

Society and Culture: Matrix and Schema for Character Formation

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Abstract: This paper deals with how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape 'others'; how we behave and embody our own worlds replete with models for imitation. Despite this socio-cultural determination, it is assumed in this study that in the process of formation, choice is possible; and that choice is limited. Choice is possible when one is free to choose, that is, when one is able to choose other than the possible range of choices offered by society and culture. I am free to choose my food because I am free to choose other than those offered by McDonalds or KFC or Chowking or Jollibee, etc. because I am free to refuse them and the other range of choices possible. Character formation (and choice) faces limits when the range of choices is narrowed down to what is necessary—more so when one is constrained by mimetic upbringing, one that is largely limited to imitating others' or elders' choices.

Keywords: Society • Culture • Enculturation • Scripting • Mimesis • Character Formation

Introduction

What if Filipinos were born in a place where respect is abundant and humility and decency plentiful? Or today's citizens were born, at least, in a time when everyone was treating everyone kindly and leaders were respectful and have not seen or heard of intolerance, high-handedness, overbearing patriarchy, corruption,

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lapdog mentality [my apologies to lapdogs], and super-abundant idiocy? Would it not be a blissful scenario if all of us were born in that ideal place and time? How do we imagine ourselves today if we were raised in “a time when men were kind; when their voices were soft”.¹

We are, however, in a real world that gave shape (and will still give shape) to the likes of Trumps, Bolsonaros, and Dutertes with all their trolls and minions swarming around and hovering above the rest of us. How do we deal with what many of us would perceive as a situation filled with problematic characters? (Let us hope that we do not miss to take into account the situation that produced characters.)

One of my students offered this: “Well, we are dealing with cards and we should make the most of what is dealt to us.” But, should we really just have to make do with what’s in our hands? That would be like one Stoic formula: have a good poker face since your cards cannot be changed anyway—otherwise, you’re busted!

While change is necessary during these troubled COVID-19 times, perhaps we could still devote a few pages about ourselves in relation to our society and culture that have somehow shaped us.

And I hope the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach would not descend on me.² Thus, below, I present some notes about: how society and culture may shape us; how some sub-cultures may shape ‘others’; how we behave by embodying our own worlds full of models for us to imitate.

¹ Lines from the song “I Dreamed a Dream” from *Les Misérables*.

² Karl Marx wrote: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Original German: *Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert; es kommt aber darauf an, sie zu verändern.*

Determination—A Spectrum of Formative Objects

Human beings could not have been born into a world of their choice. This is a determination that all natural beings cannot avoid. In one's world, kinship, biological paternity and maternity are beyond an offspring's personal choice. Also, we cannot choose an ideal world where an Imelda Marcos, or a Francisco Duque III, or a Janet Lim-Napoles or a Mocha Uson should have been born [although there is no assurance that they would embody that ideal world]; fortunately, some individuals nobler than us were also born into a world that we know today—individuals who are not of dubious qualities, but inspirations and models of life-giving behavior: Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai...

So, despite the Trumps and Dutertes around us, it is theoretically possible that we can make our own choice to be with the likes of Romero or Mandela, rather than with the kinds that produce lies, arrogance, rudeness, brazenness and corruption. That is, if one does really have those conditions or opportunities to be in the company of righteous people.

The usual institutions and familiar relationships are simply there, warts and all, before choices. These have all been established even before the subjects have become aware of themselves. Individuals, however, may choose from whatever is possible (like some individuals as friends, or specific work as career, or an inspiring lifestyle as vocation) from their world's feasible sets that provide a continuum of varying components available. In such worlds, individuals get entangled with involvements and socializations—where they would eventually acquire their personal tastes, dispositions, habits, or “second-nature.”³

³ Lyotard refers to the “first-nature humanity” as the indeterminate status of childhood or its residues, and could be

People generally regard their cultural and social standards as guiding and leading them toward something good (even if that good is really, culturally, ambivalent in its direction). They teach children to think and do the same—making possible the imprinting of the myriad cultural and social schemata or scripts in their memories which serve to trigger cues for feeling, thinking, and acting.⁴ When children adapt themselves to these standards it is more likely that they are following tested paths and imitating the behavior of elders; especially those paths certified by their ancestors as their sure ways toward flourishing of life. When they adopt or adapt to a particular pattern of behavior pre-judged as productive or good by many, they have freed themselves from the more meticulous process of examining whether this pattern of behavior is good or not. It is the tendency of individuals to adopt ways that were already there before they were born by following models who came before them (for better or for worse). This would mean that an individual (learner) does not have innate desires *for* objects of this world (objects of desire) but something derived and learned from others (model) whom we observe and imitate; this imitation could be for good (positive mimesis) or ill (negative mimesis)—thus good choices could lead to fixation of good habits, bad choices

branded as “inhuman” by the “second-nature humanity” which refers to the institution-mediated status of adult humanity; but, this “second-nature humanity” is also referred to as the “inhuman” that colonizes and dehumanizes the first-nature humanity. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1-7.

⁴ What Gagnon and Simon (citing other authors, like Kenneth Burke and to some extent Erving Goffman) have referred to as the cultural, inter-personal and intra-psychic scripting is also relevant to our present discussion. See, John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, second edition (London/New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2005), 13ff, 290, 312ff.

leading toward bad habits. These enduring ways have survived and will survive even after individuals die; these common and persistent mimetic behavior is regarded as necessary for survival as well as for social integration.⁵

Wang Lung and O-lan are characters who only knew the possibilities which their traditional Chinese world could offer and inform them.⁶ Kunta Kinte, before he fell victim to slave traders, could only think of security in the familiar age-old traditions of the Mandinka tribe.⁷ The pursuits and triumphs of Okonkwo have also been clearly cut out for him by the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria.⁸

Conflicts and struggles are also overlaid by the traditions embodied by many and these would equip individuals to maneuver for their shares of what they think the world offers to people. Mahasweta Devi has illustrated this in her stories about tribal societies in West Bengal.⁹ She tells about a hunting tribe who would “come out of the forest, go to the village market, place honey, leaves, roots, flowers, and silently take away whatever they need: rice, oil, spices.”¹⁰ They have no concept of money, but the mainstream culture has; they

⁵ See what René Girard calls as “triangular desire,” Rene Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 1-52; see also, Petra Steinmair-Pösel, “Original Sin, Positive Mimesis,” 185-192, in James Alison and Wolfgang Palaver eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Mimetic Theory and Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁶ See Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York: Pocket Books, 1953).

⁷ See Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1976).

⁸ See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1994).

⁹ Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

are branded as thieves (“inhuman”?) by the dominant culture’s imposition of commercial rules. The absence of common axis or lines of relationship (kinship, shared worldview, sympathy, etc.) precludes a more promising bond of solidarity between the tribal and mainstream societies. Because of the absence of a common measure between the hunting tribe’s and mainstream culture’s market transactions, bonds indispensable to solidarity or mutual-relations are generally wanting.

The truth is that subjects are helplessly thrown, without them knowing or willing it, into the lap of their parents; and, consequently, into their environment and their world that is full of “things out there” which are considered necessary objects in the formation of ways of looking, feeling, thinking, acting, or appreciating. Such “things” include knowledge, beliefs, values, speech, language, images, social roles, models of behavior, patterned practices or rituals.

An American born in China could not avoid learning Chinese or using chopsticks; a Filipino born in the Bicol region will most likely become fond of chili peppers and coconut milk; an Ilokano would not dislike eating the edible beetle. These are not conscious choices but largely unconscious and automatic habits, acquired through the usual socializations and cultural dispositions that surround and shape individuals.

The subjects’ parents’ or elders’ world is where they find things that amaze, threaten, surprise, attract, challenge, frustrate, enliven, or stir desires. Passing through various stages of identity development, subjects eventually form part of that world and its effects on consciousness. Subjects unconsciously *and sometimes* consciously apprehend it and make it their own world; even at the expense of losing touch with their personal drives. In some cultures, for example, individuals follow their elders’ choice of marriage partners. Some cultures

even prescribe how people should smile or laugh or chew their food or spit their saliva or wipe their face or express satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

It is into the elders' world where subjects integrate themselves with the rest of other beings; more or less. Infants, therefore, could only follow the procedures which culture-defined idea of maturity or humanity has traditionally prescribed for them. Some cultures define maturity as being more embedded into one's tribe; others would define it as greater individual differentiation or autonomy. One has to be initiated into every practice that culture has deemed acceptable in the areas of eating, defecating, and even reproducing. In the realm of sex, the post-partum taboo and the *ius primae noctus* or later *droit du seigneur* used to be norms in some simple societies.¹¹ Individuals had to conform to such things. To paraphrase Chesterton: Tradition would be the dictatorship of the dead.

There are many objects in the outside world that impact on subjects. From different levels of apprehension or experience, subjects are overwhelmed by their density. Still, depending on one's vulnerability and resistance, such objects eventually spell out the language with which identity can be described.

The Other Formative Objects

There are a variety of "other objects" that can influence or shape individuals into someone else. In a social enclave we can talk about individuals raised into the sort of inter-generational taste and manners. A royal family reproduces and perpetuates its royal taste and manners through royal customs and protocols; a working class clan immortalizes its own workers' taste and

¹¹ See <http://www.snopes.com/weddings/customs/droit.asp/>, accessed July 16, 2007.

manners through its dutiful and loyal progenies.¹² It is possible, however, for some individuals coming from a social group to acquire another group's ways, values, or lifestyles—simply because they have also exposed themselves to the latter's "other objects" that gave shape to "other forms of manners". While some children of prostituted women may become professionals because of their avoidance of pimps and their exposure to some influential social workers and educators, some children of respectable leaders may, because of exposure to "dangerous elements in society", become delinquents and later on become influential to a multitude of "other people" themselves.

The objects of the world are *also* comprehended as facts; and as facts, they are important to subjects. But before subjects recognize objects as palpable "something," such objects have already acted upon them. Being exposed to objects is being exposed to their effects on subjects. One cannot think of being proactive without being "pro-acted" upon by other things.

First, because of the position of objects relative to that of subjects, the latter have conditioned themselves to a certain way of looking. For instance, it is not difficult to see why most people look at the sky (or the symbolic world) as something "up there." This is because subjects are standing on a ground that is "lower" than the sky. However, if people look at their place and the sky's position against the background of the whole space called "universe," then the sky as "up there" and our ground as "below" are no longer determinate spaces. From the multiple indeterminate points in the universe, any place can either be "up there" or "below."

Second, being in this world means also reproducing the patterns set by the mainstream culture (or by sub-

¹² See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).

cultures of boors and Fallstaffs). Cultural patterns are there “outside us;” but eventually, also forming “inside us.” This process of internalization or enculturation may be less complicated in the context of simple indigenous tribes of Philippine hinterlands or small barrios dependent on simple farming or fishing; but, not as smooth in more complex urbanized settings where so many cases of “explosive” personalities, multiple identities, or unintegrated individuals appear. The still intact conventional road to internalization of those socio-cultural elements “outside us” is the reason why it is so easy for *most* individuals living in traditional contexts to experience the congruence between their ways of feeling, thinking, and acting on one hand, with the expectations set before them by a still solid socially-transmitted culture on the other hand.¹³ This does not mean, however, that culture is monolithic or that personal attitudes or behavior eternally constant. Neither is the process of internalization that simple; especially when the process of individualization takes place within complex settings.

Third, cultural patterns handed down by previous generations can still be considered “treasure” by *the many*. These are the objects that form an identified heritage—a living repository of what are considered as necessary, valuable, indispensable, or meaningful. They confer/impose important collective traits/behaviors or marks that make or show subjects who they are or who

¹³ In a communication process, the shared physical world as well as the internalized information or world-aspects of culture bring about better understanding among conversation partners. They are said to be in a high-context communication. There is not much need to verbalize through explicit codes what are already embedded in their worlds. On the other hand, two conversation partners who do not share contexts may have to be more explicit with their transmitted codes to bring about greater understanding. The latter are said to be in a low-context communication. See Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), p. 91.

should they be. Many times, these common behavioral traits or customs are forced on subjects like obligations (i.e., quasi-obligatory). Social expectations make a powerful pressure on every subject who is often caught in conformity or forced into submission albeit subconsciously. Social pressure is powerful because they are co-terminous with necessary relationships. They, more or less, lose their power when subjects acquire more external and internal space, thereby, gaining more autonomy, allowing them to become more critical to conventions; saying goodbye to previous dependencies while saying “hello” to new ones. Some successful women from Africa, like the supermodels Iman and Waris Dirie, have been campaigning against the customary practice of genital mutilation; career women in Shanghai, Dongguan, and Chengdu have more power than their counterparts of ancient China against the traditional practice of husbands keeping concubines.¹⁴ Mahasweta Devi and Vandana Shiva have enjoyed some prestige and power amidst India’s patriarchal and discriminatory customs (versus women and tribals) because of their education and middle class positions.¹⁵

Men and women of every culture cannot avoid being surrounded (or colonized) by the culture into which they are thrown; a culture which is more or less alive with their surviving culture bearers. Even if personal choice is involved, the determining aspects of a living tradition, no matter how weak, will still frame every decision. Thus, some intentions and decisions that are made in

¹⁴ See Don Lee, “Revival of the Concubines Stirs Trouble in China,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2005, in http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2005/12/04/revival_of_the_concubines_stirs_trouble_in_china/ accessed August 17, 2007.

¹⁵ Cf. Anees Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988); *Beyond the Courtyard: A Sequel to Unveiling India* (New Delhi: Viking, 2003).

connection with economic production or commercial exchange will also be colored by the more generalized influence of culture.

Culture becomes especially more prominent when interactions framed within a local setting are informed by shared beliefs, rituals, and traditional forms of organization. In simple or tribal societies, the congruence between economic production/exchange and the age-old cultural traditions may still be operative. Thus, the strictly rationalized calculated transactions common to urban capitalist settings (cf. fixed prices or *quid pro quo* transactions) may seem strange to the indigenous Mandaya tribe of Southern Philippines whose shared idea of reciprocity or mutual-help informs their practices of exchange. For a Mandaya, it is not a problem that their culture will give a local twist to some capitalist practices. What turns out to be more problematic is when capitalistic interests and means-end rationalization subordinate or suppress a Mandaya's expectations of mutual help or solidarity. Some small-scale commercial transactions may, however, fit into the more traditional/cultural trading patterns which may begin with the seller's assessment of the buyer's capacity to pay and may pass through the haggling stage, and may end with either withdrawal of the buyer or completion of a deal. Hidden in the seller's assessment of a buyer's modest capacity is the appropriate price adjustment based on fellow-feeling and not strictly based on business. This regard for the other's lowly status is generously allowed by the tradition of *pakikipagkapwa* (fellow-feeling); fixed-price scheme will only allow it in the presence of an explicit rational or calculative justification (for "on sale", defective, or promotional items).

Subordination of *Pakikipagkapwa* Tradition: Formation's Misfortune

Culture does figure out in the fields of politics or political games. Where different personalities struggle for places and positions, cultural elements may still be identified. These elements, as cultural capital, are pursued by well-meaning civil servants or by opportunists who seek for external goods¹⁶ such as honor, prestige, and recognition. Children, especially in the early years of formation, are *like* sponges, absorbing much information around them, by way of significant others,¹⁷ models, and social media's so-called "influencers". When elders manipulate objects or values to suit their interests, or when adults fight over tissue papers during a pandemic, these do not escape the attention of young learners whose minds are exceptionally impressionable.¹⁸ Later on, they will make sense of these learning experiences, for better or for worse.

¹⁶ For the interior and exterior goods classification, see Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. "MacIntyre believes that politics should be a practice with internal goods, but as it is now it only leads to external goods. Some win, others lose; there is no good achieved that is good for the whole community; cheating and exploitation are frequent, and this damages the community as a whole. (MacIntyre has changed his terminology since *After Virtue*. He now calls internal goods "goods of excellence," and external goods are now called "goods of effectiveness.") "Political Philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/p-macint/> (accessed 4 August 2020)

¹⁷ See, Lavinia Gomez, *An Introduction to Object Relations Theory* (London: Free Association Press, 1997).

¹⁸ Albert Bandura and D. McClelland, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977); see, Seok Hyun Gwon and Suyong Jeong, "Concept Analysis of Impressionability Among Adolescents and Young Adults," *NursingOpen*, 5/4 (October 2018): 601-610.

When a complex system of state-management practices and their organizing rules puts pressure on a whole society, it could subordinate or curtail the influence of *pakikipagkapwa* traditions (with their manifold rituals and practices included) which function in consolidating and enlivening a people (cf. the non-commercial healings performed by native healers-moral teachers who are branded as “quacks”). In urbanized capitalist settings which are, in general, more secularized than many traditional settings, the people’s attitudes and behavior will not be predominantly marked by the traditions of simple societies. Instead, they are influenced by the processes of liberal-capitalism (embodied by profit-makers/takers) which consistently revolve around the structures of private ownership, profit-making, and remunerated work. Thus, the customary *pakikipagkawa* community work based on *bayanihan*¹⁹ does not figure out in the bureaucrat-capitalists’ plans and corporate management styles. Similarly, the sharing of food among neighbors in rural areas could not be practiced by owners of restaurants or fast food outlets where cash is always required. Some people, however, may share their resources with *their friends* while they are in those cash-demanding fields.

Of multitudes, capitalistic market-economic structures have configured everyday life and have transformed societies as centers of production, commerce, and spending/consumption. It is not altogether an anomalous claim to speak of a “capitalist culture” which has gained some ascendancy and regularity, learned and shared by peoples as workers and consumers, handed down from one generation to the next generation, and quasi-

¹⁹ *Bayanihan* is a combination of two words, *bayan* (nation or town) and *anihan* (harvest)—it means neighbourhood work or community work done voluntarily and without monetary compensation.

obligatory to everyone who is integrated into the system. It is in this pervasive sense that the dominant male-instituted capitalist culture penetrates every personal process or project of integration; especially as more and more persons and environments are shaped by the requirements of capitalist work and market exchange (and consequently reproduce a capitalist culture). This will happen when a uni-dimensional market-economic system subordinates or colonizes complex lifeworlds; and, in the process, attains preeminence over the broader and more integrative cultural systems. Transformed according to the efficiency-expectations of utilitarian or means-end reasoning, the physical world will showcase fields or areas that exponentially multiply instrumental or quid pro quo relations. The use and exertion of knowledge and information to normalize relations also characterize present-day social processes. Political power nowadays is said to be characterized by its use of knowledge/power. Legislations that serve to create some “desirable” dispositions in citizens would follow the paths established by power/knowledge.²⁰

A senior citizen who is visibly suffering from a debilitating illness has handed a doctor's prescription to one of the store attendants in one of the Mercury Drug Store outlets in Marikina City. The store attendant informs the senior buyer that the latter could not avail himself of the senior-citizens' discount since the prescription note did not bear the name of the patient. The poor man explodes with expletives against the strict application of the formal requirements of commerce and the law. With his trembling body and his contorted face

²⁰ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 205-216.

revealing pain, he holds on to the shoulders of the other buyers, walks away slowly and leaves the store, extremely disappointed and furious over the subordination of fellow-feeling under the drug-store's observance of the formal requirements of commerce founded on laws or science.

Conclusion

Young individuals' or learners' encounters with others are not only about meeting people but also about exposure to formative "objects" that go with such encounters, like pursuit of goods considered as shared sources of prestige; confusing notions of right or wrong; the banality of indecency and corruption; or social predispositions toward everyday civil formality. There is no assurance that bystanders who observe civility will render automatic help to someone who falls flat on the ground, half-dead or half-alive. Impressionable characters are shaped when exposed to such encounters which are reproductions of what have been learned by grown-ups.

Even the private aspects of people's lives, like intimacy and sexual orientation, are framed by culture or a capitalist "culture." Culture, no matter how complex it becomes, is always that "web" (or complex of webs), or "canopy," or "cage," or "conscience," or "resource," configuring, to a great degree, every thought one produces, every affect one invests, or every decision one makes. This also takes for granted the complexity and variety of forms or dimensions of socio-cultural determinations—including the culture behind today's populism/s that have risen against the claims, posturing, inconsistencies, and contradictions of mainstream or elitist education, religion, economics, and politics.

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