

March 3, 2005

## 9 CULTURE: DEFINITIONS

Read: Ara Wilson, 1988. American catalogues of Asian brides  
Harrison, 1999 Identity as a scarce resource  
Nagel 43-72

- I. Relationship between “nation” and “culture”?
  - A. Eriksen’s example of Norway becoming “a nation” whose citizens have “Norwegian culture”
    1. The push to nationalism came from city dwellers, the urban middle classes
    2. Intellectuals in particular began their nationalistic project by focusing on “expressive culture”—as Nagel and Eriksen say happens
      - a. Recovering folklore, etc.
      - b. A discourse concerned with the need to discover Norway’s “real” culture
        - 1) All things identified as Danish were seen to be wrong, inauthentic, contaminated, signs of colonial oppression, etc.
        - 2) Examples from other countries?
          - a) Greeks and Turks with food, etc.
    3. The existence of a distinctive culture would show Norwegians to be “a people” in their own right
      - a. And therefore entitled to their own country—their own nation-state
    4. These nationalists went about discovering old Norwegian customs
      - a. As Eriksen says, the customs they came up with were neither ancient, typical, nor Norwegian
      - b. Some of these “authentically Norwegian” customs did come from specific valleys in Norway
        - 1) Their meaning was transformed, generalized to represent *Norwegian* culture

- c. These customs were reified into symbols, self-conscious symbols
- d. Discuss: other examples?
  - 1) Air Jordan appropriating parts of Bedouin dress (nomadic pastoralists in the Middle East)<sup>1</sup>
    - a) Flight attendants on the national airlines
    - b) In most other respects, Bedouins are seen to symbolize what Jordanian citizens are *not*
  - 2) Parallel with the use of Native Americans to symbolize America
    - a) Discuss: examples?
- 5. Another change was a new emphasis on rural-urban solidarity...brand new
  - a. The nationalist project emphasizes that all citizens of a nation share culture
- 6. Norwegians clearly needed a proper language of their own, so
  - a. A folklorist/linguist invented Nynorsk
- 7. Norwegian political history was also enlisted in the nationalist project:
  - a. They asked a member of the Danish royal family to be their monarch
  - b. Named him Haakon VII
    - 1) In order to signal a continuity with the dynasty that had ruled before 1350

## II. Culture: Definitions

- A. One definition: beliefs and practices shared by a group
- B. Another: High culture: literature, ballet, opera, poetry
- C. Another: the notion of *a* culture: Eskimo culture, Polynesian culture, Black culture, Norwegian culture

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Layne, 1989. "The Dialogics of Tribal Self-Representation in Jordan." *American Ethnologist* 16(1):24-39.

1. Note that only one of these examples of “culture” is coterminous with a nation-state
2. But three are located in space—the exception is Black culture
  - a. Anthropologists (and others) have traditionally seen an unquestionable division between cultures
    - 1) Originally located in a place
    - 2) Although some members may have left: “overseas Chinese”
  - b. Gupta and Ferguson challenge this notion
  - c. Later on we’ll read Malkki’s discussion of agricultural metaphors, for example: “rooted” in a place
3. This definition (**a** culture) also highlights the fact that culture, like ethnicity, is relational: it exists because there is something it is compared to
  - a. When we say, “it’s a difference of culture”
  - b. We can say “MIT culture” and people know what we’re talking about—MIT culture is not Harvard culture, for example
  - c. This relational feature is especially important
    - 1) First, because of the importance of inter-cultural (inter-ethnic, inter-national, etc.) relations in the real world
      - a) Ethnic conflict, for instance
    - 2) Second, because understanding that **a** culture always exists in relation to **other** cultures often reveals sites of power— asymmetrical relations involving dominance and subordination, etc.
  - d. Wilson, Harrison and Nagel illustrate the important role power differentials can play
    - 1) And how important it is to analyze the images one culture has of another

D. The idea of culture as **adaptation**

1. The concept of culture as adaptation seeks to explain why culture exists in the first place and why it changes
2. Helps us understand the cultural evolution that has occurred during *homo sapiens*' history on the planet
3. Remember my description of different subsistence modes?  
Hunting/gathering, horticulture, nomadic pastoralists, agrarian states?
  - a. These are adaptations—cultural adaptations—to a specific environment
    - 1) Interactions between environment and culture that are adaptive enough to allow the group to survive
      - a) Such cultural evolution brought us to our glorious position at present
      - b) To a point where we're adapted to our environment enough—gained enough power over it enough—to turn it into a cinder
    - 2) The emergence of a technology that permitted horticulture—producing (growing) one's food rather than gathering it
      - a) Is an example of cultural evolution
      - b) We can see it as adaptive because it allowed more food to be produced, allowed a more secure food supply, etc.
4. Keep in mind when using this culture-as-adaptation definition
  - a. That what's good for a group as a whole—enhances its probability of survival—doesn't always mean good for all of the individuals within the group
  - b. There's a constant tension, as a matter of fact
  - c. Poor people don't benefit from being members of a given culture the way rich people do

- 1) Example: producing food by growing it introduces a much higher possibility of plagues of insects, famines, etc.
  - 2) Some people won't survive (the peasants, the marginal)
  - 3) People starve even though food is available because certain cultural understandings and power relations withhold it from them
5. Remember: "adaptive" is always a relative term: Adaptive for what? For whom? Over what time span?
  6. Also remember to ask, who is authorized to assess degree of adaptation, and what is his/her agenda?
  7. Other examples of authorized cultural practices not in the best interest of certain sectors or individuals?
    - a. Mandated suicide
      - 1) Kamikaze pilots
    - b. Although we say that mandated suicide is unfortunate for the individual
      - 1) This probably *isn't* the viewpoint of the suicidee (certainly couldn't call him/her a "victim")
    - c. Other examples: fasting, going to the wilderness and eating honey and locusts, participating in the Sun Dance, tattooing, breast implants, foot binding, high heels, infibulation—
      - 1) People outside the culture will probably see these practices, and the ideology supporting them, as unhealthy, unnecessary, morally wrong, etc.
  8. When using this definition remember that cultures are never perfectly adaptive and adapted
    - a. And that a given culture may in fact be very *maladaptive* at a particular point in time due to changing conditions, ecological or social
- E. Definition of culture as "that which is taught"
1. Not "that which is learned"

- a. Many animals learn all sorts of things, but we wouldn't say they have culture
  - b. A child will learn that fire is hot and painful, but this lesson is not provided by the child's culture if the learning comes from being burned
2. The notion of culture-as-teaching conveys the idea of intentional transmission
- a. But we can argue that a lot of culture is not deliberately taught
3. In fact, much of the culture one learns is embodied, and learned half-consciously or unconsciously
- a. This is Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, described by Nagel
  - b. A set of assumptions, dispositions, and orientations that shape human thought and action, visions of the possible, perceived choices
  - c. If you've learned one culture, it's hard to adjust to a new one for these reasons
  - d. A member of a culture might be aware that part of their culture is not "adaptive"—not in their best interests
    - 1) But they might very well keep on doing/thinking/believing whatever it is
  - e. This is the Big Question of free will—individual human agency
    - 1) We aren't automatons
    - 2) But neither are we free agents always able to know what's in our best interest and freely carry it out
      - a) We're not "Little monads guided solely by internal reasons" (Bourdieu and Wacquant<sup>2</sup>)

F. Definition of culture as "that which is shared"

- 1. Very common definition

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 135.

- a. Culture is clearly not the idiosyncratic beliefs, behavior peculiar to one person
2. Nagel (p. 43): “Those ideational and material aspects of social life—language, religion, ceremony, myth, belief, values, ...are the substance of a people.”
3. Discuss: problems with this definition?
  - a. First, like “nation” and “ethnicity,” what/who are the “people” who share this culture is difficult to specify
  - b. Not self-evident, even though you may think it is
  - c. Second, all cultural systems to some degree depend on their members *not* sharing the same knowledge or beliefs
    - 1) For example, even in very small-scale, seemingly homogeneous societies
    - 2) Men and women will not share the same cultural knowledge—and this non-sharing will be built-in, not accidental
    - 3) In modern societies
    - 4) The management, foreman, and workers in a factory will not share the same understandings of the institution they all work in
      - a) This non-sharing also is built in—it’s necessary for the proper function of the factory

G. Think about the difference between

1. *Culture*
2. *Ideology* (the set of ideas that arise from a definite social class or group)
3. *Hegemony* (a dynamic process of domination in which those subordinated within it both accept it as just and proper, and resist it)