

On the (IM) Possibility of a Private Culture

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Abstract: *There is a debate whether culture can be understood as private, i.e., whether it can be perceived as unadulterated by other cultures. This paper looks into the possibility or impossibility of such case by looking into approaches or frameworks in the study of culture.*

Keywords: culture, heterarchy, hospitality, phenomenology, philosophy

1. Introduction

“Culture” has undergone an evolution of meanings as it is used in different contexts depending upon its purpose (Barker, 2004). It has been defined, redefined, conceptualized and understood in multifarious ways. The concept therefore remains to be intricate and contested. Raymond Williams (1983) described culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its complex historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought. It is commonly opined that culture is a particular way of life. It is that relational complex whole whose parts cannot be changed without affecting other parts, mediated through powerful and power-laden symbolic forms as in religious symbols rites and ritual practices whose multiplicities and performatively negotiated character is transformed by alternative positions, organizational forms, and leveraging of symbolic systems as well as emergent new technologies, media and biotechnical relations (Fischer, 2007). For Williams (2009), the analysis of culture is the clarification of the meanings and values in a particular way of life, a particular culture. Such analysis includes historical criticism where works are analyzed in relation to traditions. This also entails an analysis of the elements in the way of life. Wittgenstein (1993) in his *Remarks on Frazer’s “Golden Bough”* criticizes Frazer’s analysis of culture which employs methodological individualism. Wittgenstein said that Frazer’s account of the magical and religious views of mankind is unsatisfactory. Cultural beliefs and practices which include religious beliefs, rituals and practices should not be explained but should rather be described. Explaining the culture especially if you are an outsider is guilty of error, biases and prejudices. Wittgenstein for instance said that the idea of explaining or wanting to explain a practice like killing a priest-king is wrong saying that doing it is a manifestation of stupidity.

Approaches to Culture

Kontopoulos (1993) in his book *The Logics of Social Structure* presented five approaches or frameworks in the analysis or research on culture the extremes of which are *methodological individualism* and *methodological holism*. The other approaches include the constructionist and hierarchical. He critiques the leading approaches and argues that they are

inadequate to the task of explaining the complexity of structures that make up society and the processes by which these structures are formed and interlinked. Methodological individualism involves claims about ontology, reduction, explanation, and confirmation of evidence. For instance, social institutions or entities do not exist separately from or act independently of individuals. Moreover, it alleges that all social explanations can be reduced to theories about individuals (Kincaid, 1993). Methodological individualism on the one hand is the thesis that good social scientific explanations should refer solely to facts about individuals and their interactions not to any higher-level social entities, properties or causes (List & Spiermann, 2013). This is evident in Habermas (1995) when he said that the bourgeois public sphere maybe conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as public. Holism on the other hand is the opposite approach. Social-scientific explanations must employ non-individualistic terms. It is entirely possible that social properties, not individual-level ones, display the most systematic causal relations in some social phenomena (List & Spiermann, 2013). Both methodological individualism and holism seek to explain the social-scientific phenomena. It is in explanation where error, bias and partiality lie. Moreover both approaches involve hierarchical concerns with the tendency of being hegemonic. Kontopoulos (1993) himself said that these two extremes seem fallacious and mutually implicated functioning as the poles of unsustainable dualism. They are characterized by exclusivism tangled with explanation of culture, whether that of reductionism or collectivism. Wittgenstein (1993) maintained that we do not aim to explain a cultural practice be it of religious nature. What we can do is to describe it. Explanation of the cultural practice brings us away from the facts of the cultural experience. Description is faithful to the facts and thus it will give justice to the culture. The mean between the extremes of methodological individualism and holism is a new conceptualization which is a more comprehensive approach in looking at culture is what Kontopoulos (1993) called as heterarchy. I think this is a more plausible framework in understanding a culture amidst the multiplicity of cultures. In heterarchy, there is shared power-structure, interdependence and collaboration (Schumacher, 2010). As a result, there is increased connectivity, flexibility to change and greater communication. According to Fairtlough (2005), heterarchy reduces the danger of tyranny, helps cooperation and commitment to common goals, fosters coevolution, teamwork, learning, and innovation, pluralistic and uses diversity. In terms of looking into cultural practices,

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heterarchy avoids the imposition of meanings to practices but dialogues with the facts of the cultural practice. Fairtlough (2005) reiterates that in heterarchy special skills for dialogue, teamwork, mutual respect and openness. When I see an Agta do the monkey dance, I do not judge him as barbaric or really not human. I must not impose my own meaning to the culture. These are biased and prejudiced assumptions. I should not think that my culture is superior compared to the Agta culture. I must respect it like the respect others give to my culture. What I can do is simply describe or give an account of the culture I witnessed and situate it in a form of life. Through this, I do justice to the facts.

Heterarchy as an alternative framework is inclusive of the other. It is about the recognition of the other as different and hence irreducible to my perception. Both the Levinasian and Derridian notion of difference involve exclusivism and hierarchy. The term that I would use to encapsulate a counterdiscourse is “morphing”. Morphing is a computer technique to refer to the transformation of an image in gradual transition. I noticed that both Levinas and Derrida thought that the other is a male; Derrida’s carnophallogocentrism for example indicates masculinity. Morphing the Levinasian and Derridian notions of the other would mean to include not only the feminine but also nature and this captures the heterarchical approach which Wittgenstein tries to point out in his remarks on *Frazer’s The Golden Bough*.

For Levinas (1979), the only way to live together in peace and justice is the ethical recognition of the infinity of the other. The other is not constituted by me, cannot be contained, absolute alterity. What we can do is to invoke the other in a face-to-face conversation. While totality is about ‘saming’, infinity is about difference. This difference does not mean inferiority but difference is a value, a variety. But the other has only reference to himself as it has no quiddity. The other is different as it is totally transcendent. This concept of Levinas of the ‘other’ as different is usually construed as a male since it is rather difficult to think of the ‘face’ of the ‘other’ as a woman. It is therefore characterized by exclusivity just like in methodological individualism which Wittgenstein is against. There is hegemony in individualism inasmuch as there is the inkling of superiority either the I is more superior over the other or vice versa. But in Levinas, I think ‘the other’ is attributed with primordial superiority. Moreover, Levinas fails to recognize the qualitative difference between the ‘public’ world of politics and the ‘private’ world of interpersonal relationships and tries to judge the former by the norms of the latter. What I see is that Levinas’ notion of difference lacks the sense of inclusion aside from its difficulty for practical applications in the everyday relationships. Yes, Levinas provides an ideal solution to ethical relationships with the other and this can be characterized by “eschatological” thinking.

Derrida on Hospitality

Derrida’s notion of difference is caught within language where difference and deferral are inherent. Meaning exists in relation to other things. For Derrida, in language, there are only

differences. The notion of difference in which Derrida used *difference* instead indicates the *aporia* in language as he coins terms to show the play of meanings. Situating this in ‘the event of the other’ for instance, instead of hospitality, Derrida coined ‘hostipitality’ in as much as he thought that upon analysis, there is hostility in hospitality. Derrida distinguished unconditional from conditional hospitality. Welcoming a guest and giving him the best without thinking of reciprocity characterize unconditional hospitality. But Derrida said that unconditional hospitality is impossibility. So what we think previously as unconditional is in fact conditional (Derrida, 2000). There are certain conditions behind every hospitable act. I have thought that hospitality is purely concerned with the welfare of the guest. Upon reading, pondering and reflecting about Derrida’s idea of hospitality, my erstwhile understanding of the term is deconstructed. It is no longer what I thought it was. There exists interruption, violence or hostility in hospitality.

Receiving a guest signals an interruption. When a visitor comes to my house and of course I welcome him, I have to stop from anything that I do no matter how important it is. This springs from the virtue of “hospitableness” that Filipinos like me are known for. In Kant’s idea, this is deontological. I think it is my obligation as a host to welcome and entertain a guest. Kant posited that the imperative must be categorical, but at the back of my mind, I have to be hospitable to my guest otherwise, I will be frowned upon not only by the guest but by anyone whom the guest will tell about my unwelcoming attitude. So I feel I am coerced by certain social norm to let a guest enter my home where I am a master, where I exercise authority. My mastery over my home is interrupted. Yes I am interrupted from what I normally am doing but it is more than that. There is an interruption in my being. Westmoreland (2008) said that in welcoming the guest, the self is interrupted. Basing from experience, there are two types of guests: guests that we do not wish (like a stranger or a not-so-close friend) for some reasons but we still welcome them and the guest that we like, a close friend or someone we have invited. Interruption in this sense can happen in two ways. First, when I welcome a visitor I do not like, I still welcome him but not wholeheartedly. If possible, I could have driven him away even before he enters my home. This is what is colloquially termed “*bwisita*” because he disturbs me from what I am doing, from my focus on what I am doing. Ultimately, he disturbs my whole being. I welcome him anyway because it is the ethical thing to do. It is unethical to reject a visitor or a guest. I have to be open and welcoming even to what I think is not deserving of hospitality. Second, when I welcome a guest I like such as my close friend, there is still an interruption. What I thought was that I offer him unconditional hospitality. I entertain him, I give him a room, I tell him to “feel at home.” Initially, it seems that there is no interruption but in fact there is. In what we think as unconditional hospitality, the host is the guest and the guest becomes a host. When I asked my mother why she let us sleep on the sofa and the visitor sleeps in our room, she replied “*kasibisitanatinsiya, nakakahiyanasiyaangmatulogsaupuan.*” It should be the guest who will feel ashamed because he is the

guest but it is us who feel ashamed of the guest. It is true indeed that the host loses his mastery of his own home and the guest takes and enjoys it. Our right to sleep in our room is sacrificed. The guest takes that right. Is this not a form of violence? It is a manifestation of what Derrida called "hostipitality." There is a little hostility or violence in letting the children sleep on the sofa or on the floor while the guest enjoys the room. There is little hostility in thinking that my guest is a "bwisita". There is little hostility in giving up a parcel of the mastery, right or authority over your home for the guest to enjoy.

In his "Eating Well", Derrida used the metonymy of eating the other or eating each other but we do not eat each other, we have to eat each other well as all our orifices (carno) are used. However, the *phallo* incarnophallogocentric is male. The 'other' of Levinas and the visitor/guest of Derrida are conceived to be males. So this together with the male other of Levinas can be morph to include the female, nature and also Asian or oriental. Paredes-Canilao (2006) said that difference remains caught within the Western so I think the notion can also be morphed to include the oriental. This is a heterarchical approach which is more viable in intercultural dialogue.

On Heterarchy

The heterarchical approach is I think the same as the Wittgensteinian non-Methodological Individualism and non-differential approach which in turn is connected to the Golden Rule of relationships both in its affirmative (Christian) version: "Do unto others what you want others do unto you" and in its negative (Confucian) version: "Do not do unto others what you do not want others do unto you." The negative version is sometimes called as the Silver Rule. Some think that these are merely different formulations of the same rule. The affirmative one tells us what we should do and the negative one tells us what we should not do. In both versions, the point of reference for actions and self-identification is via the other which according to Paredes-Canilao (2006) is typically European. To determine whether others like or dislike my action done unto them by thinking whether I would like or not like the same action done unto myself (Huang, 2005). Both indicate the recognition of similarity and difference. For most Asians, this recognition always includes the other (Paredes-Canilao, 2006). The recognition of oneself always happens within the context of the other. There is the oriental and the Filipino framework the interconnectedness and interlink between entities in the life world. When we talk about ourselves we already always talk about the other also and vice versa. This is manifested in our culture, in our religious beliefs and practices and in our language. The Ilocanos for instance practice what they call "atang". They share this practice with other cultural communities like the Gaddangs, Isinai, Ibanags and others. This practice is usually done through a ritual food offering to the spirits or unseen beings, depending upon the purpose, not done alone but with the community. A connection with other beings is paramount here. The Filipino language also clearly indicates the relationship. The Filipino term *kapwa*, the Ilocano *pada a tao*, the Isinai *isumarantaju* bespeaks the close connection with the other. Ibana (2009)

presents Filipino language as a tool in capturing the Filipino world view. By examining the Tagalog prefix *kaas* accommodation of differences and opposition. This shows the infinite depth and breadth of Filipino's capacity to absorb various kinds and levels of solidarity. Language is never private since it is meant to communicate with the other and to communicate the other. The gay lingo and even the millennial words such as *werpa* (power), *lodi* (idol), etc. manifest the connection with the other which already is contained in the terms. In the Filipino language, the prefix *ka* is indicative of the recognition of the other always already present in the term. Examples are *kakawing-kawingto* indicate interlocking linkages, *kapwa at kaibato* express sameness and difference, *kaibigan*, *kapatid*, *kalaro*, etc. The Ilocano counterpart *pada a tao* and the Isinai *isumarantaju* share the same meaning of the term. Also present in the Ilocano language is the use of the term *kaas* in *kadwa* (*kasama/tayongdalawa*), *ka-ay ayam* (*kalaro / playmate*). To play means to have a *kadwa*, the other since it is not possible to play alone. But this was during the emergence of gadgets that enable a child to play alone.

The golden rule in whatever formulation is thus a universal guide for interpersonal relationships in the midst of plurality of cultures. Integrating the other into the self can aid in achieving peaceful and just communities by doing what we think is good and not doing what we think is harmful. In whatever culture we have, the other is always included. Hence, private culture is not possible.

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