

CHAPTER I

CULTURE AS A PHENOMENON

THE BASIS OF SELF-IDENTITY

A. GALLO

Culture is something we can see, count, and describe. It is the object of an experience when we analyze a culture different from ours. We easily recognize it because it is different, but not the difference itself. We see the true form, color, substance, sound, smell, high key and low key of a culture. In this moment we, as philosophers, are not taking the role of sociologists, or anthropologists. We leave that to Kroeber¹, Boas², Levi-Strauss³, So Tax⁴ or Clifford Geertz⁵. We are working from the books of anthropologists: social anthropology, physical anthropology, linguistic anthropology (e.g., Whorf⁶ or Pike⁷). As Husserl⁸ showed, we have the right to make our own experience.

Earlier studies also are elements of our living experience about cultural objects, but the primary object is the world of colors, forms, things, people, thinking and traditions, which a culture of itself shows to everyone who wants to approach it. A culture is visible, conspicuous. We see the clothes, and the shape of women walking or sitting on the earth, their hair flashing. They carry children on their shoulders or put them on the baskets of the super-markets. They talk across the street, or drive cars. The culture is something "eidetic"; it appeals us, encompasses us, embraces us, pierces us, challenges us. We can agree or disagree with it, but generally we disagree.



2 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

To its observers a culture says something: something we understand: the music, design, topology. And something we do not understand: the attitude of the people, their gestures, values, their intimate relations. Why do we understand some things and not others?

It is because every culture is a language: all cultural objects are words, and all cultural customs are discourses. Some words of this language are common to us, or very close, and we understand them. And some others are inexplicable and bore us.

The previous explanation, though very elemental, is partially true. The culture speaks because it is a language which the group, as an architect, has built through time and history to dialogue with oneself and with the world.

We can experience a culture because it is a collection of objects. Beyond their practical functions, these objects have a meaning, are signs and symbols: material, artistic, economic, religious. Every object--a door, a chair, a clock on the wall--without any reference to man, is mute, indifferent. However the human community has talked about them, used them, negotiated over them and criticized them: thus it humanized them, and put them in the history.

A thing becomes a link between persons, it assumes a certain weight in the common estimation and, a place in the world. It is a witness; it captures many references and sheds light upon the members of the group. It



is sufficient to the study of the "gift" by Marcel Mauss to be impressed. The objects began to speak. Their meanings are public and secret, aloud and mysterious, they acquire some sacrality as the dread of a major Mountain, the virtues of a source in the woods, or the specters of a solitary path. The group knows that, is awed by it, but lives with it.

Indeed this is only the most static and superficial level of the culture however it is enough to introduce us to the implications of the culture in the construction of the personality and self of individuals, born in the group, who become men and citizens by the group.

To search out a more far-reaching level of the culture, we must note, beyond the voices of objects, those of words. The vocal language is not the only language. Man creates and uses language, but it is the most complete and meaningful.

It is sensible too, due to the noise it produces, the rhythm, the tone, and periods, but its potentiality for significance engages many regions of the human soul and mind. The semantic dimensions are intertwined in the spoken language; they insert us in the very "medium" shared by the human being with his partners for the construction of a civilization and of an intellectual and moral environment.

We will propound three examples of communities: one very ancient (Guatemala's indians), the second new, completely submerged in a contemporary and technological world, and fighting there for a higher level of



4 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

economic and intellectual existence(the Cubans in Miami).

The third reflecting a situation an emergency in a suburb of Washington DC, a Hispanic conglomerate of about five hundred families, many of them from Central and South America e.g., San Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, Peru and Colombia.

CASE I: GUATEMALAN INDIANS

The first case transcends the limits of a community. There are, in the same territory, almost twenty different ethnic groups forming a complex of about four millions people, who dwell in and posses (with limitations) their own original historical land, language, collective habits and traditions.

In the highlands of Guatemala, the indian people are concentrated in a big region commonly called "the central occidental plateau". They occupy the most high level of the state geography and share the great lake of Atitlan, the Cuchumatanes mountains, the hills of Coban, and some spots scattered in the south coast. They do not compose a national unity, but they have a name which was lately adopted to make themselves feel truly unified, with a common historical background: the Mayan People.

Of course that is not a real nation; the name signifies no more than an ideal projection of the present spread of villages back in the dark historical past, in order to find a point of encounter inside an icon. These many different ethnic groups communicate each other, when necessary, trough the official spanish language.

If we consult statistical studies about this population with 64%



analphabeticism (80% among women), with poor provisions for public schools very low PCP (less than a hundred dollars a year) we could deduce that they have no culture. But we would be mistaken, or worse, lying. There is a classical case of how to deceive with statistics:

If we add the nutritional deficiency among children, pulmonary sickness, alcoholism, and many more, we have a true "black legend" about the mayan people ready for a rescue by members of the peace-corp or NGO's salvation plan.

But if we try to see (literally watch) their cultures and make a simple "eidetic" description, the landscape changes and these people become real persons. Chichicastenango, is a small Indian city, not so far from Utatlan, the old K'iche city, whose K'iche kings were burned alive by the conqueror Pedro de Alvarado.

Tourist attractions converted it into a well-known place. Its market place: the two opposite temples with stairs and little altars, burning incense, reflecting the Mayan model of religious sanctuaries; the candles inside the church, the polychromy of flower's petals offered to the saints on the sacred hilltops: all have created the myth of Chichicastenango.

But this is not sufficient. There are indigenous shamans assisting the faithful, religious servants with incense praying for rain and a good harvest. Authorities in their traditional hand-made clothes, the "cofrades" and the houses of the saints, the images stuffed with brilliant streams of paper, the

6 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

processions, all plunge us into a mystical cultural mood.

All these superficial details can not explain why they are there, after five centuries after Columbus? Perhaps we must talk with the people selling lime, or pottery, or these colorful sheets. Or perhaps we should read Bunzel Ruth, Chichicastenango; or Ruben Reina's The Law of the Saints; or Robert Carmack's Quichean Civilization.

Maybe we start by learning the meaning of every gesture, ceremony, personal prayer, wedding gift, ritual, myth and cosmic vision. We begin a trip to the interior of this culture to find the human consciousness of the other persons, their interpretation of the world, discovering their "otherness", freedom, as Husserl in his fifth Cartesian Meditation, or Merleau Ponty in Signs.

Their square world is founded upon the four cardinal points, with four colors (the red for the orient, the yellow for the south, the white for the north and the black and dark blue for the occident); the center is green for man.

Their traditional mathematics, proceeds by multiples of four to twenty, for calculating the daily small purchases in the market place. Their calendar of eighteen months, has a week of thirteen days. A square guatemalan calendar not a round mexican, with the names of the good days and the "animal-nagual" which links it to every newborn child. The shaman calculates the system of space and time which oversees the human

destiny and stress the relationship between the earthly zones of life: the underground, the surface, and the sky. The whole community knows the proper ritual to sanctify the fields of maize, to seek penance, to beg for permission, to become a friend to the lord of the hills and of the woods.

The present and the future acquire sense, with the yearly cycle and the wisdom of the ancestors, the saints, the nature's forces and the great order of the sky, the sun, the moon, and the animal's life. The book of the creation of the world written by the Pop Vuj, is not a book for reading. It is for a people who have forgotten the hieroglyphic writing, it is a living gospel, coming from the counsel of the ancestors.

This is Chichicastenango from the inside, and it is the culture of a people who for five centuries have protected their form of life against the waves of tourists and the tyranny of governors. They are the heirs of the old K'iche and have recently overrun the last military bastion of the heights along with the other villages of the same culture: Santa Cruz, Santa Maria Chiquimula, Sacapulas, Cunen, Uspantan and Saint Catherine Ixtahuacan. After the war they have fed, for years the sons of their widows, and cultivated their fields, as a community responsible of all his members.

They keep and perpetuate the four stems of the K'iche culture:

The first is the "Maize" which is the general basis of nourishment, the social "medium" to share in the family, to negotiate in the square, to dictate economic politics, to give soul to every ceremony. It is the value that

8 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

symbolizes the continuity and the potentialities of the group; and moreover, it is a divine principle linking human labor and the creative forces of nature and the universe. The formal education of the young people is related to the maize. The father is in charge of training and instructing the children about raising and cultivating the maize; the mother educates her daughters by showing them the skills of preparing in many forms the maize as a food for the man and the community. -"As long as the maize endures, the Mayan People will exist", said their recent leader Manuel Salazar Tetzaguic.

The second stem of their culture is the consciousness of being part of the whole world. The Pop Vuj's pantheistic "creation" is a spiritual work that involves their temper of mind and moral attitudes. The K'iche feels himself to be connected with the natural elements, the animals, the plants, the fields, the rain and the fog, the river and the mountain. This estimation of nature is spontaneous and metaphysical: one is Being, one is the order "with all its manifestations"(So Tax). No one among K'iche people can use the natural energies (as we do in the occidental mind, as an instrument) without venerating them, cooperating with them, asking pardon, praying to the lord each expression of the whole (Falla:El K'iche rebelde).

The third stem of the people's culture is the authority of the community. The whole society is stirred up through many structured levels of office. Step by step, a K'iche man becomes an adult by serving his community. The uppermost level is occupied by elders, the elevated rung of

wise and sage men. This training leads a person to true spiritual kinship, and after the death, they join the presence and ranks of the ancestors who live their mysterious life by night in the same streets, fields and woods (Betty Saravia, El ladino me jodio).

The fourth root in this sublime construction is the unity of all man's activities: life is not divided; their vision is unitarian. This aesthetic values make a whole of the polychromed pottery, suits and linens. Technical labor is nothing but another face of moral being, moral order and social discipline, with religious cults and the poetic imagery.

There, sectors in life are not divided between politics and education, fidelity to the family and desire for fame and skill. Perhaps the slow transformation of the external expressions of their culture is due to the difficulty of conserving the proportions of this whole in a modern context.

Through this rough overview, we realize that behind the crowded multiplicity of cultural objects, one can discover a texture of meanings which bind together the vines from the most remote roots of an ethnic identity.

To complete the scene, one must note that there are many other similar units. The K'iche are one of many expressions of the Indian heritage in Guatemala. The twelve villages around Atitlan Lake show a Tzutujil variant of the ancient culture. The Tzutuhil and Cackchiqueles people are also relics of conquest; their unchanged customs and skills make them much

10 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

sought subjects for scholars and tourist photographs.

The Santiago Atitlan provides a more intense perception of space and time through their traditional accounts (collected and translated by Rita Roesh). The sagas and myths around the lake reflect their worldview like a hyper-real mirror with high volcanos and treacherous waves, as in the dimly lit mood of the dreams.

The makers of rain, the child who brought us fire, the princess sleeping under the shining waters, the little daughter who became lord of the beloved mountain, are sufficient literature. They justify the team of naturally gifted artists (as Sisay, Curruchich and others). One should also not forget their sculptures and paintings, as well as the folk festivals, hand woven cloth, and decorated fabrics. All of this is contrasted with the rocky walls along their slender trails which escort us to the more secret syncretic cult (ancient and modern) of Maximón. They provide a new image enriching the icon of traditional Mayan culture. But let us pass to other regions.

Our travel leads to Cobán, where they speak the most attractive though aging language, reflecting the historical debates of Bartolomé de Las Casa, Montesinos and Vitoria. The Ixil triangle is dreadfully famous for the repression which took place there. There is also the Mam area whence thousands of men who crossed the border into Mexican territory and were crowded into refugee camps in Champotón and Campeche. They are not Mexican; their land is the old Mayan land, and their language

(mam=ancient) is the oldest Mayan language.

The Mayan people in Guatemala, despite their differences can be considered to constitute a vast Mayan horizon which raises questions about the vital sources of ethnicity and the struggles it has endured for centuries as the guardian of a human community. For it develops its own system of life and the meaning of being human.

CASE II: THE CUBAN COMMUNITY, MIAMI

The second case is the Cuban community in Miami. This originated mainly from the exodus of many Cubans into the United States and Puerto Rico after the installation of Castro's regime from 1959 to 1961 when his government began its agrarian reform and openly declared itself marxist.

It closed Catholic and private schools, the centers of Catholic activities, and banished the priests. Political harassment killed many citizens, thousands were put in jail, and many had to flee. From this date the flight to a free land became a more or less intense series of successive waves to the present (1992).

Many reached far countries, such as Venezuela, Canada, Brazil, Colombia, Nederland, and Australia, but the larger part was scattered throughout the Unites States, but mostly in the nearest city, Miami. It is an important fact that through the years, many thousands of cubans who spread out to the big cities of North America, slowly retired to Miami. There, the new comers and their predecessors not only transformed a minor city into a

12 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

dynamic and progressive one, but it built a community with strong structures and a distinctive character.

Today, Cubans occupy a broad geographical sector of the city. They hold leading positions in economics, business and technology. The Cubans own a large number of restaurants, hotels, newspapers, broadcasting stations, clubs, educational institutions, churches, supermarkets, drugstores, libraries and museums. This Cuban community has Cuban foods, sings Cuban songs, and buy suits in the Cuban style. They celebrate Cuban weddings and Cuban feasts, and promote political action for their rights. Practically they transformed the drowsy town of old Miami into a main trading center and a major financial force.

Obviously in this period of only thirty years, they have not forgotten their Cuban identity which they have conserved though their culture has changed greatly. Nevertheless, they continue to identify themselves as true Cubans. To demonstrate this, they keep in contact with their old relatives on the island, and talk about Cuba every day, criticizing Fidel Castro as a necessary point of reference in their conversations.

But are the Cubans in Miami, genuine Cubans? Many speak English fluently and accept American comforts, materialistic views, and consumerism. Their children learn more easily in English than in Spanish and tend to forget the latter. They are involved in American pragmatic thinking in the new-age ideology.

Though many parents, educated in the religious and Catholic traditions of Cuba, are not truly practicing Catholicism, nevertheless their religion is now a part of their renowned identity and is a consistent element for being true Catholics and true Cubans.

The Catholic religion has become a very influential element in their lives. They support the church financially and donate their services to the Church. The Catholic faith is not only the spiritual means for saving their soul, but it is a reinforced vision of the world, a cultural and spiritual connection with the past.

J. Alan Winter (1991) studied the religious integration and the cohesion of the community as a changing, pluralistic whole with many dimensions. He investigated the "Zionism" more as an integrating element for the community, than as a control. Gene Levine had established a positive connection between religion and community integration. But is religion an effect of the group integration or an instrument for it? If a religious commitment influences the sense of unity, may we talk about an "ethno-religion?" In the Cuban case there is no doubt that the religious element plays a strong role in strengthening the ties which unify the group.

As the relation between the American Jews with Israel has been a basic factor in support of the continuity of Jewish identity, there is a very interesting possibility that the reaction of the Cubans against Castro could strongly support they extraordinary force of their Cuban identity.

14 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

Of course, there are more elements we could consider. The Cubans were truly a special kind of emigrants. As the poll of 1990 demonstrated more than 51% of the people who went out from the island had some university degree or study. Only 7% or 8% were peasants or factory workers. This intellectual level and educational preparation could explain their rapid success in the host country, how strongly they intertwined the net of relations with their neighbors and their consciousness of continuity with the past.

Their negative image of Cuba today--the general poverty, the tyranny of the government, the lack of free thinking, and of free associations, the destruction of free enterprise, and the slaughter of cultural and religious expression--is a dark but essential component of their present new Cuban image of ethnic identity.

The "Hermita de la Virgen" of charity, the yearly boat festival in the bay, the discovery of St. Augustine as the first settled colony in the United States are rough materials for the history of a community which does not want to disappear. In their search for their spatial and temporal boundaries, they have created a mythical idea of an utopian country, namely a Cuba without Fidel but with a democratic government, free enterprise, and some socialism to ensure the control of government over the large centers of production and to provide basic services to all citizens. They dream of free educational centers with some teaching of religious subjects when parents

request it.

In their axiological scale, the highest value is economy (76%), the second place at 73.5% is religion, the third (73.4%) is education, with great interest in progress. The most important element in their ideal ethnic icon is the Cuban familiar relationship, with Cuban music, history, traditions and language.

The younger ethnic generation has developed the content of its own identity, which does not necessarily coincide with that of the Cubans on the island. With time, this identity will be increasingly different as new cultural elements are integrated into their respective identities, for the new factors to be assimilated will be new responses to the challenges of the historical environment. This appears in their own sense of being Cubans: 62% defined themselves as "principally Cubans;" 33% said that they were acquainted that they mingle a part of "Cubanity" and a part of participation with the new land which received them. In fact, 70% are now citizens of the U.S. and 46% of the others want to be. Many other elements will be changed, but this is not the point. What is important is that this group does exist, fights to conserve itself, and in the last few years has acquired a lasting personality. They will call themselves Cubans despite the growing differences between them and the Cubans of the island.

A typical example of this process of differentiation could be formed in an international meeting in St. Augustine, Florida on July 30th and 31st

16 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

and August 1st and 2nd of 1992. It reflected one of the possible confusions of identities. The issue of the political action against Cuba threatened the balance of the divergent tendencies between Cubans on the island and those who fled. Each party could vindicate for itself the right to be a true Cuban, and in fact there were "two true Cuban" groups or more. But the mingled mentalities could not harmonize their outlooks on the future. Fortunately, the religious element: prayers, rituals, processions, cuban night, which everybody could interpret as of their own, established the desired unity. In this case as Woochar (1986) stated regarding the Jews, the attitude toward the original people performed his basic role stressing the continuation of the Cuban identity in foreign territories. To be Cuban is to be part of a people rich with glorious traditions and perduring values. The movement of CRECED, encouraged by religious authorities, is welcomed by the community in terms of both the spiritual and the ethnic.

CASE III; THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

The third case alludes to a small hispanic community near Washington, D.C., in Wheaton, Maryland. The physical center of the unity is religious too, but this is not the reason for the union itself. The people are not emigrants of one country as is the case of the Cubans above, but they came from many Latin American states, mainly from Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and some from further south, Venezuela, Colombia and Peru. The conglomerate is not so homogeneous were the

Cubans: their only common elements are language, the Catholic tradition, and the colonial background. Few of them had any political involvement but shared a psychological attitude, that of the men and women searching for peace, a convenient job and a promissory future.

This first sketch of the group could be interpreted as a heterogeneous contest of individualistic ideals. If we say further that some 10% of them constitute a fluid population moving to other suburbs in search of new jobs or more convenient homes, and that many have problems with the authorities because of their legal situations, we can draw an image of some very inconsistent whole.

But that would be be their basic reality, for there is a true life of group. As many other groups, this is not quite uniform. A principal and fixed core is constituted of people who emigrated to the Washington area ten or twelve years ago. Their economic and social situation is now improved and well established. Their relations with their countries of origin are looser, their support of the group is more effective.

Some of them offer professional services to the Spanish speaking: regarding jobs, insurance, taxes, contracts, etc. Others are expert in building maintenance, or managing hotels, stores, factories. Women work in offices, travel agencies, and the like.

Around this stronger nucleus are grouped more recent immigrants, socially and economically weaker, who seek the aide and collaboration of

18 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

those of the same language and tradition who are already established. For them the linguistic and cultural barrier is too robust to be broken; they depend on the support of people who can communicate with them in some deep sense. They identify them, reach them through friends, and thrust them.

A strange incomprehensible "gap" separates them from the highly technical and developed English-speaking society. They ignore the internal sensibilities of these well organized people, of the mass media, art, literature, politics; and understand very little of labor associations.

But they open a space for themselves in the big society, with some protection from the law and a small human environment similar to them. In fact not only the language is common; the same religion, the same feasts, friends, and some spiritual conceptions of the life and of the world, which is the general latin american heritage of the colonization and spanish tradition. Over this fragile web they interlaces a thread of a human context.

Not only the mail is an assumed channel for perpetuate the relations with the families in the outside world of their original land, but mainly the phone. The telephone calls are the new fancy but effective instrument to connecting this small and closed yard to the living history of they relatives, and the big history of the past: in the fun and noisy Salvador, in the foggy mountains of Peru, or the mythic mayan cities of Guatemala. Could we say that the phone wires and the microwaves are the threads which nourish the identity of the group?

In fact they do not have any problem of identity or alienation. Their land is not lost, their old house is still there, waiting for some possible pace to return. And all their family is alive there. Is that a sufficient reason to justify their sturdy attachment to their customs and traditions?

Maybe we have to take account of other component of identity: the race. This is not a biological concept which, we know, does not influence culture in some predetermined way. More in the sense Pitt-Rivers assumes for Guatemala and Mexico.

The racial concept in Latin America is that of the "mestizo". This group of St. Catherine knows that they are "mestizos": their dark skin opposed to white and blonde, the short stocky frame opposed the tall and slender, the ravish and warm character opposed to the cold and calculated, and other paradigmatic quotes, induce all the members of this group to classify themselves as coincident with the standard inside marks, and fairly inconsistent with the outside people of the same vicinity.

The slow but gradual transformation of this group is not only due to the changes of jobs that moves the people to another site of the city, but to the new comers into the family. The classical concept of the extended family operates to introduce into the established unities, new arrivals from the kinship: cousins, aunts, nephews, or simply known people. All these need more and more the support and the cooperation from the community, and in the same time it makes the ties more stronger. This is a minor problem for

20 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

the community but temporarily it shapes the whole; for seeking jobs, homes, contacts, schools, and health assistance.

No doubt that the religious factor is the main agent for the birth of a common identity, and in fastening ethnic bonds; specially the catholic religion. In fact, many persons who in their original countries passed to some new sects or fundamentalist congregations, have returned to the catholic practice inside the group.

The catholic parish of St. Catherine is traditionally english speaking, and of yankee style. It offered to the spanish minority the physical shell and human openness. There were developed all the religious activities in spanish:prayer's teams, biblical schools, preparation for baptism and for marriage, retreats, classes of Catechism for children, alphabetization, rooms for family celebrations, games, masses and encounters after mass.

All these activities scheduled along the week, and on sunday, give to all the old and new members of the community the favorable opportunity for the autorealization and friendly contacts:as teachers, choir members, leaders in the religious knowledge, as consultants, trainers, sport directors. These complex activities satisfy the persons of all social class levels, strengthens ethnics bond and overthrow the social stratification.

A lot of the new arrivals are speedy incorporated to the life of the group; and the aide to the poor members is seen as a task of improving simultaneously the identity of the whole.

These weekly activities and the closed relations among hispanics in the working context, orient the marriages to be an in-group phenomenon. In fact a few are celebrated with persons of the originary country, but the ordinary ones are with partners of the same group or other likely communities of the Washington area.

Despite of living in the same territory, and using the same physical spaces (church, school, Claridge room, Russell room, convent, rectory) the spanish community keeps a sharply definite boundaries with the english parish, because all the community's institutions are different. Most of the members only know the spanish language well, the english priests (the pastor and others) do not speak spanish and do not understand spanish. Only the community leaders, and the nuns designated for the apostolate, deal freely in both languages.

The commitment of the leaders, deacons, and a good number of lay cooperative people, is consciously inspired by the religious faith, but not so unconsciously ethnic. They keep some general consciousness of perpetuating a spiritual mood from their homelands, with high human values, opposite to those of the surrounding materialistic civilization (drugs, car-jackings, run-away youths).

The perception of an economic security and amelioration due to responsible behavior in their work and with the laws and the duties of the citizens in the host country, firmly supports their faith; taking the recourse to

22 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

God and to religious creed as a conscious complement of principles for life.

Inside the community then, they find a catholic education for children, new practical courses of training for employments, more intense knowledge of the spiritual doctrine.

In general we can describe the St. Catherine spanish community as a people of different roots, but a common hispanic background, who are too recent to have an history and a durable consistency, but consciously fighting to become an ethnic group.

In a broader view, if we try to notice all the similar communities spread in Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia (from the catholic perspective belonging to the Washington Archdiocese) supposing the present conditions will last, soon they will become a set of some newborn ethnic entities, with their consequent: languages, communication means, life design, as they have, the ethnic groups.

This process is quite different from that of the cubans in Miami. Maybe, it could be compared (only from the ethnic point of view) with our first case, of the mayan archipelago of groups in Guatemala. These defied centuries to conserve their historical identity, and they are defying a technological superpower to constitute their own new communal way of life.

We have then three different styles of producing culture on behalf of a human set of persons in quite a wide variety of environments. Our eidetic description offers to us an experience that we have to interpret, reflecting,

explaining or reducing in the phenomenological method of analysis, without forsaking contact with the experience itself.

The three look quite different, but in some true way, they are groups, human groups. We tried to see the cultures starting from the cultural frontiers: the things produced, the behaviors generated by the people. We saw the objects, circumstances, attitudes of the spirits, the geographical contexts of the tropical mountains or the flat hot plain, or the wonderful woods, and the home's kits. We saw the variety of external colors of the internal thinking, and all of their products, homes, machines and offices. Is the culture a set of stable, settled objects?

When the hurricane Andrew struck Miami (1992) it left these people bare footed, tore off their roofs, ejected the doors, broke the walls, and exposed everything and uncovered their bare bones to the sun. All the cultural objects were dispersed: chairs, tables, tools, plates, dishes, books, disks, cars, beds, shoes, cans, pictures, papers, diaries, records, memories; and left the people there, alone. Thanks to God, only few dyed. Fifteen thousand homes were disrupted, only their inhabitants were left standing desperately seeking their goods. But indeed, walking, talking, weeping and screaming, but real persons in this immense disaster of things.

Maybe this is a metaphor, for what we need to go inside into the group: the things are dead, the men are living; but which is the link among men and things? They were crying, because they lost their useful objects

24 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

and tools; what about the people who were deprived of their languages, their customs, their traditions, their thinking, their ideals which they loved? Why could we not sweep away all the things and give to the men a new skin? What about this strange being we call person? From this thin starting point, we can, probably, move our reflections about the ethnic groups.

Person can forsake, and build a new house; but can he forsake his culture and adopt another? We have to find the answer beyond the cultural objects, and follow the thread of their significance to reach the interior level, where the meaning is produced and received; beyond the phenomenon of the experience to the transcendental world of the communication between persons. Person dwells in the center of the woven icon whence things are denoted, and whither things send their sings.

This experience brings to the person the living foundation, but the reflexion and the communication make the sense. In the following section George McLean will explore the constitution of the person as an individual, a forward step in our inquiring. Before, we need to bestow an insight to the whole context, where the persons flourish and grow: and it is the human group.

We do not find many philosophers debating it as they did in examining the individuals. Only in this contemporary age did the ethnic group uplift the issue of their identity and beg the attention of a speculative analyses. Despite E. Husserl anticipation of the theme, in *Philosophy as*

strict science, and in the fifth meditation, Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Paul Ricoeur's entries, whose attitude was viewed more as a traditional defence of the political nationality, or of an hidden national socialism; merely after the crushed communism(1989) and consequent movements inside many historically unified states, the plurality of cultures, and the issue of the ethnic groups, became an international problem and an interesting subject from the speculative perspective.

The issue was before a field of research for anthropologists as Gnarl (1969) Barth (1970) and Geertz (1973). But lately it is debated mainly in religious literature. We will quote only some recent discussion such as J. Alan Winter (1991) "Religious Commitment, Zionism and Integration in a Jewish Community", John Webster (1992) "Locality and Catholicity", Crispino James(1980)" The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups", Charles Tylor (1989) "The Making of Modern Identity", Frederick Schick (1992) "Liberty, Equality", Edward Dixon Junkin (1992) "Up From Grass Roots". Others are more political and ideological such as P. F Knitter (1991) "Pluralism and Oppression", Rodney Barker (1992) "The Broken Circle", Diana L. Eck and Susan A. M. Shumaker's report (1992) "The Pluralism Project", James Paul (1989) "National Formation and the Rise of Cultural".

In the past, philosophers spoke about the personal "ego" and interpersonal relations as Max Scheler, Levinas, Hanna Arendt, Shutz. They also spoke of the family as a natural entity as fundamental nucleus of the society.

26 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

But few are acquainted of the group as a super-personality as Husserl call it, as "natural" as the family is. From the family, a man receives biological life, care and emotions, education, sensible communication, patterns of action, protection. But who established the rules of the language? the norms of civility? the patterns of conduct? the working traditions? All are products of the group. And all these are the fundamental cultural elements.

Every individual person is shaped by the group's daily interrelations, from the beginning of his existence to the fullness of human development, and maturity. So it is the case of the indians we painted from Guatemala, the Cubans in the island and the cubans in Miami, and these small communities in Washington DC.

And if the group does not exist, the man does not obtain a definite identity, a neat values's scale, a set of good manners, a place for himself in this world, and many other more profound characters, or elements supporting the identity: this man can acquire many knowledge, sciences, maybe, skills; but he will be nobody: without roots, without traditions, without a world to share with others, without a structure of intimate communications, what could produce a more deep and transcendental signification.

To understand the dynamic of the life inside the group we will transgress the exterior frontier (of material or intellectual products) the fixed ones, which tend to be historical, conservative, for their own essence, despite of being intellectual objects, aesthetical, moral, or political; of whom

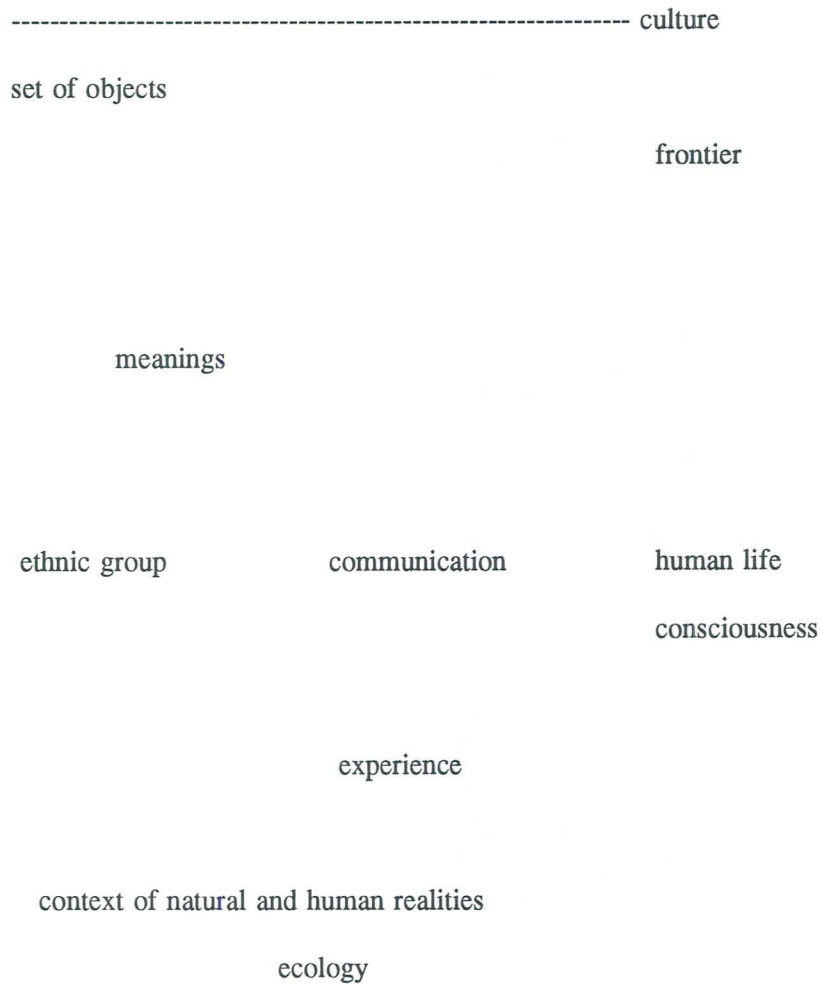
P. Ricoeur speaks as an ideology.

The culture seen from its boundaries, where a group states its differences from another; where the groups project the meaning of its unicity, there is not any favorable conjuncture of promoting changes through an external influence. We could not, for example, plunder the Cubans of their prolonged discourse about Cuba, their family meetings, or their Cuban food. There is too much significance in it. In Guatemala it would be impossible for the Mayan people, to forsake the sacred maize, their process of education inside the community, and their concern about the ancestors and the nature's presence. And for St. Catherine people to separate themselves from the weekly convention, the calls of phone through Latin America and trust on their community members.

The inculturation as we describe it will be a reality at more internal level, at the communication level where a man is evolving in his deep process of experience and expression.

But is not possible to reach this more authentic and essential center without take contact with the cultural frontier and passing through it. This is the place of hermeneutics as a first step to the inculturation. We can put it in the following scheme:

28 *Culture as a Phenomenon*



We can distinguish three main regions in this global representation of an ethnic group as a whole, as a personality. The most superficial region we put in the superior level is external to the group notwithstanding it is strictly linked to the group by meanings.

Is the region of the cultural objects, signs and symbols: as words, writings, and material supplies. These, are terminal products of the persons

inside the collectivity. They can not be changed, only substituted by others more or less different. As products, all these fixed entities are the expressions of a particular moment of the group; but on repayment they conserve a link with their authors and project an image of themselves in the consciousness of the group.

The first could be interpreted as an utopic movement, and the last as an ideological one. The human being as the member of the group becomes conscious of the image, and hold it as something of himself, and, of course, compatible with the possibilities of the utopia. The dialog between the utopian and ideological movement constitutes the rising of the group evolution. This process is a human process and consequently follows the natural possibility of changes and adaptations.

The region of the cultural products has a meaning to every citizen who is born, educated, and growing in the horizon of the group; a shared meaning which becomes a spiritual mood, an image of themselves for all the members. In fact, the mayan people of Guatemala have a long-lasting image almost five centuries old; for their reaction to the natural an historical environment continued producing cultural objects of the same form for so many years. For the cubans, there is a short but intense history of exile, fight for employments, a legal state, and the continuity of their homeland civilized history of whom they are proud.

In St. Catherine there is a very weak and pieced history, shed among

30 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

themselves and the community, in a strange and some hostile circumstance that gathers dispersed unities in the common horizon of the latin american tradition.

We can understand the "polarity" between the two extreme positions, the belt of objects, static; and the person itself dynamic; but a polarity as consequence of the unity among the two opposite realities.

The second region is the reciprocal communication between the persons of the group. As many contacts, interchanges, necessary dealings, actions shared by the members, are transformed in an intermediate middle, for a more intense, plural, intellectual, affective, and economical understanding. This mediation of the communication is not an aggregate of experiences but a constitution of the person itself, where the individuals give life to the whole and the living interlace is a natural complement of the unicity of individuals.

Then the subjectivity and the objectivity of the community are not yet abstract concepts but a woven tissue of life. This grows and intensifies the concert, becomes grave, thick and mysterious, and exclude the other groups can not participate of the appropriated significance. This phenomenon is particularly conspicuous in the St. Catherine tense situation.

This is the region of the consciousness, of the psychological temper, of the original creativity. Inside the mood of the group every member feels himself at easy, free from stiff formality. He can participate his pain or

anxiety, and with them his dreams find support for creation. Because they understand him , second him, and among them the words have the same meaning.

Inside the cuban group they generated a common mood about being they a true engine of the Miami economy; about to be able to generate a strong net of aides and collaboration; and to move into the aesthetic field of the theater and the dance, and a style of gentle and fine sociability.

In St. Catherine they are proud of a higher moral level, of a spiritual life gathering powerful individual energies for the common conquest of the dignity.

In this mysterious region the stiffness of the icon becomes more smooth, and the individual unicity takes place inside the collective experience and control.

The third region of the group can be appointed with a word:the ecology. Every group has its ecology. In the modern sense the ecology is not only the assortment of the natural resources; but all the physical, human, and historical context around the community. This is the region of the things and of the fundamental experience of the knowledge. For the St. Catherine is the immersion in a unknown technological and economically complex situation in which they insert themselves on the most accessible knot of the structure. For the cubans is a very improved and sophisticated organization of the work, trade, inversions, production, that they effectively understand and

32 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

dominate. The group reacts to the ecology, and interpret it, and makes his world in it.

These three regions we distinguished for a analysis, but we are really integrating them into the life of the group. The third, the ecological region is mediated by the group to produce the objects. And the objects are mediated by the group to produce the icon, a significant reality for the region of consciousness. The second one is the central "core" of the group, the region of the dialog among individual personality and a growing super personality of the group.

The third region shapes our internal structure trough the experience. Experience is always the essential term, of our relations. All we think, all we dialog, has to be confirmed and opposed to the experience. We are thinking, but the experience will guide us. The groups knows it, and conciliates all these experiences: concentrates them in the objects. The mediation of the group is a quite human mediation. Ecology is not a void word, it is a sum of experiences.

Let us make some more theoretical considerations.

What about the human being so mysteriously involved with the group? Is then the individual really an independent entity, is the subject an Ego? What kind of constituents, elements, forces, and principles dwell in this Ego? in this Subject? Is a "group" more a Subject than the Subject itself?

The first killer of the subject was Immanuel Kant. His first Critique, to close to the concept of Hume's intuition, reduced the experimental activity to the sensibility and the mundane being too the "phenomenon, as mere a phenomenon. "With that not only the noumenon became unknown but the Ego too. The Ego was voided and nullified. The ego was closed to the world and open to the categories. His understanding was impoverished of content and crowded of ideas. Kant eliminated the objectivity, and then left the Ego alone, deserted, separated from the challenge of the living context of the man.

After Kant the idealistic movement went on into the same trend. Hegel reduced all the reality to the reason (Idea, Nature, Spirit) and in the rational world the human Ego was converted to a passing moment of the monistic whole. In the Marx's humanism and utopia the personal Ego was submerged into the struggle of work's relations and of the production's forces.

The return to the experience provoked, at the end of the last century extremes reactions among scientists, and at the beginning of this present the radical attitude of the viennese circle and the Oxford and Cambridge logical positivism.

Between the two ideological position phenomenology with a new methodology returned to the problem of the experience, to be together with the other sciences at the same point to have a common foundation for his

reflexion's and abstraction's activities.

Then the Ego reality was firmly recovered: with Merleau Ponty, Marcel, Blondel, Sartre, Jaspers and Max Scheler.

The Ego as person is the center and the main value of the human existence, and he was established in his real world by the community in the concrete life: the ethnic group. In the group the person reaches its best performance and dignity; as man between men.

Then we have to ask: what happens inside the group to be so enormously important?

Apparently, nothing. In the group the persons are speaking. The language, the most usual issue among scholars in our days, is the field to where all the human sciences flow together. But not the conventional language we can learn by books or some lessons, by grammar and dictionary; the true language people use, at home, at all the ages, in the street, for both material and spiritual subjects, for the speculative and practical necessities. This is the language of the group. And its plural significations are from the group too. In the group the language is a reflexion over the common experience, is the communication of the internal feelings, generally with gestures and visible circumstances. There the distinction between intensive, extensive or ostensive definition does not make sense. The flow of the meaning is complete, living. We will put another scheme to understand it.

----- constitution of
the world

@@-
@@@@

Egos conceptual communication THE GROUP

meanings

@@-
@@@@

experience

ecology and things

#####

36 *Culture as a Phenomenon*

The Ego of the person makes its own constitution through the experience. Is a personal and individual experience. The experience is continuity is change, is modification of oneself, is emotion. Experience is not only a sensible experience. Is the whole existence there, in the space and time, is the contact with things. Every member of the group has its own experiences. And the experience is lasting, endures. Without experience we are nothing, experience is life, is our form of living: experience of forms, values, ideas, relations, emotions and will. There is an infinite variety of experiences and there are all the time before we think and under our thinking supporting it.

But the experience is nothing more than experience. The experience does not make sense. The experience is not an explanation, is not a commentary. Among our experience the experience of the other person, of the other ego is fundamental too.

We see the other Ego, Other subject, and person. Discovering the other is to communicate to the other. I am seeing and speaking. Only a person can speak. Speaking opens a new dimension of the being. To a different being, a person. The children become men speaking, communicating with persons. The men are more men speaking, in the dialog with others.

And then, the spoken communication makes the group. Through the language the experience becomes a spoken experience, becomes common experience. The group has a common experience and a common explication too. The individual becomes more individual in the group. He becomes a

member of the group, and his thinking is the thinking of the group. His world is the world of the group.

The group creates the world. The experience bring to us the things, the group put us in the world. Then the world appears. It is our world, our space in the existence, our dimension in Being. There is not any world before the group, only things, only the bare experience, Sartre would say "the nausea". But we are reflecting, abstracting, comparing, perceiving the differences, we experience the other, as other, we are men.

This passage could seem quite poetic, but it is not. It is only the simple description of what happens with the group. We can confirm it. The people of St. Catherine know that, they live by that. The cubans know it too. For that the group is strong, thick, profound. Living in the group is living in the world. Is not only the physical world, is an interpretation, an intellectual view, a cosmology, a semantic world, genuine and faithful; a world true to human life.

A group can occupy every place in a long scale of different form ob being group. The most complete is without any doubt an ethnic group.

We can put as an example the Israel people with a definite general identity and a lot of subcultures inside it. Many other examples can enumerate: The Basques, and the Catalans in Spain, Bavarians in Germany, the four Cantons in Switzerland, Sardinia in Italy, Vallons and Flemishes in Belgium, and so on. Every real situation of the political states, in the

contemporary world faces with the groups. The first struggle between these people is over fundamental human rights; but all the negotiates are dealing with the language, and the semantic issue of themselves.

All that are expressed by the languages, all classes of languages: oral, written, of gestures, of music, of dances, of the cultural objects. The language is the main channel and twine and thread that constitutes a free unity of the Egos in the group. The talk and the dialog are the builders of the unity, but of the change to. The language guides the men between the ideology and the utopia. This is the field of the inculturation.

But there is not language without meaning, and not inculturation without life, because the meaning of the group deals with the life. We can reflect upon these when we think about the inculturation, and promotion of the group. Inculturation is a production of meaning in the language of the group, and then is a production of life.

What kind of meaning? What kind of life? All intended inculturation has to promote the life of the group, it means to move the group from their ideology to their utopia. It is trough an essential and true human understanding. We can not unculturate extraneous or superficial things. These must be the most human, vital, valuable issues. We will face to some of these issues in the next chapters; from the language issue, to the semiotics and hermeneutics. Our aim is always to share some elements of common understanding and collaboration among different groups, leaving them free in their way

of life.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.