

Intimate Relations: Culture, Power and History

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Introduction

Like many other scholars (Wolf 1982; Ortner 1984; Driks and Ortner 1994), in this paper, I also argue that culture, as a central concept in anthropology needs to be understood in relation to the dynamics and issues of power and history. In contrast to the earlier conception of culture championed by many influential anthropologists, I rather argue how understanding of the issues of power and history, as I see it very powerful, can profoundly alter, redefine, reshape and reinforce the dominant concept of culture in anthropology. In an aim to demonstrate the intimate relations between culture and history, I will first try to position the concept of culture by examining the two dominant schools of thought namely the interpretive mode and political economy schools in anthropology. Also, I will explain how the relationships between culture and history are intertwined. Secondly, I will provide a theoretical discussion of power and argue how such understanding helps us to grasp the present-day human reality which concerns many contemporary anthropologists. Thirdly, with specific reference to such contemporary anthropological works, I tried to demonstrate how multiple discourses and everyday practices of individuals have become more important in theorizing contemporary culture and human reality.

Positioning Culture

Culture, a key concept in anthropology, has been undergoing severe challenges in recent times. The earlier concept of culture as shared, durable, timeless, relatively coherent and consistent entity has now come into question with the recent perspectives in critical theories in anthropology. As anthropologists begin to study the more complex

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societies, the issues of power and history in the analysis of culture have also become important.

In the eighties, major theoretical shifts in anthropology towards the practice and praxis, and the investigation of everyday forms of resistance and life experience have begun to dominate. Such theoretical shifts bring the issues of power and history in explaining culture in anthropological enterprise. Along with this perspective, the investigation of the concept of culture in various associated fields, such as cultural studies, literary criticism, media studies, science studies, sociology, philosophy and so on, have also come together in anthropology. All these critical perspectives posed several questions or challenges to the notion of culture. These perspectives tend to understand the concept of culture and cultural representations in relation to history, power, domination and authority in a given society. One of many critical questions raised by these perspectives is; Is culture shared by all members of the society? If yes, then, by whom and how? and, under what conditions? If not, then, in what ways and to what degree it has been shared by different social groups often based on the class, gender, race, sexual orientations, ethnicity and other social categories.

The attempts to address those questions in many ways go back to Foucauldian discussion on power, and culture as multiple discourses, and the Gramsci's discussion on culture in relation to "hegemony." These analytical frameworks develop the distinctive perspectives on the culture of power, the culture of resistance, and the politics of cultural productions and manipulations (Dirks and Ortner 1994: 4).

These perspectives argue that culture is grounded in unequal relations and is differentially related to people and groups (Dirks and Ortner 1994: 3). They also regard culture as "multiple discourse, occasionally coming together in large systematic configuration, but more often coexisting within dynamic fields of interaction and conflict"(Dirks and Ortner 1994: 4). I hope to return to this point in later part of my paper.

Culture as a core concept in anthropology has been analyzed through different theoretical paradigms over the time. Here, I will focus two

theoretical paradigms such as the interpretive mode and political economy paradigms in anthropology. I consider these two paradigms as they offer us to rethink about the critical relationships amongst culture, history and power.

For some reasons, the interpretive mode in anthropology, even though rich in explanations and details of human interaction, remains silent about exploring the connections whereby meanings provide certain power and privilege to certain groups in a given society. The interpretations of meaning in the symbolic anthropology do not take their discussion to the questions as to, e.g., what are the driving forces that lead and shape human actions? They reduce all the actions of the people to the product of their views of the world in which they live. As Keesing (1987) mentions, where Marxism and Feminism find the problems, interpretive modes sees them as local people's relative view of the world. On the other hand, political economy school in anthropology emphasizes the link between the distribution of power and the productive activity in the society. However, political economy tends to reduce everything to social constructions and blatantly disregards all that is not human (Greenberg; 1994). In a similar way, Gardner (1995) argues that "political economy perspective in anthropology reduces the world to a singular one-dimensional place, where each country must be categorized as part of the 'core', 'periphery' and 'semi-periphery' and the understanding of hegemony and the role of ideology at the local level is little elaborated."

I think that the significant issues in positioning culture in the human activity have been adequately addressed by Rossebery (1991). He explores the intersections of the two opposed paradigms; historical political economy and the symbolic anthropology. He intelligently argues that meanings shape actions and meanings are also shaped by actions. Thus, the autonomy of culture does not come from material circumstance of life. Cultural understanding and new circumstances constantly reinforce each other. Like Wolf, he also argues that culture should be viewed in both a putative evolutionary scheme and its shaping in the larger process. While Wolf argues to see the role of culture and 'cultural orderings' in mediating social relations,

Rossbary (1991) argues for the contradictory experience in the social relations which produce contradictory consciousness. Rossbary (1991) also argues that "the directions and determinative pressure in history are unpredictable." Thus, any creative and surprising activity of human subjectivity is of importance which can provide important concepts in theorizing human conditions; or 'human culture'?

In short, the two theoretical perspectives symbolic and political economy have some limitations for their own theoretical commitments and concerns. Symbolic anthropology considers the meanings of symbols and actions as relative worldview of the people. On the other hand, political economy perspectives also suffers for not taking into consideration other non-social factors at the local level and the role of ideology at the local levels are also little elaborated. Both perspectives lack some issues and concerns that need attention in theorizing culture. These include the issues of individual agency and their subordination by the larger systems of symbols and meanings, the production and role of multiple discourses and practices at every day life experience, the issues of contradictory experiences in mediating social relations.

Relationship between Culture and History

The relationships between history and culture have always been critical. In the seventies, the political economy school in anthropology, which is heavily dependent on the dependency and world-system theory, has addressed the issues of history to a certain extent. However, the understanding of history in this school of thought in many ways has turned out to be problematic. The issues of subjectivity and human agency in making and unmaking of history have been poorly addressed in conceptualizing the terms history and culture. The western economic-centric analysis which is heavily dependent on the institutions and the technology of exchanges, lacks the analysis as to how surplus is generated in the local economies (Greenberg 1994). Ortner (1984) mentions the capitalism-centered worldview by the political economists allows us to view "History as something that arrives, like a ship, from outside the society in question. Thus, we do not get the history of that society, but the

impact of (our) history on that society." She also mentions, "history is not like a chain of external events to which people react, it does not happen to the people. On the other hand, people make history-within the constraint of the systems" (Ortner 1984). Human agency in making and unmaking of history thus provides us with different perspectives- what culture is, and how it gets constituted, contested and transformed. In a similar way, Wolf (1982) argues that as a goal of the unfolding the moral stories, "history needs to incorporate other agents who serve that purpose." By criticizing the previous notions of society and culture in anthropology, he argues that culture, as "internally homogenous and externally distinctive bounded objects" is fundamentally problematic. In contrast to that, Wolf argues that we need a more dynamic view of the concept of culture and society in relation to its larger economic, political and historical forces. He argues that culture is not the billiard balls which can be easily recognizable with its essential characteristics. Thus, he tries to explore the fluidity of the concepts such as society, culture and nations within the broader framework of world-economic system. He also argues that social relations and cultural forms, as a 'determinant orderings' of things, behavior and ideas, should be understood in its relation to the broader historical, political and ideological context in a particular time and space.

The above-presented discussion thus leaves us thinking of the inseparable nature of history and culture. Like Ortner, I also think that what is historical is also cultural, and thus, history is just an expression of certain cultural forms in a historic moment. For example, the British colonialism in Indian subcontinent is historical as well as cultural when we take account of culture, as Ortner (1984) suggests, "as multiple discourse, occasionally coming together in a larger systematic configurations, but more often coexisting within the dynamic fields of interaction and conflict." In this matter, the peasants counter-insurgency, their organized struggles (known as *Bidroho*), and contestations against the discourses of British colonial power thus make this historical moment cultural. To me, history is being made and unmade everyday, at every sites of human reality where power plays an important role in the transformation of history

and culture. Hence, the important questions here would be; what are the process and ways of such diverse transformation of history and culture? And how can we capture those realities of history making? To address these issues and questions, I think that we need to explore what power means to us.

Power

Philosophically, power entails two views. First, as Mao suggests, "power proceeds from the barrel of a gun." Second, as Marx suggests, the individuals or groups who control the economic power also enjoy the cultural and political power. This monolithic vision of power thus leads us to think that there are always two groups of people in the society; who hold the power (powerful); and who do not have the power (powerless). The monolithic vision of power also tells us that power is intentional and transferable from one individual and group to another. Thus, proletariats become powerful once they have control over the economy. In the same way, as Mao envisioned that the individuals would gain power once they win the gun! This notion of power has been challenged or further expanded however, not rejected by Foucault. Foucault extended the locations of power from limited boundary of economic and 'political' (e.g., state power and judicial power) spheres. To him,

"Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organizations. And not only to individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the positions of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulations. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application." (Cameron et. al.1992: 19).

As I understand the above-mentioned definition, it seems that Foucault wants to see power as something that exists at every sphere of human life. And humans live in, live through and live against in this 'net-like organization' of power. Cameron (1992) mentions that "Foucault does not want to see power as something individuals create, have or use, but as something that exists prior to them and works through them." To Foucault, power is relational and organized

and manifest through knowledge and practice-like Imprisonment, doctor- patient relationship, identifying and classifying the Third World, sexuality, criminality, madness etc. Foucault calls these organized practices as "regimes of truth"- "a set of understanding which legitimate particular social attitudes and practices" (Cameron et. al.1992: 2). Thus, individual's cultural knowledge, ideology, and their everyday practices are the domain of investigation of power and how it travels through the multiple discourses and practices in society.

Then, how does this understanding of power help us to develop distinctive perspectives in analyzing culture? Let me remind of the argument made by Ortner and Drik that they indicate "culture as multiple discourse..... within dynamics fields of interaction and conflict (see P. 5)." I think that the "dynamic fields of interaction and conflict" in culture have not been well developed in the earlier definitions of culture where I emphasize more to investigate. For me, these dynamics fields of interaction reflect and refer to the discourses and practices of various power relations between individuals, between groups, between institutions and so forth in the society.

Also, power always exists with its inherent nature of resistance. The nature and level of resistance have varied qualities. The agency of individuals acts as a force of resistance against the broader forces of power and domination. For example, the discourse and practice of development helps the northern development actors and institutions to enjoy certain power over the governments and the people of the Third World. At the same time, the discourse and knowledge of social and economic injustice which resulted from the discourse and practice of development, recently helped third world people to organize themselves to resist, to some extent, that northern discourse of mainstream development practice and power. The recent organized movements against the development policies by powerful institutions like the World Bank and IMF are few examples of that resistance.

Anthropology as a discipline offers us various routes for the analysis of power. Rossebery (1996) argues that there is no requirement for any particular ways of analysis on power. For example, from a Marxist theoretical framework, one might be interested in the class analysis to understand the dynamics of power in the society. Thus, the analysis of the mechanism of the control over institutional power and economics help to identify certain class as powerful over others. Similarly, the interpretive mode of analysis through examining various tools such as language can also be very useful in understanding and analyzing the relations of power between institutions, individuals and various social groups. However, political ecology, as a broad theoretical paradigm, also argues to include the discussion of ecological concepts in the understanding of power relation in the society. From a critical stance, it has been argued that the overwhelming emphasis on political economy does not capture the cultural dimensions that help to maintain and reproduce existing inequalities in the society and consolidate prevailing systems of power. In other words, while control over the economy and politics plays an important role in sustaining existing systems of inequality, they do not sufficiently explain the relationship between political economy and culture.

Culture as Multiple Discourse

Keesing (1986) argues that anthropology as an interpretive and hermeneutic enterprise, pioneered by Geertz (1973), views culture as a text which can be read deeply. This school of thought views culture as 'system of symbols' and 'systems of meanings.' Thus, they find culture in rituals, in myth, in metaphor, and in the meanings of everyday life. Keesing (1986) argues that cultural meanings are situated, and thus, he identified three sorts of situatedness of cultural meanings. These kind of situatedness are reflected in three areas and these are; the sociology of knowledge, culture as ideology, and cultural translations. Keesing argues that even in the classless society, culture is not always shared by all of its members. And not all symbols are made available to the public. He argues cultural and social knowledge as 'distributed and controlled.' By providing example of a nut ritual from a tiny, classless, expertless Bimin-Kuskusmin society in Papua New Guinea, he argues that the

meanings of different layers of rituals are accessible only by few men who go through the progressive stages of cult rituals. Only few men in each generation understand the deepest layers of meaning. Thus, to grasp the culture as a text, we need to understand who writes this text and who has access to that knowledge which allows them to read the text more deeply or less deeply. Thus, for him, meanings do not necessarily lie in the text nor in the symbols, but the meanings are rather evoked by the symbols.

In his second kind of situatedness, he argues that culture is not only "the web of significance and system of meanings that orient human to one another and their world." But, he argues that this also constitutes the ideology. This ideology disguises the "economic and political realities as cosmically ordained." Even in classless societies, "this ideology empowers some, subordinates others, extracts the labor of some for the benefit of those whose interests the ideology serves." He views culture as a web of significance as well as a web of mystification.

In his third situation, he is concerned about the interpretation of other people's construction of the meaning and their world. He argues that everyday talk, which is one of many of the paths of interpretation of meaning, sometimes can be problematic. Like the anthropologists, as researcher, local people's world view about their past and the futures, of emotions and of connectedness in the events also substantially depends on the metaphoric usage. Thus, the investigations of all the linguistic stuff of local people, merely as an abstract construction of their world, can sometimes mislead us.

Kessing's explanation of cultural knowledge as distributed and controlled, culture as ideology that helps to maintain the status quo in the society and the problems of cultural translations tell us the intimate relationship of culture, power and everyday life experiences. Thus, viewing culture as multiple discourses and within the fields of interactions and conflicts might benefit to understand and explain contemporary complex societies.

Likewise, in order to understand the contemporary culture and society, I think that we also need to understand the mechanism or technology of such cultural knowledge: who creates this knowledge;

who defines it; to what ends; and how it becomes legitimized and maintained in the society in specific historic moment.

Viewing culture as an ideology offers an invitation to explore its relations to hegemony. Even in a classless society, ideology disguises the political and economic realities and helps to maintain the status quo. In a complex society, the ideology serves to maintain the dynamics of multiple discourses and practices. Thus, everyday practice and actions become very habitual, and potentially hegemonic. This everyday hegemony exists through multiple discourses and structures of economic and political power which continues to be changed. Hegemony has also been legitimized and maintained by various institutions such as state, media, and disciplinary practices, to name a few, in historical moments. Thus, culture as a multiple discourse, needs to be situated historically with its embeddedness in the political and economic structure of power. For example, Guha (1999) by examining the historical documents of colonial Indian society explores the peasants' subjectivity within the larger discourse of power, governmentality and authority during the era of British colonialism in India. Guha's recent work clarifies how British colonial Power subordinates peasants' subjectivity and exercises power to silent the peasant's history. Guha argues that peasant's insurgency is an organized resistance against the British domination and power. Insurgency reveals their political consciousness against the British rules and it is grounded in the cultural logic of the peasants. However, the official British history presents that insurgency is merely as violence, problems, fanaticism and madness of the peasants. Thus, he argues that the text of the history is always categorized and influenced by the categories of dominated groups and power. Thus, he argues that peasant's "subalternity was marginalized by the structure of the property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion, and made tolerable and even desirable by tradition"(Driks and Ortner 1994: 20).

Culture and Practice

Like Keesing and Ortner, I do not diminish the importance of deeper understanding of meanings. However, we need to broaden the framework of interpretive mode of analysis and also make room for the analysis of co-created, situational meaning of everyday life as

expanded by Ortner as "thick history." Recently, there has been growing tendency in anthropology to capture the everyday life experience that human goes through. While traditional work places in anthropology (such as the study of the rituals, myths, festivals and the offshore 'exotic' places) provide a more dynamic interaction of multiple discourse and powerful hegemony, contemporary anthropology, however, tends to explore new workplaces to investigate the culture of power, culture of resistance and the issues of human subjectivity and cultural identity. For example, Bourdieu (1990) explained how the domination works in the contemporary French society through the systems of education. He explained the mechanism and production of cultural knowledge and how the differential valuation of cultural knowledge maintain and contribute to the production and reproduction urban social classes in French society. Bourdieu explained that this domination occur through the mechanisms of cultural capital and habitus. The possessions of higher valued cultural capital and habitus make an individual more powerful over others. Thus, in a class-based society, there are various dominant and subordinate groups of individuals with varied habitus and cultural capital. Bourdieu's habitus becomes a powerful concept of explaining the theory of practice within the domain of practical activity of each individual. In the same fashion, contemporary anthropologists invite to explore new workplaces to investigate the struggles and contestations of ordinary people with the larger discourses and powerful hegemony in everyday life. For example, the works of Abu-Lughod (1991) on Writing "against culture" where she emphasizes the everyday experience of the persons not the cultural forms of the people, Ortner (1994) works in among the 'self'- the high school classmates in New Jersey, where she argues the relation of power and the productions of knowledge about "others" in anthropology. Appadurai (1999) provides several significant concepts in understanding culture in global "ethnoscape." He argues for the genealogies of global cultural forms and how web of cosmopolitanism and media influence the imaginations of the people. All these recent trends in anthropology reshape and reinforce the notions of history and power and its critical relations with culture. Thus, understanding of culture more importantly takes us to the understanding of the dynamics and issues of power, hegemony

and ideology, and more specifically, the culture of power, culture of resistance and culture of dominance.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the relationships among the concepts of culture, power and history are intimate. Theorizing culture in two earlier theoretical perspectives, mostly the symbolic and political economy in anthropology did not pay sufficient attention to the issues of larger power structure and individual's struggle against it. By using the Foucauldian definition of power, I tried to demonstrate the inseparable nature of culture and history and the role of power in historical or cultural transformation. I also argued that what is historical is also cultural and the vice versa. In the light of the work by Kessing (1986), I have tried to explain that how the analysis of culture invites us to view culture as multiple discourses and occasionally coming together in organized and large configurations but also work with the dynamic fields of interactions and conflict. Thus, the definition of culture inevitably means to include the culture of power, culture of resistance and culture of dominance. By highlighting the individual domain of everyday life experience, I argued that understanding of the culture of contemporary complex societies should also include the investigation of everyday struggles.

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