective Culture: This kind of culture arises from the basic principles of man's evolutionary life. Its motives are original human aspects, and its goal is the ideals that make man head for the attraction of life's supreme end. This is the culture that can provide man with truly original human civilization, and free him from all selfish rulers. Cultural activities also aim toward the highest of human values. If a culture is creative, objective and progressive, it will never fall.

Pioneer culture originates from two factors – primary and secondary. The primary factor is the active, mental factor that tends to change the universe into man's ideal home by using constructive human aspects. The secondary one involves the external and internal factors exclusive to each nation or peoples, accounting for their lifestyles.

If pioneer culture is to dominate human societies, man should recognize the highest aim of life as one of the basic elements of culture.

The basic principles of pioneer culture are:

1– The principle of perfection-seeking and eagerness toward it. Cultural truth is eternal, even if its peoples and occurrences vary.

2– The principle of respect, which has been called love for peers, love for mankind and affection in human cultures.

3– Man's high desire for a proper life

4– Correcting and adjusting the four relationships:

a) man-himself

b) man-God

c) man-the universe

d) man-his fellow beings

Two Aspects of Culture

Every culture can have two aspects:

1– The observable, visible aspect includes the human ideas and ideals that materialize in an observable fact, like artifacts.

2– The clear aspect of culture consists of the ideals, emotions, morals and goals chosen for life and justifies and account for man's life individually or socially, consciously or unconsciously. The word 'clear' for these cultural aspects is like needing light and special glasses to see things, without which nothing would be observable.

The clear, unobservable aspects of culture – which account for its observable aspects – are of different kinds:

1– Selfishness and greed for power.

2– Unintelligible racism and patriotism.

3– General ideas and ideals that have been of interest to man throughout history, like science, art and well-being.

Some of the clear aspects of culture attract man with their ideal, desirable appearance. The way to deal with them is for man to refer to his own self. Since man has fallen quite far away from his own self nowadays, they have also put aside original, pioneer culture. As we know, the clear aspect of culture interprets man's life in all its aspects. If man turns to himself again and finds the supreme goal in his life, he can change and improve the clear aspects of culture.

The supreme goal of life creates pioneer culture. The supreme goal of life answers the six questions – Who am I? Where have I come from? Who am I with? Where have I come? Why am I here? Where do I go from here? – thus accounting for where it stands in the universe, and acquiring an original culture.

Diversity of Cultures

Can a society have diverse cultures? Can the society survive different cultures? First, we must see what cultural diversity means. Let us begin by studying several forms of culture:

1– Cultures that are harmonious because they have original commonalities, like holy religions. Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrians, *Sa'ebbens* (followers of the prophet John) and other God-sent religions can live in harmony, for they have the same:

a) faith in the origin of the universe

- b) faith in God's wisdom and will
- c) faith in afterlife
- d) faith in human dignity
- e) faith in the necessity of man's proper life

2- Cultures that have the same basic principles of natural life and ideology. Cultures that have the same belief about the desired mental life can reach harmony, even if they are not religious.

3- Cultures that differ in their interpretation of the universe and the supreme aim of life. Such cultures may be able to live alongside each other for a limited period of time, but the disturbances and contradictions they cause each other will soon destroy their harmony.

If various cultures have the same ideas about things useful for man's physical and mental life, they can coexist harmoniously.

Acquiring Cultures

Cultures are diverse, so people and societies may be subject to acquiring or transferring cultures. We must take the issue into consideration whether cultures can be absolutely acquired or not. Should cultures be totally accepted or should we study the culture we are to acquire first?

If the culture is a pioneer one, we definitely must accept it and endeavor to transfer it, for man's perfection-seeking potential considers such a culture as desirable to man. Furthermore, no culture should be accepted without study and refinement.

The elements and aspects of the culture should be evaluated and criticized to make sure the inappropriate elements are not transferred; culture transfer is not always correct, and only those cultures that are based upon human values – which makes them useful and constructive – had better be transferred. The elements of such cultures, like science, industry, pioneer arts and supreme moral ethics, can bring about remarkable developments in human societies, like Islam did when it entered Iran and many other countries.

Sometimes, on the other hand, culture transfer leads to corruption and mental disruption. Such cultures make human life nihilistic and ignorant toward social values and the people.

Factors that Can Preserve Cultures

Some cultures are stable and sustainable. They can prevail for a long time and in various societies. The factors that can make a culture stable are:

First, the positive relationship between the culture and some necessary components of the society. For instance, the special culture Indians have toward animals is necessary due to India's specific environmental or ideological factors, whereas other societies have neither such beliefs nor the necessity to do so.

The second, factor is time. Cultural elements become more firmly fixed through time and also more attractive. The continuity of a cultural element, however, does not necessarily mean that it is correct or attractive.

For example, selfishness has been quite common throughout the history of mankind, and few human beings have succeeded in correctly assessing themselves and controlling their selfishness. Does the mere fact that selfishness has prevailed mean that it is correct and well-established? Obviously not, for the stability and continuity of a phenomenon in various aspects of human life does not necessarily mean that it is righteous and justified.

The traditions and customs of a nation are the third factor. As cultural elements, traditions and customs affect different people, and create a specific identity that can provide the culture of the society with continuity.

The fourth, factor is the compatibility of cultures with facts. Any culture that can be compatible with the fixed principles of human life will be stable.

If the factors that make a culture stable belong to its ethnic necessities, they must be studied. If the necessities are due to the people's mental principles and rules, time cannot ruin the necessities; if they are based upon the beliefs of influential figures among the people, the stability of the culture depends upon how influential these individuals are, and how logical they are.

In brief, the mere firm establishment of a culture among people does not imply its originality or its compatibility with the truth. Although when a culture deeply infiltrates inside people it does become like lenses in their eyes through which its followers see the universe, since many cultures of past and present prove baseless when analyzed, we can say that for every positive step man takes on the path of his evolutionary life, he must analyze the culture that dominates his society, throw away any sedentary elements and prevent them from inhibiting his development.

Why Cultural Elements Lose Their Harmony

As we have already said, culture consists of various elements, which in harmony can provide members of the society with development, elevation and continuity. In most societies, however, there is unfortunately lack of harmony among cultural elements. Intense disorder in the elements of a culture can lead to the destruction of the whole culture. The most important disorder in the culture of a society occurs when there is a divide between the spiritual principles and human values. The factors that can

bring about disharmony among the cultural elements of a society are:

- 1- The selfishness of the social leaders can cause disorders in some cultural elements.
- 2- Hedonism is of the most significant of factors making cultural elements disharmonious.
- 3- Greed for authority can also, in many forms, demolish cultural values.

We should also keep in mind that harmony among cultural elements in a society does not necessarily mean that all elements originate from the same principles, for every cultural element or phenomenon must arise from its own, specific origin. It does not matter, for example, for the moral culture of a society to originate from emotional principles, whereas its scientific culture may be intellectual and observational; likewise, artistic culture may arise out of abstract tendencies while historical culture originates from observable, realistic elements, and religious culture is based upon pure spiritualism.

Can Culture Undergo Evolution?

Some people believe that culture has undergone an evolutionary progress throughout history. These thinkers consider the advances achieved in some cultural elements such as science and man's making use of his potentials and talents as evolution in human culture. If evolution means scientific and technological advances, man has undoubtedly made progress with regard to his contact with the world and his fellow beings, for the necessity to adjust life and man's sense of domination and benefit-seeking has led to developments in some cultural phenomena in history. But when it comes to components of culture that are to develop man's soul, there has been no evolution. In other words, man's material culture has made progress, but the other aspects have not. For instance:

- Man still has to make himself committed to defy the culture of selfishness.
- The culture of kindness toward human beings, constructive love, creating charity and greatness has vanished.
- The culture of righteousness being the highest and using power to uphold righteousness and executing what is good and right has waned.
- The culture of scientific conscience has been marred by greed for fame, power and selfishness.
- The culture of caring for geniuses and constructive figures and using them correctly has faded away in today's societies.
- There is no culture of constructive relationship between people; human beings behave toward one another with savagery.
- If human culture has really had evolution, why does man ignore the most fundamental principles of his

life:

- a) an Intelligible life
- b) human dignity and grace
- c) responsible, intelligible freedom
- d) all laws should be equally applicable to all people

Man still suffers from cultures influenced by Machiavelli, fighting for survival and greed for power. Stagnant evolution in culture has deprived most people of realizing the supreme realities and following them. People cannot comprehend intelligible beauties. The culture of mechanistic life has disabled man's understanding of the beauty of the universe, justice, freedom and dignity.

Nowadays, committing immoral acts is the preferred way to achieve one's goal in political cultures. The logic of human economics has turned into consumerism, and the culture of making a living for life has become living to make an earning.

The Fundamentals of Western Culture

The principles we see as dominating cultural life in Western societies today that can be considered the basics of Western culture. This does not, however, mean that all people in the West believe in them; there are some who actually defy these basics. The important thing is that these principles govern the life and behavior of the people in the West. Let us take some of these principles into consideration:

- 1– Worldly life is fundamental: Western man has no goal beyond life in this world. They believe that this world is man's ultimate location of existence in the universe.
- 2– Absolute freedom: Any individual or group can do as he wishes, as long as they do not disturb others. Thus, the individual's life for his own sake has no meaning, for man can do the filthiest of actions legally as long as he causes others no inconvenience. Western culture emphasizes mutual coexistence, not human effort on the path to an intelligible life.
- 3– Greed for power: Power plays a crucial role in Western culture. It has made cooperation, affection and tolerating legitimate actions of other human beings mere tools for reaching power. The powerful do their best to disable man in order to reach their own animal desires more easily.
- 4– Hedonism: Western culture encourages hedonism. Some Western so-called “thinkers” have even used science to promote hedonism. If human pleasure is downtrodden, they believe, man will fall into mental disorders and complexes.
- 5– Desire for seeking profits and advantages: Western culture sees man as always seeking his own

benefits and desires. That is what has led to so much exploitation of various peoples and loss of human life

6– Machiavellianism: Machiavellian beliefs dominate the political culture of the West. Human principles fade away, and politicians can use Machiavellian principles to ignore human values.

7– Pragmatism spreads: Another basic characteristic of Western culture is spreading pragmatism without correctly interpreting it. If Western thoughts were based on the premises that mere emphasis upon abstract concepts is not the only way to practically use true facts, and an intelligible interpretation of the facts of the universe were presented, the West would never be what it is today. Unfortunately, the current trend is judging as true or false based upon only observable actions. Thus, the criterion for being the truth is only observable actions.

8– Ignorance toward the limitations of science: In the West, man pays attention to only science and what he gets from his physical senses and laboratory devices. Religion, moral ethics, philosophy wisdom and mysticism are overruled because they are regarded as non–scientific.

9– The incapability of Western philosophies: There is no question that ever since many years ago, not only has the West failed to present a systematic philosophical school of thought or world–view to man, but has even been unable to provide a significant number of profound, meaningful – though scattered – material. Alas, man cannot interpret or freely choose his way of life without a general understanding of the four relationships (man–himself, man–God, man–his fellow beings and man–the universe).

10– Prolific, profane arts become popular: Although there is a concept of perfection hidden in art, what exists in the West today is prolific art. Lowly, decadent concepts are presented in the most attractive form to fascinate people. Prolific art and using culture in the service of one's desires and lusts is a factor that can destroy original human cultures.

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