Special Knowledge is the Source of all Culture
by Anne E. Witte, Ph.D.

Mobile human groups spread and absorb ideas. They found institutions, devise rules, and test new lifestyles. Migrating communities take creative and destructive courses, making and breaking civilizations, and connecting and dividing territories and people. Countless historical examples of cultural dissemination and assimilation in history owing to continuous human movement spring to mind – Buddhist spiritual practices originating in India diffused all over Asia, Roman administrative and organizational principles which laid the foundations for many cities and governments far and wide, the mythologizing narratives of the Greeks forming the canon of modern Western literature and philosophy, and the military expansion of Islam bringing monotheism to three continents and stabilizing nomadic communities. Cultural specialization is a feature of human social history. Migration and economic exchange have often induced these adaptations with enduring repercussions on the behaviors that ensure collective modes of survival.

From an ecological standpoint, culture is the means by which collectivities enhance their adaptability, fitness, and survival in a Darwinian sense (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). Although anthropologists may hotly debate the symbolic or functional nature of food, work, and lifestyle choices for given groups, it is clear that cultures interact with a local ecology in formulating their organizational priorities and symbolic life. Historical and environmental constraints may provide opportunities as well as inhibit action. As humans tend to institutionalize stable and familiar circumstances that enhance lifestyle, the arrival of foreigners or the necessity to migrate creates new cultural formulations. Although most societies welcome labor-saving machines or medical technology, the prospect of moral, organizational and geographic change is viewed with dread and suspicion. Even if the material concerns of daily life can be altered rapidly, the symbolism underpinning societal norms is destabilizing for the human psyche. Migration and the arrival of migrants can be traumatic as well as redeeming.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

In Chinese, the concept "culture" combines two ideas having to do with proper upbringing and manners. The Chinese term "*wen hua*" first appears in the *Book of Changes*, dating from the latter part of the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE to 14 CE) and the concept became a pillar of Confucian principles linking good manners ("*wen*") and customs ("*hua*"). In Chinese, *"wen"* encompasses a variety of meanings including civility, literature, elegance, and education and it is often used in contrast to the military or barbaric. "*Wen*" concerns civilized men and women, or people living in the city, or in society. "*Wen hua*" combines acquired social and civil manners, so that the Chinese word for culture refers to the desired "upbringing" conferred on members of society.

In the Romance languages, the etymology for the word "culture" derives from the Latin noun "*cultura*" which links it with "soil" and the means to obtain vegetation from cultivated land. The related Latin verb "*colo*" means to dwell, to observe a religious rite, or to nurture. This cluster of words linking soil, religion, and food - sources of human vitality – can be observed in many Indo-European languages. Culture is the deliberate shape we give to our environment and our interaction with that eco-sphere.

In many Indo-European languages, culture is implicitly tied to farming and the land. This is not a surprise given the social history of speakers of those languages. As early nomadic human groups abandoned the hunter lifestyle to farm and to herd as early as 10, 000 years ago in the Middle Eastern Fertile Crescent (modern day Syria, Turkey and Iran),[1] the lands they occupied located near waterways such as the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates as well as their diet became a source for identifying and distinguishing between groups.

Naming and kinship patterns worldwide reflect culture-specific conventions used to keep track of kin. Family names reflect how human groups assert their unique situations: by referring to local geography (Richelieu, Bradford), to types of craftsmanship (Smith, Faber), or to clan (MacDougal, Lee). Surnames in world cultures can derive from a host of sub-system symbologies such as holy books like the Old Testament (David, Joshua) or the Qu'ran

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[1] Evidence for this region as the cradle of agriculture is that the wild varieties of all seven of the original Middle Eastern domesticated crops (i.e., einkorn wheat, emmer wheat, barley, lentil, pea, bitter vetch, and chickpea) are found only in this core area (Stone & Lunquist, 2005, p. 87).

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(Samuel, Mehdi), historic places (Florencio), father's names (Jonsson), occupation (Ferrand), imposed administrative offices (reflecting caste, class or military attributions), or uncommon and rare symbolic titles. The sign value of a family name and its meaning within the inner logic of a community is so vital for integration that many countries today allow immigrants to "naturalize" their names, passports and official documents to assimilate more easily. Naming is a ceremony of membership. To name is to integrate into a referential system.

The conventions of civility in the case of Chinese, the accent on agriculture in the case of many Indo-European languages, and naming traditions worldwide confer on local enactments of "culture" traces of the habits and priorities of community organization. Culture is therefore the normative social arrangements that allow for mutual identification and symbolic exchange.

The modern English speaker uses the word "culture" to assign sets of behaviors to particular human groups. The study of "culture" was traditionally the sole domain of anthropologists initially focussed on small pre-industrial societies. Today, culture is a topic that has fully integrated numerous disciplinary pursuits – history, religion, politics, tourism, comparative linguistics, law, science and medicine – with sub-categories of culture differentiating by age, gender, technology, ideology, and social class. Culture now concerns the enduring features of collectivities (Rokeach, 1972), their attitudes, ideas and behaviours and the specific set of preferred "patterns, language, beliefs, priorities, customs, shared values" and especially the means by which they "communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life" (Geertz, 1973). Culture is a set of "learned routines" and encompasses the material and immaterial products that distinguish one group of people from another (Brumann et al., 1999). The organizational specialist Geert Hofstede referred to culture as "the software of the mind" or the collective programming of groups (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, 1991). For Francis Fukuyama, culture is described as "inherited ethical habit" or the a-rational choice that governs the perception of good and evil regulating social behavior (Fukuyama, 1995). For Ulf Hannerz, culture is not only ideas and modes of thought, but also the way in which these processes of the mind are made accessible to others and the way these inventories of meaning spread over a population to create a "coordinated network of perspectives," or "ground rules for action," resulting in an asymmetry of the distribution of power and resources (Hannerz, 1992).

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Culture can be extended beyond territorial, historical, ethnic, political or religious abstractions to more idiosyncratic meanings. Less traditional categories of culture might include "pop culture" (fashionable behaviors of groups), "corporate culture" (shared strategies of financial units), or "vegetarian culture" (the dietary choices of people). These uses of the term culture allow for broadening the field of cultural investigation into limitless instances of population differentiation and the complex relationships entertained with material goods and their meanings. The uses of the word "culture" even change in time as certain cultural groups grow, disappear, or mingle with others. In one classic article seeking to define culture, more than 150 contemporary uses were found (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

The concept culture may or may not encapsulate the related term "civilization" depending on the language used. F. Braudel used "civilization" (in his native French) to refer to enduring cultural traditions extending beyond nation borders and lasting over centuries even millennia. He reserved the word "culture" for the more ennobling aspects of human development (art, religion, literature and philosophy) leaving the term "civilization" to cover moral and material concerns. This is also the case in the German "*Bildung*" and the Italian "*civilità*" equivalent terms for civilization used as a larger concept than high culture, encapsulating the concerns of economics, religion, technology, law and politics. Some skeptics criticize the suggestion that there can be a high or low form of civilization studies claiming that the notion of culture and especially high culture is subjective, imperialist, elitist, and reductionist. New disciplines within "Cultural Studies" resolve some of these concerns by focusing on non-elitist, mainstream, popular, hybrid and lesser acclaimed manifestations of collective expression. In this book, I will use the term "civilization" to refer to cultures having survived over centuries and millennia, discussing in detail only those existing today actively interacting as purveyor and producer within world economic, scientific and ideological exchange. This choice is related to space constraints and readership.

Some anthropologists see culture as enduring, structuring, coherent and historical (Clifford, 1988). This attitude to cultural study focuses on events, acts, people and processes that may be identified by an outside observer as variants on other human group behaviors. Such an approach may focus on different ways of thinking, feeling and acting and emphasize the special knowledge and behavior specific to groups. But many contemporary experts on

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culture refute the notion that groups of people are bounded, similar and organic, especially because migration, globalization, the media and travel disperse people and ideas creating the possibility of world citizenship, global culture and new cosmopolitan lifestyles (Robertson, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 2003). Rejecting any form of study that seeks paradigms for differentiating human societies which enforce separation and judgment (calling such endeavors racist), some radical scholarship rejects the notion "culture" altogether (Abu-Lughod, 1991) accepting only the plural "cultures" and the adjective "cultural" as alternatives (Brumann et al., 1999). These dispositions prefer hybridity, transmission, change, improvisation, variation and mediation as norms for cultural study and they emphasize the cultural relativity of the observer and the arbitrary choice of subject in conducting cultural analyses.

This book mediates between traditional understandings of culture (which have legal realities in a world of nations) and contemporary skepticism about the enduring pertinence of such a category in a globalizing human environment. Navigating between the material and territorial notions of culture and the larger questions of ideology, power, and philosophy guiding civilizations, this essay takes into account instances of human behavior that are idiosyncratic, local and historical as well as those that are trans-ethnic, contrived and spontaneous.

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

A convenient non-specialist approach to studying cultural expression relies on the classic, albeit mundane division of cultural levels divided into artefacts, rituals, values and world view. Although these categories may not satisfy all intents and purposes, they provide a convenient study framework.

Artefacts

The study of ancient cultures has led scholars to focus on architecture, pottery, tools and religious objects as they are often the only remnants available to scrutinize past societal systems. This has created a cultural subject matter focused largely on items used by elites or for sacred offices. But today, most material products are considered cultural artefacts, even trivial items like tools, baskets, buildings, computers, and fishing rods. This shift of interest from sacred and artistic objects to all cultural productions distinguishes the contemporary study of culture from nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropological approaches.

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Whether this elevates all productions to the status of art, or lowers all art to its material worth is a question of perspective and epistemology.

Rituals

Rituals are repeated practices that impose regularity and order. They punctuate transitions, such as the beginning of a new year, or changes in personal status within a group. Rituals function as public reminders of collective values and desirable end states. They are sustained by shared beliefs, myths, and heroes. Traditional societies ritualize birth, fertility practices, marriage and death, but today, mass mediated events such as New Year's Eve, the Super Bowl, and the Olympic Games have ritual status. Membership rituals marking the passage from one state of community membership to another (adolescence to adulthood for example or fraternity inductions) have also been maintained in contemporary society in gang initiations, adolescent drinking sprees, bungee jumping, or the first sexual encounter. Certain banal social conventions may be considered as ritualistic (greetings, dress codes, holiday traditions) in that social membership is re-enacted through these repeated gestures. In early modern society, festival and carnival involved ritual role-reversal (kings became fools and fools ruled over court) only for order to be re-instated at the end (Turner, 1969). In this way, festival assured a return from chaos to order, re-instating the status quo. Today, highly mediatized rituals, such as the Christian mass, presidential inaugurations, and the funerals of celebrities are performed for world audiences through the use of satellite, cable and television, removing ritual from its local sense-making, repetitive context to the status of global mega-event.

Values

Values are "a learned organization of principles and rules to help one choose between alternatives, resolve conflicts and make decisions" (Rokeach, 1973). They are "the criteria people use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people (including the self) and events" (Schwartz, 1992). Values are informed by social as well as individual experiences. They reflect certain types of moral reasoning and instruct individuals and groups in their decision making. Values are shaped by economic and political constraints and they influence the way in which individuals are able to control their lives.

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Agrarian societies tend to hold strong communal values, privilege authoritarian and patriarchal forms of power, prefer inherited status, and respect traditional religious beliefs. As people prioritize security, food, and predictability and avoid uncertainty to reduce stress, these values reinforce the ability of communities to survive and prosper. As societies shift towards an industrial or manufacturing-based society and integrate more technology, gender roles tend to become separated with men in the value-added economic space and women occupying the domestic realm which has no exchange value (Engels, 1884). These societies tend towards materialism and remain authoritarian (Inglehart et al., 2004), but the desire for self-expression and the appearance of secular-rational institutions gradually takes hold. In studies of Western societies that are moving to a service-based economy and that enjoy higher levels of education and democracy, a post-modern or "post-materialist" value system seems to be emerging. These values predominate in a secular-oriented society and are evidenced by the rising participation of women in public affairs, high individualism, and a pursuit of hedonistic and post-materialist goals such as tourism and environmental studies. In the absence of scarcity, values may either turn to materialist excess, or to a search for the transcendental (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

Values will inform acts of charity and hospitality, views on the death penalty, abortion and human rights. Values shape ideology and will prepare us to pay for education, or rather expect the government to provide it at no cost for all. They give context to social conventions, male and female roles, humor and aesthetic preferences. They drive the legal system as they direct society towards recommended or favored behavior and they guide us in our tolerance of deviance and tastes for food, clothes and leisure activities. Contemporary values debates include the role of religion in society, materialism, charity, genetically modified food, the official age of adulthood, global warming, migration and the role of the state and duties of citizens. Values can be studied at the universal, cultural and personal levels. Value orientations will even diverge within cultures depending on age, gender, education, and social status and they may be radically modified by major environmental stress such as terrorist acts, disease, natural disaster, or war.

International value surveys have documented evolving social patterns over the last 100 years (Inglehart et al., 2004). These surveys indicate that religion tends to be considered more important in low income societies than in economically developed societies with two

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important exceptions being the U.S.A. and Ireland (*Cf. Chapter 4: Values*). It is has also been observed that there has been a gradual shift in gender roles, child-rearing goals, working habits, religious orientations, consumer patterns and attitudes towards voting as societies achieve greater economic wealth (Inglehart et al., 2004). Although values tend to be resilient over time, socio-economic development does modify meaningfully, however gradually, core social values.

Abstract Belief

Every human society harbors unshakeable notions about the proper role of men and women, the existence of God, the division between good and evil, the importance of truth, the cyclical nature of human life, the sanctity of animals and nature, the reliability of intuition, the promises of medical research, and the ultimate purpose of human life. Religion, philosophy, and even science offer competing world views that structure these abstract belief systems and become enduring superstructures. They inform the most basic distinctions between:

- Evil/Good
- Dirty/Clean
- Ugly/Beautiful
- Unnatural/Natural
- Abnormal/Normal
- Fair/Unfair
- Honest/Dishonest
- Paradoxical/Logical
- Irrational/Rational

Cultural abstractions and world views are notoriously difficult to assimilate from the perspective of foreigners as they are intangible, unconscious, symbolic and implicit. Abstract systems of meaning are developed through long periods of history, reinforced by educational systems, parental guidance, and civic or religious enculturation. These underlying structures provide the logic and rationalization supporting society's institutions – justice, polity, education, and trade.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

The French public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu defined cultural capital as the result of our combined socialization and enculturation processes. The concept includes linguistic ability, eating habits, class belongingness, political affiliation, esthetic preferences, spirituality and other forms of symbolic exchange that shape group identity and become "second nature**."** His learned term "*habitus*" refers to the entire body of "cultural practices, knowledge, and demeanors people learn through exposure to role models in the family and other environments" (Bourdieu, 1979). « *Habitus* » combines all the structures and dispositions (beliefs, upbringing, environment stimulus, social condition etc.) that incline people to act one way or another. The *habitus* orients choice and generates behaviour inculcating in individuals a set of principles and schemes that lead people to focus on certain elements that matter more in their lives. The *habitus* governs the way people think about themselves and others.

Cultural capital is endowed on individuals by the intermediary of parental investment, educational institutions and through immersion and participation within the objects and symbols of culture such as books, museums, schools, gymnasium and libraries (Bourdieu 1986), but also consumer products and leisure activities. It is enacted through socializing institutions including schools, religions, political parties, or informal associations. The normative pressure of cultural capital has direct repercussions on the economy, the political system, moral values and even artistic and philosophical modes for it establishes recognizable and expected codes of conduct allowing for the processing of symbolic meaning. The realm within which individuals learn and practice their cultural capital is referred to by Bourdieu as a "field" and it structures logic and action.

Having more or less cultural capital can result in more power, privilege, and status for certain individuals. These may be enacted as class, gender, or occupational differences within large groups. Cultural capital may be visible to non-members of a group functioning as a socio-cultural sign between groups. The reputation of French fashion draws from a cultural capital which places value on design, color and textile. It normalizes the body as a portmanteau for artwork and considers clothes a social statement. Sometimes cultural capital associates private activities to nation expertise and vice versa. Porsche derives its cultural capital from Germany's reputation for engineering and Walt Disney established U.S. cartoon entertainment as wholesome. Dior, Al Jeera, Greenpeace and The Rolling Stones are organizations which ride on cultural capital, but have become an organizational trademark.

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Cultural identity in these cases becomes a strong brand message with specific symbolic connotations operating across social fields. Cultural capital directs how the world perceives these brands and how employees within these organizations make decisions and behave. Cultural capital can also surface in mundane details of every day life such as the high information content in a German print ad as opposed to the strong visual impact of a French television commercial. The brand image associated with certain nation products (the quality of French wine, the efficiency of Japanese automobile construction) suggests that cultural capital is a source of communicative and societal identity with transaction value. Organizations may rely on symbolic and cultural capital to fuel reputation, innovation and competitive difference. Nations may use cultural capital to position their economic, political or ideological dispositions. Cultural capital sets standards within society and between societies establishing basic "truths" about quality, beauty, efficiency and appropriateness.

IN SUMMARY

In their first encounter with a new culture, most people tend to recognize what is similar to their own social environment ("*Look, they have a McDonald's too!*"). This automatic human response to strangeness, generates a discourse of comparison focused on "us," and "them." It overlooks the subtle in preference for the obvious, and divides similar and different according to superficial criteria.

At the time of the discovery of the Americas, indigenous peoples came into contact with English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Dutch explorers, merchants and missionaries arriving to trade, settle, and spread Christianity. Over decades, the arrival of Europeans in the Americas gradually effaced a great majority of these people. Those who survived became forever entwined within the mercantile, Christian and class concerns of the European immigrants. The European settlers themselves gradually lost contact and empathy for their past European values. Two lifestyles were gradually replaced with an entirely new cultural superstructure. The tales of the great cross-cultural heroes of the early American novel such as Uncas in the *The Last of the Mohicans* (James Fenimore Cooper, 1826), the folk hero Daniel Boone, or even Hesther Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1850) live in a world in which the process of integration and assimilation is laden with sacrifice, danger and conflict. People living between two value systems face exclusion from both.

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Fractures in the social ecology abound in fiction. Eighteenth and nineteenth century French and British novels offered to their educated readers a view on Asian and Arab lands that had become the focus of European political aspirations (Said, 1979). The romantic depiction of the "Arab and Indian other" perpetuated racist and imperialist justifications for the territorial and material appropriation of foreign territories and the need to re-educate "savage" people to resemble the European model. In the mid-nineteenth century, European travel guides described exotic African peoples, Hindu mythology, faraway treasures in Peru and unique adventures in Australia in a mixture of truth and fantasy tailored to stimulate the imaginations of sedentary European readers who consumed these narratives for leisure. These pastimes indoctrinated an entire generation into believing in a divinely ordained civilizing process that Western designers were destined to carry out. Later, university professors of sociology, anthropology and comparative religion institutionalized the study of culture and human groups as an academic pursuit. The advent of cultural anthropology in the late nineteenth century enabled scholars to categorize the world's peoples much in the same way as the natural sciences created a taxonomy of the world's species. Such categories of culture proved handy to legitimize colonizing, Christianizing and developing missions in "underdeveloped," non-industrial cultures. They also opened the way to empathetic study of lesser known cultural models and unique human systems.

By understanding other cultures based on our own cultural references, we practice « ethnocentrism » or viewing the world only in terms of our cultural (socio-centric) or personal (egocentric) set of values and preferences (Levi-Strauss, 1976). Cultural categorization results in the labeling of cultural groups that become fixed stereotypes. By subscribing to a view that sees cultures as coherent and stable collectivities of similarly-minded people suggests that culture is somehow innate, genetic or spiritually endowed on people, an essentialist reading of human behavior that sees culture (and gender) as a form of biological determinism. Being able to view a culture as a dynamic social and ecological arrangement requires a deliberate intellectual effort. Going so far as to develop a non-judgmental attitude toward all foreign cultures, known as cultural relativism (Levi-Strauss, 1976), or attempting to *understand* rather than *label* or *judge* cultures, may prove to be a utopia for it is sometimes just as difficult to rationalize another culture as it is to imagine being a member of the opposite sex, or for that matter being a cat. Yet, contemporary life

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does require of us to take the extraordinary leap of the imagination that will enable us to do precisely that.

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