

Culture: What It Is, Who Owns It, Claims It, Changes It

By Sujata Warriar, Ph.D.

Understanding Culture

The term “culture” and culture itself have been studied for several centuries. Much of what we understand of the term comes from the formulations of Western colonialists and the participation of colonized people in accepting these formulations. As a result, we have come to understand cultures to be very stable patterns of beliefs, thoughts, traditions, values, and the things that are handed down from one generation to the next to ensure the continuity of these systems.

This understanding of culture has served the very purpose of the colonizers to “civilize” the “natives”. Colonial empires relied on distinctions about “the other” as did local cultures to justify the processes of marginalization and inclusion, in order to maintain political and social power. An example of colluding with colonial claims of the differences of the “other” was the Indian response – ‘yes we are different, we are spiritual. The East is more spiritual than the West, therefore we are better than you’.

Such reasoning does not get at what actually transpires in particular cultures, and permeates the ways in which we talk about culture. Often when we are invited to talk about who we are and what cultures we represent, the same collusion can be found behind the ways in which we understand who we are. We fail to look at the fact that cultures are not just stable patterns that are handed down from one generation to the other. When you look at and study different groups of people, what you see are ways in which these traditions actually shift and change under changing social and political landscapes. So when we talk about culture, we are not really talking about stable patterns. We are actually talking about ways in which our experience(s) shape our commonalities. For example, my Indian ethnicity is not the only thing that differentiates me and I include the way my religion does or does not shape me; the class that I come from; my age; my immigration status; if I am disabled or not; my sexual orientation, etc.

Understanding culture requires looking at how all these things come together and connect, not just for individuals but also for groups of people. There are times when I share my Indian characteristics or South Asian characteristics; however, I also share characteristics with other people either because of my class, or because of my religion, or if I am anti-religion, or through other means and other formulations. We must understand that these are not very stable things but rather they constantly shift and change, and our experiences and commonalities also shift and change. Culture is inclusive of all of these things. It is not just about ethnicity.

Often in our conversations, assumptions are made, for example, that as Chinese Americans and as South Asians we have a much in common. Well, we do and we do not because there are numerous inter-ethnic diversities that make us different. Sometimes we do not recognize our diversities or we do not talk about them and how they can lead to contests within cultures. There are no clear-cut boundaries. Most boundaries are permeable and as Uma Narayan states there is no such thing as a “packaged picture of culture”.

Most of us have been asked to present what domestic violence looks like in a particular Asian community. We get up and give a nice list of what it looks like. We give people lists of what they can do if they have encountered a Chinese woman, or a Korean woman, or a Cambodian woman; and we go away feeling pleased. These are the rainbow-colored panels that we have all been a part of. That is not to say that these lists do not have some value. But we must critique our presentations, examine *our* assumptions, and not connect back into a totalizing notion of culture. These totalizing notions of culture are in fact idealized pictures of our traditions; and as we know, traditions have both nurturing as well as oppressive elements.

It is important to shift our understanding away from totalizing culture to illustrating its diversity, contradictions, contrasts, ambiguities, and the interconnections between various internal systems that structure power.

Cultural Positions

The kind of cultural definitions we have been using puts us all in very problematic positions. Uma Narayan¹, a Professor of Philosophy at Vassar College, outlines the different cultural roles that we often occupy. I outline them here so we can see the ways in which we have all occupied these positions:

¹ Narayan, Uma 1977. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminisms*. New York: Routledge. Pp.121-157

1. The Emissary Position proclaims how wonderful each of our cultures and its traditions are. These claims are designed to counter either totalizing (how people lived, ate, thought, dressed, etc.) or negative (e.g., the status of women – issues such as veiling, female genital mutilation, domestic violence etc.) characterizations of culture by Western colonialists. The emissary position surfaces more so with migration; as immigrant communities hang on to cultural practices and traditions to preserve identity and resist homogenization. This portrayal of course denies the realities of oppression, of class and/or gender differences, how power is structured, and how privilege is conferred.

2. The Mirror Position This position also facilitates “Westerners” taking an interest in “our culture”. Here, we try to take how the West has looked at us, then turn it around and say, “Let’s look at how they are and show that they are a mirror image of what we are.” The most common example of this position is to claim that “this is the way most cultures operate, and you have the same forms of violence after all”. So, by pointing to the mirror image we become inadvertently trapped within the Western gaze, a defensive protectiveness of our own culture that inhibits discussions about what is happening within our communities. This differs from the previous position in that while the former is laudatory, this provides the mechanism to sustain and provide confirmation on the global predations of the West.

3. The Authentic Insider Finally, in this position, we can claim knowledge about our culture, offer explanations, critique traditions, and engage in struggles for change. While this position has merit, it is problematic when there is no reflection. For example, who invites us in as an authentic insider and for what purposes? Where are we seen as authentic insiders? Are we crafting and defining policies, say on child welfare, or are we just commenting on API perspectives? We are asked to come in and fit into a picture that already exists rather than being invited to shift the picture and to engage in a dialog that examines the ways in which violence against women may be expressed in different communities. Furthermore, it is often a single voice that is representative of a diverse whole. The contradictions, conflicts, disagreements in our cultures are not allowed to surface because there is no space in which to discuss these differences. “We” then appear monolithic and seamless. Additionally, limits are also placed on what we can talk about. For example, when called to a meeting on child welfare we are only asked to talk about Asian and Pacific Islander issues and any critique or reflection of the child welfare system as a whole is understood to be outside the bounds of what we have been invited to speak on. The other difficulty with this position is that we are invited to introduce and enhance the notion of “difference” which means that we have to be a “true native” and fit into the picture of “difference” that already exists.

Conclusion

I am not pointing this out to say that all of these positions are bad. Instead, to show that we have all occupied them. Sometimes we have even praised traditions in our own communities that we know are detrimental to women because we are put in particular positions or there is a particular reason why we are doing what we are doing. What is important is to understand why we are presenting a particular picture of culture in a certain way; to what audience; for what purpose; and to know what are the ways in which these three positions connect with each other.

I want to end with a quote by Himani Bannerji in her book *Returning the Gaze*². “The struggle is for a fundamental change in social relationships rather than a per community quota for representation in the parliament of racism and ethnicity. We are engaged in politics – linking theory to practice, examining ideologies through our lives, and our own lives through revolutionary ideas. We are not shopping in the market of cultural differences.”

SUJATA WARRIER serves on the Steering Committee of the Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence. She is the Director of Health Care Bureau, State of New York, Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence.

²Bannerji, Himani. 1993. *Returning the Gaze: An Introduction*. Toronto: Sister Vision