



Towards A More Accurate Understanding of Culture

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ABSTRACT

This essay by Roland Kharkrang surveys major anthropological theories of culture—Evolutionism, Diffusionism, Functionalism, Structuralism, and Ethnosemanticism—before developing an original theological-anthropological framework that distinguishes human Nature, understood as the immutable, God-given constant of body, intellect, free will, and conscience shared universally by all persons, from Culture, the mutable, learned, group-specific mould through which that nature is shaped by the environment. Drawing on St John Paul II's Theology of the Body, alongside illustrative material ranging from royal birth customs to real-life “Mowgli” cases of feral children, the author argues that nature makes all humans equal, while culture differentiates them, and that speech is an inborn human faculty, whereas language—culture's highest expression—is learned only through group contact and imitation. The essay concludes by examining language and laughter as distinctly human, humanising phenomena that separate man from animal, positioning language as both an intimate window into individual and cultural identity and the most exalted index of a people's cultural development.

Keywords: nature and culture; theological anthropology; cultural evolution; language and human identity; human uniqueness

1. INTRODUCTION

The 18th century was known as the Era of Enlightenment. The age of Imperialism was an age of aggrandisement of wealth, power, and domination. The discovery of the Americas brought with it a desire to understand the variety of cultures explorers met. That discovery brought in its wake discussions on questions and issues from disciplines like Philosophy, Theology, Psychology, and Linguistics. It was said and believed that the Enlightenment spread because the Enlightenment enlightened man. It also gave rise to expressions like a cultured person, that is, a person who is familiar with and can talk about a variety of current issues, topics, and subjects. Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Jean Turgot, and Denis Desiderot were some of those who favoured and promoted this idea.

Others argued that the availability of opportunities explains differences between cultures. That also accounts for cultural centrism, that is, members of one culture would look down on people from other cultures.

Fall-outs from the 18th Century

Marco Polo wrote back home to Italy from China, where he found cultural practices so different from those he knew in his homeland.

It is an open secret that colonialists from Spain, Portugal, England, France, Holland, ..., wiped out entire indigenous cultures and imposed their own on indigenous peoples.

Anthropologists searched for original cultures and proposed that all cultures are equally good, and disciplines such as Geology and Archaeology seemed to support that proposition. Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill believed that cultures have their own lifespans, and all cultures begin with what they called the Stone Age.

2. THEORIES ABOUT CULTURE

To understand culture, scholars have subscribed to different theories of culture. Let us discuss some of them briefly.

2.1. Evolutionism

It has its beginnings in the propositions of Evolution by Charles Darwin. Essentially, it says that "Society and culture developed in a regular sequence of predictable stages." Religion, for example, grew in the following manner: from Animism to Polytheism, and then to Monotheism.

Culture is life; it has its own life span and stages, like Infancy, Childhood, Youth, Adulthood, and Maturity. Each stage can last hundreds of years. Look at the following sequence:

From Slavery	to	self-determination.
From Wage-earner	to	ownership.
From Barter	to	buying and selling.
From Agriculture	to	industry

Culture is said to gradually organize the loose ends in society and turn it into orderly coexistence.

The proponents of this theory

Enlightenment - Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881): He spent a number of years among the Iroquois Indians. In 1877, he wrote his monumental book *Ancient Society: Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization*. He coined the formula: Savagery –

Barbarism.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and James Frazer (1854-1941). Herbert Spencer wrote his *Principles of Sociology* in 1896. Thomas R. Malthus was another supporter of Evolutionism.

Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917) is considered to be the Father of Social Anthropology. In 1871, in his book *Primitive Culture*, he came up with the first-ever definition of Culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Jha says that Taylor's definition of Culture "was considered to be the first scientific form of defining culture."

Taylor believed that "the study of culture is the historical study of man's development in society...from Savagery...to Barbarism...and then to the rise of Civilisation."

For Taylor, "Culture is a historical process" that is subject to change.

Critics pointed out as a limitation that Evolutionism put too much stress on man alone and did not take the trouble to understand the powers of nature to change man and his destiny.

Secondly, Evolutionists relied too heavily on verbal accounts of travellers, traders and missionaries.

2.2. Diffusionism

This theory begins with the assumption that "all cultural traits were originally developed in Egypt and subsequently spread throughout the world in waves of migration." Cultural traits diffused from a few select areas, which are associated with various traits with certain geographical environments. Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937), a Diffusionist, was greatly impressed by the grandeur of the pyramids in Egypt, and by the carving and sculpting talents of the Druids in England. He saw a certain and definite relationship in the artistic designs and structure of the Mayan Pyramids, the Pagodas of Japan and of Cambodia, the Bali Temples, and the grave headstones of the Amerindians.

William James Perry (1887-1949) was an archaeologist.

W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922): He believed that Australia was the origin of all cultures. His contention was that as generations pass, later generations know and remember less and less of the past.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904), Fritz Graebner (1877-1934), and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) were German Diffusionists. Clark Wissler (1870-197) and Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) were Americans. Diffusionism believes that "culture has grown in course of history...because of transmission of culture is due to historical happenings and mutual contacts."

3.3. Functionalism

Functionalism "arose in opposition to the extreme evolutionist and the diffusionist positions."

The central tenet of Functionalism is that "each of the traits within a culture has a specific function which (traits act together to) hold the social system together by the way in which it fulfils that function." "It was functionalism which finally emphasised the analysis of relationships within cultures and the ways in which cultures respond to the needs of the members. Yet functionalists failed to account adequately for the origin of cultural phenomena."

Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), a Functionalist, believed that religious rituals and folktales have a powerful influence on keeping members of a group together. He further believed that religious meetings are to the members much more than mere acts of worship of God; much more

importantly, they are necessary because members of a group need to meet and feel together as one. That, says Radcliffe-Brown, is the depth and strength of culture.

Bronislaw Kaspar Malinowski (1884-1942): Like Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski was convinced that the greatest need of man is to feel secure in being together. Further, he said that when man feels insecure, he is likely to seek shelter and meaning in the powers beyond himself: be it God, or Satan, or the powers in nature

Malinowski made 3 expeditions to New Guinea, and spent valuable time with the Trobriand Islanders:

- September 1914 – March 1915
- June 1915 – May 1916
- October 1917 - October 1918

Unlike Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski was not interested in searching for the beginnings of cultures; he believed that it was sufficient to find out how cultures responded to people's human needs, like hunger and thirst, and family life. Secondly, culture also takes care of the needs that are more on the fringes, like education. Thirdly, culture does have a say in belief in the supernatural (God) and in the religious beliefs and practices of people.

Malinowski strongly emphasized that the researcher should collect data through the medium of the natives' language, and for that purpose, the researcher should learn their language before undertaking long, intensive fieldwork among them. That is the only way of getting to the roots of culture.

Supporters of Functionalism loved to say that Culture should serve the living, and not the dead. Logically, dead culture belongs to history and is neither relevant nor useful.

2.4. Structuralism

It is based on the understanding of “culture as an expression of the underlying structures of the human mind.”

Claude Lévi-Strauss is the foremost structuralist. Like Malinowski, Claude Lévi-Strauss spent time with the Trobriand Islanders.

Culture is not the actual observable behaviour of people; it is rather an abstraction derived through observing their behaviour. Culture is a set of rules or standards which, when acted upon or lived by members of a society or culture, leads those members to act in such a way that their behaviour or their action is considered by all the other members of that society or culture to be proper and acceptable.

Structuralists analyse psychological structures of a society by examining the beliefs and ideas of its members. They say that culture is what meets the eye; it is that which we see. They are called structuralists because they preoccupy themselves with studying and analysing observable structures of the organisation or a society.

2.5. Ethnosemanticism

It is also referred to as cognitive anthropology or new ethnography. It aims at “arriving at a description of culture as members of that culture would see it, (that is, that description should be) free from the biases of the outsider.”

It relies heavily on language, on words, and on what appears outside as the outer coat of the inner form. As such, language is of paramount importance.

Culture then is like an iceberg. What is seen is only “the tip of an iceberg”; what is not seen is far greater, far more significant and valuable than what is seen. What is important is: (i) the impression that what is seen makes on an observer, (ii) the parameters or the dimensions of the reality behind the observed or perceived reality.

It is no wonder that the strongest criticism levelled against Ethnosemanticism is that it relies too heavily on verbal data collected from a very limited number of individuals. It is also said that it is stuck in cultural relativism.

3. NATURE AND CULTURE

The brief review of anthropologists’ work above is necessary for two reasons: (i) this present effort does not begin from scratch; (ii) in fact, it is a humble attempt to carry forward that search for an accurate understanding of Culture.

This attempt to arrive at a more realistic, more accurate understanding of what Culture is is the fruit of quite a few years of introspection and reflection.

The present search begins with the presumption that there seems to be an unexpected, surprising and intimate relation between Nature and Culture.

Before we take the discussion further, it will be useful to visit a few preliminaries.

1. God is the Creator; man, and all else are creatures;
2. God created man to be a body-soul/spirit unity. In telling us that truth, the Book of Creation uses figurative, euphemistic language: mud for body, and breath for soul or spirit (Gen. 1:26). That breath is another name for “the image and likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26).

Man is not a combination or the sum total of an addition of body and soul; He is a “unity of body and soul,” a “body-soul integration.” The analogical expression of two sides of the coin is quite apt here: the body and the soul are, so to speak, the two sides of being a human person. It is not possible to say where one ends, and where the other begins, precisely because the two realities are co-extensive, and integrated.

Pope St John Paul II, the personality philosopher, teaches that the “human person (is) a really existing subject and (is) the responsible origin of moral acts.”

3. Everything exists according to its nature.
By human nature we mean what a man is from the beginning of his existence as a human being, a human person. Human nature is what makes a “living creature” (Gen. 2:7), neither an angel above nor an animal below.

Let us begin by looking at a newborn infant. What immediately and spontaneously meets the eye is: The infant is a bundle of joy, a bundle of love. It is also a crying, breathing, defecating and urinating vegetable.

Looking at it, we are aware that it is born of human parents; and, therefore, the infant also is a true and complete human person, in the nascent stage and the nascent form, yet a true human being, just like its parents.

Its human dimensions

I. What we see with our eyes:

(a) It is a body, a bundle of tender flesh and fragile bones; we see its physical features and dimensions, all its human, physical attributes, all of which are in the nascent stage.

(b) Secondly, the infant offers us also something that we can see or perceive only with the eyes of the mind, or the spiritual consciousness:

(i) Its heredity: biological: Its gender has been determined by the 23 chromosomes from the father and the 23 chromosomes from the mother; its blood group has been determined by the genetic code; its family tree will have had a strong say in its physical characteristics, like its size, its height, the colour of its hair, of its eyes, of the skin, etc.; from its family, the infant will have inherited its family name, relationships and social ties, the infant is in line to some part of the family inheritance; it will slowly and gradually imbibe the family and social values and attitudes, it will learn to use the language, personalize the family attitudes and social habits, nurture the qualities of head and of heart;

(ii) The infant comes imprinted in its nature the liabilities: like the process of growth and decay, the life cycle of birth, life and death, as someone has said that the first cry of every new-born child is I am born to die (See Heb. 9:27).

(iii) It comes carrying in its hand, so to speak, the limitations that man must eat, drink, breathe, sleep in order to live, that one can eat only from the sweat of one's own brows, etc.

II. The infant is a true and complete human person in the nascent stage. Like all other human beings, it comes endowed by the Creator with the following unique human faculties which again are in the nascent stage. The Book of Life tells us that God the Creator took earth (body); but only when He created man, He breathed into it His breath of life, so that man became a living creature (Gen. 2:7). That breath of God is man's soul, or his spirit, God's image (Gen. 1:26) that every human person carries within himself or herself. This is the one real thing that makes man a person; it is what makes man totally and absolutely different from an angel as well as from an animal. Those human faculties are spelled out subsequently:

(i) Intellect: the ability to perform mental and intellectual activities, to think, reflect, introspect, etc.;

(ii) The power to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, along with the moral conviction that one must do good and avoid evil;

(iii) Free will: the ability to think, and freely, without any outside compulsion, choose, to make decisions, and the maturity to accept responsibility for all of one's rational and conscious actions, and also for the consequences thereof, so that "even if he (man) is forced to act in a way that is objectively good, he will not experience it as good unless he makes that good his own by choosing it freely as a subject."

This man who is a "subject constituted as a person...must consciously discern and choose between good and evil, between life and death."

(iv) Conscience: the inner voice, the gentle but stern reminder that:

(a) exhorts one to do what is right, and avoid what is wrong;

(b) approves of the good that one does, and disapproves of the wrong;

(c) faithfully and accurately keeps records of all of one's rational and conscious actions.

The above four human faculties make man, who is a body, a rational being, a person; they constitute man's definite and specific "difference from animals, his subjectivity as a person, his self-determination." They – the body, and the four elements enumerated above, constitute what we shall call hereafter in this essay human nature.

Pope St John Paul II teaches that man's subjectivity is the privilege that only man can ever point to himself and say I! No animal can ever do that. Pope St John Paul II says that subjectivity distinguishes man from animals. That subjectivity is intimately related to man's ability for personal choice and decision, for self-awareness, for self-determination, for self-actuation, for self-consciousness, for introspection. Christopher West says that "Subjectivity refers to the self-experience of personhood."

In the subsequent discussion, the bodily dimensions and the human faculties enumerated in Nos. I. and II. above constitute human nature. It is this nature, the human faculties, that make man a rational being, a human person, a "living creature," a he, a she, and not an it. That is infinitely more than a cut above the animal!

In our discussion, we use this word nature – in Uppercase and in Bold, to mean specifically man who is an integration of the bodily/physical attributes with the four human faculties as enumerated in I. and II. above.

The Book of Life tells us that the act of creating man was the result of a very personal and deliberate decision of God the Creator: He said, "Let us create man" (Gen. 1:26), "I will make ... a helper" (Gen. 2:7).

It will be to our advantage if, at this juncture, and before we proceed to the next section, we look at some relevant implications of the "Let us ..." above:

1. The creation of man is a very personal and deliberate decision and act of God the Creator;
2. That is what God the Creator says and does each time He creates a human person;
3. Nature comes directly from God the Creator. The rest comes through our parents, the family, society, etc.;
4. It is said that God the Creator never uses the same mould, or formula, the same blueprint twice. Pope St John Paul II teaches that each human person that comes into life is "unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable." "Consequently, every creature bears within itself the sign of the original and fundamental gift." Unrepeatability means that "man is utterly unique and cannot be repeated or replaced." Our biometrics confirm that no two persons in all the world have the same eyes, the same whorls or fingerprints.

We earnestly and fervently wish it were possible to see a newborn baby vis-a-vis itself as it would be after say ... 35-40 or 70 years later. Today in 2026, we are incredibly fortunate that that possibility is no longer wishful thinking, but a reality. AI gives us that possibility on a plate. I am grateful to my friend and classmate in our Theology days, Dr. (Fr) Charles Panackal SDB, a Scripture Professor-emeritus in our Theology College in Chennai, who shared with me on WhatsApp the self-explanatory sets of photos in the pages that follow.

I. Let us begin this part of our discussion by looking at the continuum below:

A ————— A

In the continuum above, the alphabet has travelled from the beginning of the continuum to the end, and has remained the selfsame alphabet, in its nature; its identity has remained unchanged. However,

it is also immediately clear that there are some differences in the manner in which the alphabet was in the beginning and as it is at the end. The alphabet in the beginning is the same one at the end, but it is also quite another. While remaining the selfsame alphabet in its essence and identity, we immediately notice the following differences between the alphabet as it is in the beginning, and the same alphabet as it exists in the end:

- (i) In its font: From Times New Roman at the beginning, it has changed to Algerian at the end;
- (ii) In its size: From 11 at the beginning to 20 at the end;
- (iii) From lowercase at the beginning to UPPERCASE at the end;
- (iv) At the end of the continuum, the alphabet is in Bold.

II.



Now, let us look at the AI-generated photographs. In each of the two continua, all the photos, from the first to the last, belong to the same individual at different stages of growth, age, and life.

What actually happens is that in both instances, the continuum of the alphabet and of personal growth, nature remains constant, unchanged throughout. The subject has gone through stages of physical, mental, and social growth and maturation. What gives it the appearance of change are the years (age), maturity and growth, the physical changes, like the wrinkles, greying hair, decaying teeth, etc.; they are all infallible telltales of mental growth, bodily development, signs of physical maturity, of decay, and of course – of wisdom too!

In both continua, nature, or essence, has remained unchanged right through; but (a) its mode of existence changes, (b) at the end-stage, the individual has grown and matured, ... and decayed.

As the fruit of all those years of growth and experience, the helplessness of infancy gives way to self-direction, self-dependence to interdependence, self-centredness to altruism.

It reminds one of the enigmatic expressions we sometimes hear in jocular conversations: that the difference is the same!

In terms of human persons, the eventual intervening time-distance between the beginning and the end of the continua can actually be any number of years.

There are, no doubt, many other telltales of that growth and maturation; among them, a very important and significant acquisition is that of thought and language.

Similarly, there is a host of other skills, practical wisdom, education, reasoning capacity, etc., etc., all that human nature has gathered laterally along its journey through the years of growth.

Human Nature

The “historical” man, or the existential man, is, according to Pope St John Paul II, “constituted as a specific unity of spirit and body” that to be truly a human person is to be Body + Breath of life, or Soul, or Spirit, as described in Genesis 2:7.

Pope St John Paul II teaches that man is not the sum total of an addition of two entities, a combination of some kind of body and spirit, nor an alloy of some elements. Pope St John Paul II calls it “integration.”

Again, he teaches that the body is not the cage, a “shell” or a “house” where the soul/spirit is encaged or housed. He is “always a materialized spiritual entity.” At any time, he is a body-soul/spirit integration. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 365) teaches that “The human being is a profound unity of soul and body and it is precisely this unity that constitutes human nature. Thus, ‘spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature’” West concludes thus: “In fact, the human person does not so much ‘have’ a body. Rather, the human person is a body.” The two constituents, soul/spirit and body, are constitutively complementary, mutually inclusive.

The analogical expression of two sides of the coin is quite apt here: the body and the soul/spirit are, so to speak, the two realities of being a human person. It is not possible to say where one ends, and where the other begins, precisely because the two realities are co-extensive, mutually inclusive, and man is a body-soul integration.

Why Body?

Right at the start, Christopher West, the commentator and explainer of Pope St John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, calls it “the tremendous gift.” Then he says that “the body (is) the antidote to theological abstraction.” He even stresses that, just as Hebrew is the language of Israel, ... “the language of Christianity is the body.” Additionally, he says, “The Theology of the Body, then, is nothing but an extended proclamation of and commentary on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of the Incarnate Word – the ‘Gospel of the body.’”

In speaking about the body, Pope St John Paul II is very eloquent. He teaches that “the body expresses the person.” The spirit/soul needs a body to manifest itself, “to reveal man,” to interact with the visible, material world. As Pope St John Paul teaches, “through the body, he (man) belongs to the visible world.” Nature needs a body to individuate itself. Further, he says that (a) “man is in some sense unable to express (himself) without (the language of) the body” and (b) that the body makes visible what is not seen. For Pope St John Paul, the body is the sign, and he calls the body the “primordial sacrament.” “The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine.” We may say that the body is the language of the soul/spirit.

Christopher West says that “the body becomes the threshold to the transcendent reality of the spirit.”

The body is the visible and tangible aspect of the person, and the soul or spirit interacts with the outside world only through the body. What is very assuring is that, right from the beginning, God Almighty Himself saw that everything He had made, including the body, was very good (Gen. 1:31).

4. NATURE VIS-A-VIS CULTURE

The royal road to a more accurate understanding of Nature and Culture is by going to the root words of the two terms. Both terms come from the classical language Latin. (It is said that one-third of English comes from Latin.)

4.1. Nature

The word Nature comes from the Latin: nascor – nasci - natus sum (= I am born – to be born – I was born). This Latin verb is in the passive form. Words like nation, nascent, native, and nature are derived from the Latin word above.

Nature, then, is whatever we are, and as we are, when we are born, and ever after.

Birth is the first public recognition that we receive, but nature begins nine months earlier than birth. At any moment, nature is what we are as human persons. Nature remains constant throughout our lifetime.

We had no choice, no say in whatever we are: we did not choose our gender, our blood group, our physical features, etc. They had all been decided and determined by the Creator. Our original blueprint, or our heredity, is determined by our ancestry, by our family tree. Perhaps it is in that respect that we should understand the utter and total helplessness and dependence of a newborn infant mentioned above.

An attribute of nature is that it is immutable; it is constant, absolute, universal through time and space; that is, human nature is shared absolutely by all human persons, no matter who, when, where, or how they are. The degree may differ.

Another analogy: Suppose twenty people go into a hotel, and each is served the same food items from the same menu. No one gets one item more, nor one item less than any other one; no item that one gets is better or worse than the same item that another gets. The only difference that is allowed is the quantity of any item that one chooses to have.

In the same way, Nature endows every human person with the same human nature and dignity. The packaging, so to speak, varies in quantity. All humans are intelligent, but we are not equally intelligent. All of us sing, but the voice of one is distinctly different from the voice of another. And so on.

However deformed, or differently abled, persons may be, they are a complete human person in their human nature and human dignity. The bodily deficiencies do not in any way alter that human nature, nor diminish its human dignity.

So, Nature is immutable. Questions like, can a leopard change its spots? or can a zebra change its tracksuit? are both repetitions of the above statement.

Though that is the nature of nature, we may have to keep in mind that we are talking about Human Nature. Every human person is a Nature, an entity by himself/herself. It is synonymous with being a human being, or a human individual. Nature does not exist independently of us. We are that Nature that we talk about.

Once again, Nature, then, is whatever we are, and as we are, when we are born, nay, at the time we are conceived, and thence forward.

4.2. Culture

The term Culture is derived from another Latin word: colo – colere – colui – cultum {I cultivate – to cultivate – I cultivated; cultum is called supine. Supine is the root from which other tense forms are derived}.

Edward Burnett Taylor first defined culture in 1871. By 1950, there were over 200 definitions of Culture.

Human nature perhaps comes as a shapeless, disorganised bundle of the physical dimensions and the four human faculties. God the Creator immerses it into a particular Environment. Initially, Human nature is like a square peg in a round hole. It is not familiar with the Environment; it does not fit into it.

The environment interacts with human nature to help it slowly and gradually fit itself into the Environment. Thus, the environment is like a mould for human nature to fit into.

The environment, or the mould, contains opportunities and possibilities for human nature to avail of in order to survive, to live, and to grow.

That interaction between human nature and Environment lasts a lifetime. What Environment is, and what it does to human nature, may be compared to what a mother bear does: it licks its cubs into form; environment beats and hammers human nature into shape, just like red hot iron is beaten on an anvil. It may be said that Environment slowly, persistently organizes human nature, as human nature slowly and imperceptibly fits itself into the mould/environment where it survives and develops.

The first layer of environment, which is also most intimate, is the mother's womb. Family is the second layer; the village or community is the third. Later come the school, college, the commercial, the political, the religious communities; they are the broader layers in the Environment, or the Mould.

In the process of interaction, human nature gradually gets used to doing the same thing again and again, in the same way repeatedly, to get the same results. The end result of such repetition is a habit. When a group of people adopt a habit, culture is born.

Why do we repeat an action? To maximise the benefit, the satisfaction that we get out of that action, or that process.

So, culture means: (a) the Environment/Mould and all that it contains – the artifacts and the mentifacts, the rules and customs, the thought patterns, etc., (b) the constant, persistent and lasting interaction between human nature and environment.

That leads us to another truth which anthropologists have taught umpteen times, that (whereas human nature is given by God,) Culture is man-made. Human nature does not change, nor can its essence be altered in any way. The nature of nature is that it is immutable. It only develops and grows; it matures. Human nature is one and universal, but Culture is group-specific; it changes with time, place, and circumstances.

The purpose of whatever Culture does to nature is that nature may meet its needs, the first and most urgent of which is survival, then growth and development, etc.

Culture, then, may be said to be the companion and handmaid of nature. The two are inseparable. Nature is primary; culture is secondary. There is no Culture without nature.

For example: Across the world and throughout time, people eat, drink, sleep and rest in order to live. That is the requirement of human nature. All humans eat. It is a human necessity. It is a natural necessity. Then: in India, we eat with the hand; in Europe, people eat with spoons, forks and knives; in Korea, Japan and China, people eat with chopsticks. Europeans eat bread and meat; in India, we eat rice, millet and chapatti; Africans eat tapioca and maize. In fact, everywhere, people's staple food is what is immediately available locally. All people eat; but what and how they eat differs from place to place, from time to time, from people to people, from culture to culture.

Eating is nature; what and how people eat is culture.

All peoples dress. But the way different peoples in different places, at different times, on different occasions dress is dictated by the climatic, social, financial and other considerations of the places and times they live in. Our thought and speech patterns are formed by the place and by the society, and by the time or age we live in.

Dressing is nature; how people dress is culture.

We do not make an issue of the fact that Indians are brown, Europeans are fair, Africans are dark, Chinese are yellow. We take in that data for granted.

A very common analogy is that water takes the shape and colour of the container it is put in. When viewed from outside the container, it also takes the shape and colour of the container.

4.3. The Needs of Nature

What is the business of nature? It learns to meet its own human needs; the first, the most cogent and urgent of which is survival.

We might prioritise nature's needs as follows:

1. Survival:
 - a) Hunger and thirst, which it satisfies through eating and drinking;
 - b) Health and wellbeing, which it satisfies through medicine and health care;
 - c) Security, which it satisfies through shelter:
 - (i) from the elements of nature;
 - (ii) from predators;
 - (iii) from enemies;
 - d) Perpetuation: Continuity of self and of the family, of the tribe, of the community, of the species through self-preservation; Continuity of the group through propagation through marriage and family;
2. Contact and Socialisation: family, village, society – hunting in groups, school, market;
3. Comfort, Aesthetics, Leisure.

4.4. Describing (not defining) Culture

Culture "is a difficult term to define, even to describe."

"Tradition is a funny thing to define." By 1950, there were already 200 definitions.

The discussion hitherto is a description of culture, not a definition. Suffice it to say the following:

- (a) That human nature and culture are the two fundamental and complementary constituents of man.
- (b) So, when we look at a newborn infant, we are actually looking at naked human nature, without

Culture. Nature, then, is primary; Culture is secondary.

(c) We can talk of nature in respect of everything created, of everything living, of everything that exists. But man, and only man, is cultural. That is because man is a rational, social being. What he learns, what he acquires, is from the society, from the community in which he lives. It is in that sense that it is said that Man is a creature of culture, that he is formed – not created - by culture.

(d) Culture does not exist in the absence of, or independently of, nature. It follows that we cannot talk of Culture without at least an implicit reference to nature.

(e) Nature is created by the Creator. Culture is a human condition; it is man-made. The same truth is expressed by the statement that man is a cultural being. Might we say that Man is created by nature, and formed by culture?

What a man does is determined by nature; how he does it is dictated by Culture. Eating, dressing, speaking, etc., are typical instances. Man must eat to live. All eat, but each has his or her own way of eating. Whether we stir our tea clockwise or anticlockwise, we always do it to make our tea sweet. So, we may say that culture is the companion and handmaid of human nature.

4.5. How does Nature differ from Culture?

1) Human nature is co-extensive with all the members of the human species at whatever stage of development, across time and space; it demolishes all timelines and spatial barriers. Culture is particular to the members of a homogeneous group. Practically, a species comprises several cultural groups.

2) Human nature unites all human beings. Culture distinguishes one cultural group from another, within the same (human) species.

3) Human nature is constant, absolute, and immutable. To be alive and relevant, Culture must respond to environmental conditions and circumstantial situations. Culture changes from time to time; it differs from place to place and from one human group to another.

4) Human nature pertains to all the members individually as well as collectively, in as much as, no matter when and where, everyone in the human species shares the same human nature. On the other hand, a few individuals do not make a culture. Culture belongs to an entire homogeneous group.

5) Human nature unites people, in as much as all members of a species share in one and the same nature. Culture divides, insofar as one cultural group is culturally different from another.

6) Human nature is created by God; it is inalienable. No one chooses, no one refuses or alienates, no one can change one's nature (just as a leopard does not choose nor change its spots). It is said that Culture is a creature of man; it is man-made; then, in his turn, man is a creature of Culture, in so far as Culture shapes and makes man what he is, what he does culturally. One can leave one culture and adopt another one. Culture is alienable; it is mutable.

7) Human nature is an abstract consideration; Culture is normative.

8) Human nature is inborn. Culture is learned and acquired.

Nature makes men equal; culture makes them different.

By human nature, all men are equal and the same. Culture makes one man different from another.

The Prince of Wales had to wait many years before ascending the throne of Britain as King Charles III. His mother, Queen Elizabeth II, reigned from 30 May 1953 to 8 September 2022, when she died.

When the Prince of Wales, Charles's first grandson, Prince George of Cambridge, was born on 23 July 2013, Tony Appleton from Essex, England, the fervent royalist and traditional Town Crier, took his stand outside the Lindo Wing of St Mary's Hospital in London, rang his bell, and cried out as loud as he could to announce the birth of Prince George of Cambridge to Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Middleton. Tony Appleton announced the birth of a "royal baby."

The British Telecom tower displayed “It’s a boy.”

The fountains at Trafalgar Square were lit blue to signify the birth of a baby boy.

In the forecourt of Buckingham Palace, a golden easel carried the announcement that a baby boy had been born, and that both mother and child were doing well.

At Green Park, close to Buckingham Palace, the traditional 41-gun salute was fired from 13-pounder guns that date back to the First World War. Simultaneously, an even larger cannonade of 62 guns took place at the Tower of London. The additional 21 guns were a traditional expression of the loyalty of the citizenry of the city of London.

On Royal Navy ships, the Royal ensign was flown from the main mast. The Queen might also have given the order to “Splice the Mainbrace,” a tradition that ensures every sailor is given a tot of rum.

At Buckingham Palace, a military band zestfully played Congratulations to the lucky couple, and good luck to the newest royal incomer.

The Tabloid The Sun temporarily reinvented its own name for that day as “The Son” in honour of the royal baby boy.

The Private Eye, the English caricature of public figures, dismissed the entire event with just a terse Woman has Baby.

A few days later, an Indian columnist (wasn’t it MJ Akbar?) took scant notice of the English royals and summarised the English goings-on in very terse language, as if only in passing, encapsulating the entire event in a succinct phrase: “the royal birth of a local boy.” Isn’t that what it really was!

Birth is nature; royal is culture.

Another royal instance. In 2005, another son of King Charles III, Harry, was a cadet undergoing training to become a British Army officer at the elite Sandhurst Academy. The sergeant in charge of the training became suspicious that Harry had tattooed his girlfriend’s name on his backside. The sergeant yelled during a parade: “Cadet Wales, drop your pants and show me your backside...I want to see if it’s true!”

“You should have seen Harry’s face. We all fell about laughing.”

Was Harry’s royal rear any different from the rear of any other local boy?

The ultimate truth is that God the Creator made humans; we make and unmake royalty. Royalty is not anything permanent; it is something that is worn, not born. When face to face with the final accounting, kings and queens, emperors and empresses are as naked and as vulnerable as any commoner.

5. SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

Two very important and significant changes that happen in the interaction between human nature and culture are socialisation and the learning of Language. Language is learned and acquired.

Speech and Language are two other assets that put human beings a cut or more above animals.

In that interaction, the finest thing that an individual can learn and acquire is language. It is learned and acquired only through hearing and imitation.

Secondly, almost every cultural group has traditional folklore and legends that explain, according to their tradition, why only human beings have speech and language.

Haviland says that language is a systematic code for communication in symbols of any kind of information.

Speech and Language are about the greatest, the most personal gifts of the Creator to human beings. They are perhaps the highest points of culture. They are the means par excellence for communication; through language, we let others roam the most intimate corridors, the most private chambers of our thoughts, emotions, feelings, the innermost and sacred temples of our beliefs, of our convictions.

Language is not to be confused with speech. Speech refers to the universal faculty that enables humans to use language. On the other hand, Language refers to the actual and mutual verbal communication between members of a cultural group. Speech is an inborn gift of human nature; language is, instead, a learned and acquired skill.

Speech is part of being human; as such, it is part of human nature. Every human person is born with speech. That does not mean that every human person can actually speak. There are people who are eventually unable to speak, not because they lack the human faculty of speech, but because of accidental or congenital impediments to learning a language, or to actually speaking it. Impediments do not negate the faculty of speech, but only the actual speaking. One such impediment is loss of contact, as was the case with the Mowglis (in the subsequent pages), because language is learned and preserved by hearing and imitating. Language takes place in a group. One Mowgli syndrome may indeed be “Experts...fear he may never learn to read or write” (The Sheep boy below).

Every human person is born to speak. In this sense, language is human, as well as a humanising factor. “For human beings,” say Beals and Hoijer, “the tendency to attach symbolic meanings not only to words but also to a variety of other things as well is an important aspect of the development of culture.” They attribute speech and language to the human “capacity for abstraction.” Without that capacity, man would never be able to create and use symbols, to create and use language.

The flowering or eventual development of that faculty is realized in the creation of language. Speech is inborn – it is part of human nature; language is taught and learned through hearing and imitation – it is part of culture. That is the reason why the weaker the sense of hearing, the greater the difficulty for learning a language. Without speech, there could never be language.

Language comes from a group; it belongs to a group; it arises from a group. An individual alone cannot develop a language, because language is a tool for communication, a vehicle for thoughts, feelings, emotions and experience. Varied and changing experiences and circumstances make a language grow. Static life situations make a language stagnant. “Language is the foundation of a group’s ethnic identity.”

A group is either primary – parents, one’s family members, or secondary – members of one’s larger society. Within the group, language is shared or handed on vertically – from parents to children, from the older generations to the younger ones, across generations; or horizontally – across to contemporaries, right and left. Language grows in us, and with us.

Language is the most personal, the most abstract, and the finest dimension of man. It is the best and

most exalted attribute of man and of culture. “Perhaps the most important defining characteristic of human beings is the ability to develop and use language and other similar symbolic codes.” It is the most subtle, and it is the human as well as the humanising factor.

Language is a window into the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences of a people or of an individual. It has tremendous power to unite people, but also to dismember a group.

“Learning about a language will also give them entry into the culture of the other, thus increasing appreciation for each other” (sic).

Loss of contact leads to blunting the sense of hearing and imitation, and subsequently to loss of language. Apparently, individuals revert to the level of animals.

The following instances bear that out.

1) In the city of Chita, in Siberia, a 5-year-old girl was raised by cats and dogs “since birth”. She “walks on all fours, laps up food and drinks with her tongue and communicates by barking.” Natasha Mikhailova, for that was her name, was “found dressed in ripped and soiled clothes and surrounded by dogs and cats.”

When Nina Yemelchugova, the boss of the rehabilitation centre, went in, Natasha “jumped at the door and started barking, not just meowing...She laps up food from the plate.” Her companions, “the three vicious dogs sought to protect her. She was living in filthy conditions. We were almost knocked over by the stink.”

After Natasha had been brought to the rehabilitation centre, the way she leaps at humans and plays dog games...She is not mentally retarded, but only “starved of contact with humans – shuns other children.” Natasha had “developed dog-like traits.”

Natasha had been abandoned by her father, Victor Lozhkin, 27, and her mother, Yona Mikhailova, 25. They were arrested.

Natasha had been nicknamed Mowgli, a character in Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*.

, 2)



A 14-year-old boy “was found living with a flock of sheep in a makeshift shelter with animals for eight years.

“The boy does not have any sense of language and lacks civic virtues like knowing how to use a

toilet.”

The boy was originally from Kyrgyzstan. His parents had come to Russia in search of work. “It is believed that the boy’s grandmother took care of him until she died. His misery started when her body was found in a river. He is now called a ‘Sheep boy.’”

Experts explained that the boy suffered from “Mowgli syndrome, and they fear that he may never learn to read or write. The “untamed boy tears off socks and shoes nurses put on his feet. He’ll need a long period of adaptation.

3)



A 29-year-old Rochom P'ngieng of Cambodia spent 18 years growing up in the jungle before she was found in 2007. She could not learn any language, preferred to crawl rather than walk, and refused to wear clothes. She fled back to the jungle on 25 May 2020.

4) Mowgli!

In one of his children’s stories, Rudyard Kipling spins the tale of a toddler who strayed and landed amidst a pack of wolves. Its parents had gone looking for it, and had been scared away by Sher Khan, the mighty and vicious tiger who wanted to prey on and feast on the toddler.

Father and Mother Wolves accepted the toddler as a man-cub and adopted it as one of their own. He shall learn to run, to climb trees, to swing from tree to tree, they said. The boy proved to be very agile, and light-footed like a “little frog”; he could walk noiselessly. He was known as Mowgli the Frog. He learnt to growl like a wolf; he learnt the “cryptic language of the jungle.”

Mowgli lived in the jungle till he was a young man when the human instincts in him awoke, and he finally returned to human society in his village.

Bagheera the Black Panther had been born and brought up in captivity; he lived in a cage among men. There was a time when he broke free and made straight for the forest, “the place where I belong.” He once said to Mowgli, “I was born among men... (but) you are a man. You too must be reconciled to your own world, the world of man.”

Sher Khan himself could not but admit, “He is just a man who became a wolf.” Mowgli too realized, “I am not a wolf but a man.” At one particular moment, Mowgli shed tears, and Bagheera remarked, “...These tears are something that only men have.” After all, “A man-cub is not fit to run about with the jungle people.” Mowgli fled to a village where men lived.

Once among men, Mowgli –

- “had no clue to the language of men...”,
- “...could not follow even a single word of what Messua said. He was familiar only with the language of the Jungle People and knew nothing of the language of Man...But in order to live with Man, I must talk like Man.” (Messua was a woman in the village; she was actually Mowgli’s own mother);
- “tried to learn by repeating...”
- was “busy learning the norms, customs and etiquette of the human world...”
- For a time, Mowgli still lived by animal habits.

In the village, Mowgli found himself a misfit. He missed his friends, his brother-wolves away in the jungle. Buldeo, the village hunter, sat on the village council and hunted Mowgli down, who had nowhere to go. Mowgli was “not allowed to live with wolves because I am a man, and (now) I am not allowed to live with men because I am a wolf.” He was confused. He returned to his family of friends in the jungle.

In the following spring, during the lambing season, Mowgli was astonished that his own brother-wolves did not respond to his call as promptly as they had always done. Mowgli felt betrayed and let down. It was even said to him, “Little brother, go back to your own people for that is where you belong.” Mowgli returned to the village a second time. He thought that it was about time he made the decision of his life – to return to where he belonged. After all, “Man goes back to Man.”

Once out of the adopted ambience, human instincts began to awaken. On the way, he saw in the distance a “beautiful young girl” coming from the opposite direction. He looked at her, and long-buried unfamiliar feelings surged powerfully, as if he had been charged with high-tension currents. Mowgli was beside himself with confusion. He stepped out of the way, out of sight. “I don’t know what is wrong with me,” he thought aloud. Old Baloo, the great Bear, Mowgli’s long-time mentor and guide, summed it all up for him, “Your body is indicating to you that it’s time for you to go to the life of a man...you must return to your own people, make (your) home with them.”

Within himself, Mowgli felt the war raging between staying in the jungle and leaving for human society. To all his brother-wolves and friends, Mowgli moaned, “I have no intention of leaving you, but my feet are pulling me away.”

It was Baloo again who had the last say, “It is natural!”

A recapitulation of what happened to the four Mowglis above can give us some insights into:

(i) Language is learned in a group. “When we learn a language, we join a community older than ourselves, and which is sure to outlive us. Language is given.” (ii) Language is a human as well as a humanizing dimension.

(1) Loss of human contact, physical and cultural, was substituted by animal contact in their early years, that is, at the time of imitating and learning, a crucial time when they pick up a language.

(2) Subsequently, there followed a loss of human culture. Natasha suffered only cultural and emotional contact. Physical contact was not effective enough to maintain the human equilibrium. Natasha, Rochom P’ngieng, and the other Mowglis were all “starved of human contact.”

Animals became their seniors, so to speak, who taught them the “law of the jungle”. The Mowglis in turn learnt and adopted animal habits and culture. They were effectively isolated from the world of men. Since they had stopped interacting with humans, they interacted with animals.

(3) They had lost their human (biological) parents early in life, and animals became their adoptive and cultural parents. To survive, the Mowglis integrated themselves into the world of animals.

Natasha was “protected by three vicious dogs.”

In the case of Rochom P’ngieng, nothing is said about her parents, nor about any animals she might have met and with which she might have interacted; but she effectively lived like an animal.

(4) Loss of culture and human language, because “Language is given. It must be accepted as it is,” says John McKenzie. Language is learned and taught in human groups.

(5) The consequences of the isolation that the Mowglis experienced could be listed as:

(i) Even though an animal outwardly, the inner human soul and dignity could be neither negated nor stifled; it was only suppressed. A man can indeed be or behave “like an animal”. The other way round is also true: an animal may only be “like a man,” and that too only in some respects.

(ii) Loss of human language, culture and behaviour;

(iii) Among animals, even man behaves like an animal;

(v) When a Mowgli returns to human society, (s)he has to start the learning process all over again, and, as always, a Mowgli resists learning.

An interesting news item appeared in The Shillong Times on 29 May 2025: a two-month-old Mowgli black bear cub had been lost in Los Padres National Forest, California, and was rescued by Autumn Welch, a wildlife operations manager, in collaboration with San Diego Humane Society, and transported to Ramona Wildlife Centre.

The rescue party used a bear costume that is stored in bins packed with hay scented by black bears “to prevent bonding with humans.” The rescue team wore a “suitable mask.”

The cub “treats the caregivers like siblings”. Eventually, it “learned to dig through soil for worms and insects.”

“Biologists hope to return the cub to the wilderness next year, provided he learns to find food, seek shelter, and avoid people.” “The technique is relatively new.”

The idea is:

(1) The cub’s nature was respected, and not disturbed beyond what was strictly necessary;

(2) The cub was being prepared to return to its own natural habitat where it belonged, where it could live a natural life;

(3) That was true and genuine kindness.

Language: The Human and Humanising Factor

Language is first spoken, then written.

Language is the symbolic expression or representation, verbal or graphic, of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. Language is coded in symbols: (i) in phonetic sounds, it becomes the spoken language; it is audible and distinguishable by sound; (ii) in alphabetical symbols, when it becomes scriptable, it becomes the written language; it is seen and read.

The mental or intellectual content of both spoken and written language is likely to be more or less identical and coextensive. However, neither spoken nor written language can fully and exhaustively, or perhaps even adequately, capture and express all the nuances of the emotional, intentional or intellectual content and expression, partly because “Our ability to express our thoughts and feelings is limited by our control of the language.”

Language may be said to be grammared speech, that is, speech according to the body of rules which we call grammar, the “arbitrary assignment of meanings to sets of sounds...”. The rules of grammar

make a language an intelligible means of communication. We may juggle a little and say that the power of speech becomes parts of speech.

Speech is shared by all human persons; it is common, it is universal. But language is group-specific. Therefore, there is one speech, but myriads of languages. Speech has no grammar; language has.

One might also say that speech is the capacity for language. Thus, going back to the Mowglis, we may say that until they were able to speak, they were that much away from being fully human. The faculty of speech comes with being human.

Human language is infinitely wide and comprehensive. It encompasses the entire gamut of feelings, emotions, thoughts, and experiences.

Humans use signs and symbols. Signs are natural, as smoke is a natural sign of fire; swaying trees are a sign of the wind. Symbols, on the other hand, are arbitrary. The alphabet, musical notation, and signs are symbols, man-made.

Because it is man-made, men can turn and twist language almost as they please. We use logic, irony, doublespeak, puns, etc. For example:

(1) One of the most striking examples of speech trickery and ambiguity is the celebrated doublespeak of the Oracle of Delphi. When the Roman men of war went to the Oracle to enquire whether or not they would return from the war they were about to fight, the Oracle gave them the following reply (in Latin): *Ibis, redibis non morieris in bello*. The negative non is placed between two verbs: *redibis* (you will return) and *morieris* (you will die).

If the negative non is attached to the verb *redibis*, the Oracle's reply would read: *Ibis, redibis non / morieris in bello* = You will go, you will not return, / you will die in war. If the negative non is attached to the verb *morieris*, the reply of the Oracle would read: *Ibis, redibis / non morieris in bello* = You will go, you will return, / you will not die in war.

In either case, poor humans are always fooled, and the Oracle would always have the last laugh.

(2) Look at the following clip from Jim Davis:

"Dogs bite." — "But we cats are deadlier. We use sarcasm."

Or – What did the big chimney say to the smaller one?

"You are too small to smoke."

(3) The jester was entertaining the nobles in the king's court.

"Give us a pun!" someone demanded.

"Name the subject," replied the jester.

"Errr....The king!"

Without batting an eyelid, the jester said, "The king is not a subject!"

6. LAUGHTER

Human language includes intonation, tones, pronunciation, pitch of voice, accents, vocabulary, etc.

All of these add to the parameters, or the specificity of a particular language.

Scientists have discovered that laughter is part of human language. They have demonstrated how human laughter differs from that of apes. Robert Provine, the “doyen of laughter research,” ascribes it all to bipedalism (walking on two feet). “Four-legged mammals,” he says, “must synchronise their breathing with the stride. By taking pressure off the thorax, bipedalism gave us the breath control needed for speaking and the ability to chop up our exhalations, giving it the characteristic ha-ha sound of human laughter.” “Laughter is literally the sound of rough-and-tumble play... But their (apes’) playful pants are not as musical as ours, and instead of being made up of extended exhalations, they are produced by breathing in and out. Thus, ape laughter doesn’t sound much like our own.”

7. ANIMAL LANGUAGE

Animals do seem to have some sort of “language” (if we can call it language), of their own, in the sense that they communicate with other members of their own kind, so that one member is able to decipher and interpret the signals from another one of the same species.

Animal language is limited to feelings such as fear, pleasure, aggression, and excitement, and to instincts such as defence and hunger. It is limited to survival strategies. It is limited to sounds – horses neigh, pigs grunt or whine, dogs bark, growl, or yelp, and sheep bleat, etc. It is also limited to body signals, such as a dog or a baboon baring their teeth as a sign of warning or threat. But a dog will never neigh, and a pig will never bleat.

The same set of sounds and body signals are shared by all the members of that species, at all times and anywhere in the world. They do not change. These instinctive sounds and signals are inborn. The Mowglis were denied by circumstances the opportunity to let their humanity bloom fully in as much as in them speech had been stymied in the process of becoming language. It may be said that speech makes one a human person; language places him/her in one of the ethnic or cultural groups.

It is also said that language is a significant index to one’s cultural standing and ethnic identity, “the primary outward sign of a group’s identity.” A greater portion of culture is transmitted verbally, by word of mouth, by older generations to younger ones. “Speech and language are used to initiate children into becoming fully competent members of the society. Speech is a crucial component in the process of socialization,” – no less so is language.

Especially the written word, or language, has been considered one unmistakable index of the cultural development of a group.

About the Author: An erudite scholar with an MEd, MA, and M.Phil in Anthropology, Roland Kharkrang is a Salesian Priest belonging to Shillong Province and a dedicated writer of articles and books, with a particular interest in Salesian literature. He keeps himself well informed and humbly verifies what he writes. Marked by a keen sense of humour, gratitude for even the smallest kindness, a deep love of community life, and unwavering fidelity to prayer amid a hectic ministry, he remains a distinctive and much-loved figure.