

The Role of Culture & the Arts in Preserving Identity (Blind Identity).

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A Baseline Definition of Culture

To comprehend the meaning of culture and develop a common ground for the discussions in this conference, I introduce two baseline definitions of culture. They have been selected on the basis that I agree with their definitions. However, this does not mean that all authors are in a total agreement about the definition of culture.

John H. Bodley, An Anthropological Perspective

From *Cultural Anthropology: Tribes, States, and the Global System*, 1994

Diverse Definitions of Culture:

Topical:	Culture consists of everything, such as: social organisation, religion, or economy.
Historical:	Culture is social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations
Behavioural:	Culture is shared, learned human behaviour, a way of life
Normative:	Culture is ideals, values, or rules for living
Functional:	Culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together
Mental:	Culture is a complex of ideas, or learned habits, that inhibit impulses and distinguish people from animals
Structural:	Culture consists of patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviours
Symbolic:	Culture is based on arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society

Culture involves at least three components: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. Thus, mental processes, beliefs, knowledge, and values are parts of culture. Culture is shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive, and integrated.

The shared aspect of culture means that it is a social phenomenon. Culture is learned, not biologically inherited, and involves randomly assigned, symbolic meanings.

The cross-generational aspect of culture has led some anthropologists, especially Kroeber (1917) and Leslie White (1949), to treat culture as a super-organic entity, existing beyond its individual human carriers. Individuals are born into and are shaped by a pre-existing culture that continues to exist after they die. Kroeber and White argued that the influence that specific individuals might have over culture would itself be largely determined by culture.

Thus, in a sense, culture exists as a different order of phenomena that can best be explained in terms of itself.

Some researchers believe that such an extreme super organic interpretation of culture is a dehumanising denial of "free will," the human ability to create and change culture. They would argue that culture is merely an abstraction, not a real entity. This is a serious issue because treating culture as an abstraction may lead one to deny the basic human rights of small-scale societies and ethnic minorities to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of threats from dominant societies.

In Eritrean history, and especially during the war of liberation, cultural music and generally arts served as a means of raising nationalism. Although ethnic language and music was used, its primary mission was enhancing revolutionary sentiments. This phenomenon was a typical of a one nation - one culture approach in building of a new and emerging African countries experience, not just Eritrean. The reason behind it possibly is/was to minimise conflicts within the various cultural backgrounds, but what is/was the consequences of such one nation-one culture approach?

After independence in Eritrea (1991), there has been a focus on the development of diverse ethnic Eritrean languages via promotion of mother tongue education system. i.e. children being instructed in their own mother tongue at elementary schools.

It is of paramount importance to realise that culture includes its human carriers. People can be deprived of their culture against their will. Culture is a people's unique possession.

For the word "culture," Clifford Geertz refers to the important [anthropological](#) work, Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man*, in which the following meanings are suggested:

1. "the total way of life of a people"
2. "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"
3. "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"
4. "an abstraction from behaviour"
5. a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave
6. a "storehouse of pooled learning"
7. "a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems"
8. "learned behaviour"
9. a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour
10. "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"

11. "a precipitate of history"

12. a behavioural map, sieve, or matrix

‘Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind.’ Says *Raymond Williams, Moving from High Culture to Ordinary Culture -Originally published in N. McKenzie (ed.), Convictions, 1958*

We use the word culture to mean a whole way of life, the arts and learning - the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Culture has deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.

- **systems of meaning, of which language is**



primary: If the process of learning is an essential characteristic of culture, then teaching also is a crucial characteristic. The way culture is taught and reproduced is itself an important component of culture.

- ways of organizing society, from kinship groups to states and multinational corporations
- the distinctive techniques of a group and their characteristic products



Several important principles follow from this definition of culture:

- Because the relationship between what is taught and what is learned is not absolute (some of what is taught is lost, while new discoveries are constantly being made), culture exists in a constant state of change. *Hrd* (leather band worn in the upper arm), *g'set* (hair style –young women) are lost in Blin culture
- Meaning systems consist of negotiated agreements -- members of a human society must agree to relationships between a word, behaviour, or other symbol and its corresponding significance or meaning. To the extent that culture consists of systems of meaning, it also consists of negotiated agreements and processes of negotiation.
- Because meaning systems involve relationships, which are not essential and universal (the word "door" has no essential connection to the physical object -- we simply agree that it shall have that meaning when we speak or write in English), different

human societies will inevitably agree upon different relationships and meanings; this a relativistic way of describing culture.

Essence

The "essence" of something is that part or property from which the thing's identity is derived. In other words, if you take away the essence of a thing, it loses its identity. The essence of a bicycle, for example, might be that it rides primarily on two wheels; devices which rely on one wheel aren't "unicycles," and with more than two are "tricycles," wagons, cars, etc. Similarly, when we talk about the "essential component" of something, we are speaking of that component which is most basic to its identity.

culture is a distinctive awareness of oneself engulfed by own understanding, feelings and interpretation of life in all aspects and reflecting own surroundings. It is the passion that drives an identity in the maintenance of the values, heritages and history as a family, or group of people, a nation or nations or even as a continent.

Arts: is a product of culture and artistic production is an expression or description of the culture in itself. Artistic and creative contributions are mostly made as a result of creative ability and/or as part of development and maintenance programmes of specific cultures, which may include research base sponsorships; by institutions, government or individual people's initiatives. The products of such activities mostly remain the documented materials for future reference of that culture.

Blin speaking people are one of the well-known ethnic groups with their songs; The most famous forms of dance and songs include; goliya, wesomiya, chefera, sheleel, elelewo, aulo. Although some of these forms are shared with other cultures there is always some distinctly different applications in their performances.

Blin do see some creative artists two perform extra-ordinary artistic talents in every generation. In my time, I have known some masters poets and singers;

Poets: Abreha Amar of Ashera, Dafla Osman of Squina and Hidru zer'e of Adefa and many more. Their lyrics were a result of a creative minds and in process they expressed, various changes including; social, political, economical and religious. They also advocated a way forward for the Eritrean people, and the Blin in particular.

In Blin history or stories and especially when it comes to transmission of culture, it merely depended in oral transmission and documentations does not go beyond the 19th Century which was indeed made by scholars of other cultures.

Culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we eat, the way we sit and so forth. Says Aime Cesaire, Martiniquen writer, speaking to the World Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris

What makes Blin is therefore, all the above and the ways in which we express and hold on to our cultural traditions. Again, Blin language remains to be the core of all values as a medium of communication and means of transmission of stories and history cross-generationally. Nevertheless, stories and history or traditions could also be told in various other languages

but that means sacrificing the value of language and leading to losing other values as speaking merely other languages also means borrowing other cultures and also missing the essence of the story being told.

In for many years Blin speakers have been multilingual; enriching their cultural heritages by borrowing and lending some cultural traditions including vocabulary of language and the usage of languages. Hence, it is a dynamic and a culture with tremendous organic ability to borrow and lend. I conclude with the following enlightening expressions by some culturally aware individuals.

No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive. [*Mahatma Gandhi* [source: *Correct Quotes*]]

Culture is but the fine flowering of real education, and it is the training of the feeling the tastes and the manners that makes it so. [*Minnie Kellogg, Iroquois leader* [source: *Petras and Petras*]]

The poor have no business with culture and should beware of it. They cannot eat it; they cannot sell it; they can only pass it on to others and that is why the world is full of hungry people ready to teach us anything under the sun. [*Aubrey Menen* [source: *Flesch*]]

Culture is an instrument wielded by professors to manufacture professors, who when their turn comes will manufacture professors. [*Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (1949)* [source: *Maggio*]]

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