

What Culture Is Not!

Brooks (1968) delineates the framework of culture by differentiating it from other close subjects. Namely, geography, history, folklore, sociology, literature and civilization.

Culture is not 'geography', for the latter is the 'setting' of the former. "Geography is the stage upon which the drama of human culture is played. Geography can at best be no more than the material surroundings in which culture takes root, flourishes, and comes to fruition" (Brooks, 1968, p. 19).

Culture is not the same as 'history' which heavily relies on written records. Of course everything has a history. Even history has a history, and human culture is no exception. In general, it is fair to say that history goes back no further than the invention of writing. Human culture is vastly older than history (Brooks, 1968, p. 19).

Culture is not 'folklore'; i.e., it is not the customs, legends, and superstitions that are transmitted in an informal way from one generation to another by means of oral communication. Folklore can provide only a limited and partial view of what we mean by culture (Brooks, 1968).

Culture is different from 'sociology'. Damen (1987) believed that a society has a culture and a social organization. Therefore, she maintained society and culture are not the same. In general, when referring to social interactions, sociology focus on the group as a major concern of analysis, while culture refers to a set of behavioural, cognitive and emotional patterns. However, what is social and what is cultural may coincide and be identical. Therefore, both the social and the cultural perspectives are complementary.

Culture is not to be confined within literature. However, literature can supply us with a valuable part of what needs to be taught under the heading of culture.

Culture is also not to be confused with civilization. Brooks (1968) puts it clearly that "Civilization deals with an advanced state of human society, in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government has been attained. It deals mainly with cultural refinements and technological inventions that have come about as the result of living in cities and thickly populated areas' (p. 21)". In other words, civilization is a more inclusive concept than culture.

Brooks (1968) argues that the point which distinguishes culture from the disciplines mentioned above is the fact that in culture we never lose sight of the individual. For example,

for geography, mountains, rivers, lakes, natural resources, rainfall, and temperature is quite impersonal and would be what it is whether people were present or not. It is only when we see human beings in this geographical picture and observe the relationship between their individual lives and these facts and circumstances of the earth's surface that our perspective becomes what we may call cultural.

The origins of the term 'Culture'

The concept of culture originates in agriculture where it denotes the tillage or the cultivation of the soil and plants. By extension, it refers, in biology, to the growing of bacteria.

Culture in the nineteenth century meant Western civilization. It was popularly believed that all peoples pass through developmental stages, beginning with "savagery", progressing to "barbarism" and culminating in western "civilization". It's easy to see that such a definition assumes that western cultures were considered superior. This is a subjective, authoritative, taken for granted definition of culture (Jandt, 1998).

In the mid-nineteenth century, culture was bound to literature and fine arts. It was then defined as "the pursuit not of material but of spiritual perfection via the knowledge and practice of 'great' literature, 'fine' art and 'serious' music." (O'Sullivan et al., 1994). Hence, it was exclusively restricted to an elite class, leaving the majority of people 'uncultured'. This has later formed one of the basic orientations in the definition of culture, namely the literary, aesthetic, artistic approach or big 'C' culture, known also as 'formal' or 'high' culture. The second orientation is that of the social science anthropological approach which views culture as what shapes everyday life, namely patterned ways of behaviour, including the thought processes of a given people, in other words, small 'c' or 'deep' culture. (Brooks 1968, Seelye 1993).