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## Cultural Dimensions in Geographical Studies: A Review

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**Abstract:**

*Cultural dimension is one of the techniques of approaching geography and its objectives in its own ways. This paper aims to analyze culture in geographical perspective and highlight the importance of culture in geographical studies. Cultural geography developed as a sub-field of human geography under the leadership of Carl Sauer. The central themes in Cultural geography are culture, cultural process, cultural landscape, cultural region, cultural diffusion, cultural ecology and cultural interaction. This discipline witnessed the challenges posed by new geographers who (front runners were Denis Cosgrove, James Duncan, and Peter Jackson) claimed that the scholarship of the Berkeley school as static, empiricist, and obsessed with relict landscapes and material artifacts. Rather, they advocated for revitalizing the sub-discipline. Despite these obligations, the reorganization of the state and the degree of coherence between the political/institutional and socio-economic sub-system certainly depends upon cultural harmony of the state. If cultures in general and ethnic identities in particular do not become policy for development project, these cause the resistance to change for development.*

**Keywords:** culture, cultural dimension, cultural region, cultural landscape, cultural diffusion, cultural process, cultural interaction, cultural ecology, Berkeley school

### 1. Introduction

Dimensions of the subjects – different worlds (domain of techniques) in which members of one professional group exercise their own particular skills (J.H. Paterson, 1979). Cultural dimension is one of the techniques of approaching geography and its objectives in its own ways. The geographers, the economists and the scholars of the other social sciences consider the cultural dimension as the widest ideological and cultural dimension of the world, and of the territorial systems or geo-systems in which terrestrial space has been developed by human societies (Francesco ADAMO).

Culture is the total way of life that characterizes a group of people and it is one of the most important things that geographers study (Charles A. Heatwole, 2006). The father of modern Anthropogeographie, Friedrich Ratzel stated that culture was a fundamental dimension of the field he was creating (Ratzel, 1882-1891). Francesco ADAMO held opined that culture (material and non-material, including knowledge and also ideology) is a fundamental dimension (or content or component or sub-system) of the reality that is the object of geographic representation (territories or geo-systems, from the local community to that of the whole world). Due to its immense importance in geographical representation, it has its own special geography which is designated as Cultural Geography. This paper aims to review culture in geographical perspectives and to examine the importance of the cultural dimensions in geographical studies.

### 2. Emergence of Cultural Studies in Geography

The interest pertaining to cultural problems developed in human geography right from the second last decade of the nineteenth century (1880s). The studies dealing with social aspects of human distributions developed at the same time. But the role of cultural factors in geography got greater momentum than that of social factors. In the early stage of its development (almost half a century) emphasis was more on culture, its impact on landscape, the role of techniques and the notion of *genre de vie*. With the passage of time (between the 1950s and the 1970s) social geography overcame cultural geography in terms of research priority.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) came to know the problems of ethnicity and culture during his stay in the United States of America. He stressed on culture in his book entitled *Culturegeographie der Vereinigten States von Nord-America* (1880). He opposed *Naturvolker* (the people of nature and the primitive ones) to *Kultuvolker* (the civilized ones) stating that first ones suffered environmental constraints whereas second ones enjoyed more freedom and were less submitted to physical limitations. Otto Schluter (1872-1959) focused on landscape which was used as main tool in its cultural approach. He perceived cultural landscape just as natural landscape that gives the object of study for physical geography (quoted in R. C. West (ed), *Pioneers of Modern Geography*, 1980, p.69).

Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) developed an approach for the study of man/milieu relationships in a cultural perspective which was parallel to the landscape school. The notion *genres de vie* as developed by Vidal de la Blache, had different dimensions (a) Ecological foundations-choice of crops and forms of cattle-raising adapted to specific environments, (b) technical dimension-farming and cattle-raising were based on specific know-how, (c) social dimension-as it analyzed the work schedule of the group

and the way it was intervened with other social activities, and (d) cultural dimension. Jean Brunches (1869-1932) was very keen on the role of techniques in the structuring of ways life. He developed a strong school of cultural geography in France and his main interests were the adaptation of man to harsh environments, and human agency in shaping the landscapes of civilized regions. Carl O Sauer () was first to conceive cultural geography as subfield within human geography and used the term as such. He had a keen interest in landscapes as biological realities shaped human action. Sauer used the term landscape to denote the unit concept of geography, (b) to characterize the peculiarly geographic association of facts. He held the view that it was not nature that caused culture, but rather culture, working with and on nature created the contexts of life. His most influential essay entitled "The Morphology of Landscape" (1925) placed culture right at the center of geography's project. Sauer concerned himself especially with the destruction humans had caused to the landscape which reflected in his landmark essay "The Agency Man on Earth" which was published in 1956. Sauer's work provided exceptionally prominent themes that dominated cultural geography in the twentieth century.

Cultural geography has its roots in a theoretical and political world quite different than what one might expect: not in a world concerned with cultural difference for its own sake, or one concerned even to delineate the geographies of that difference. Rather, it developed within and as part of a set of "culture wars" (Don Mitchell, 2000).

### 3. Components of Culture and Concepts of Cultural Geography

A culture comprises of numerous cultural components that vary from one culture group to the next. The partial list of cultural components include religion, language, architecture, cuisine, technology, music, dance, sports, medicine, dress, gender roles, law, education, government, agriculture, economy, grooming values, work ethic, etiquette, courtship, recreation, gestures etc. IGCU Commission on the cultural approach in geography expressed that some components such as attitudes, practices and know-hows, are generally not explicated through words and drawings whereas some are conceptualized (knowledge and values). Concepts of cultural geography is visualized through some key concepts in geography which are as follows-

#### 3.1. Cultural Interaction

Cultural interaction refers to the relationships that exist between cultural components that characterize a given community. When geographers seek to explain why a particular culture trait is found in a particular area, they often discover that the answer lies in another trait possessed by that same cultural community. This demonstrates that cultural components may be interrelated. Cultural interaction may explain the presence—as well as the absence—of particular traits in particular areas.

#### 3.2. Cultural Region

A cultural region is a part of earth's surface delineated on the basis of some common cultural components. The most fundamental question i.e. 'where' in geography is accessed by mapping of cultural regions. The purpose of dividing the world into areas (having common cultural traits) is to make geography more comprehensive. Cultural regions may be of different sizes. It may be of exceptionally large size such as the Islamic culture region which is spreading over of millions of square of miles of North Africa and Southwest Asia, and it may be as small as the size of apple belt in Jammu and Kashmir. It is to note that culture regions may be found in urban, suburban or even in rural settings. Urban culture regions may be differ to rural culture regions in terms of agriculture and many more. With passage of time culture regions are likely to appear and disappear, and expand and contract in between.

#### 3.3. Cultural Landscape

Cultural landscape refers to the human made landscape crated by a cultural group occupying an area. The cultural landscape is the visual manifestation of the culture and its interaction with the environment. It consists of material aspects of culture (buildings, shrines, signage, sports and recreational facilities, economic structures and many more) that characterize Earth's surface. Cultural landscape so often embodies humans' most basic needs-shelter, food, and clothing and these are considered the most important aspect of cultural geography by some geographers. With the passage of time, the cultural landscape of given area tend to change. People of different regions in same and people of same regions in different time have left their cultural imprints on the surface of earth which may be tool for understanding the history and status of a given region and the current trends that prevail therein.

#### 3.4. Cultural Diffusion

Cultural diffusion refers to the spread of culture by the factors such as migration, communications, trade, and commerce. It is observed that the cultural traits originate in one particular area spread to another area and ultimately spread over larger extent of a territory. Cultural diffusion helps in explanation of how cultural traits spread in a particular cultural region. Cultural diffusion encourages cultural sharing and interaction between people, sometimes it may promote conflict also. When cultural items diffuse, they come across to one or more barrier effects that discourage cultural diffusion and likely to stop its spreading. The barrier effects may be either *physical* (oceans, deserts, mountains, dense forests, etc which inhibit the spread of culture) or *social* (say religion, language, race and ethnicity that limit interaction between human groups). These barrier effects are likely to isolate cultural communities from each other and even these had been successful in far past to do so i.e. it inhibited the interaction of some cultural groups. Modern means of communication has diminished the traditional barrier effects and has enforced isolation to decline. Adaptation of new culture is associated with disuse of an old culture.

### 3.5. Cultural Ecology

Cultural ecology is the study of the causes and effects of the interaction between a group (society) and its environment. It examines how the culture of a specific group impacts the entire environmental complex that they occupy and the way in which the environment affects the people who reside within it. Ecological approach in cultural geography poses the question 'how do we describe and analyze what is happening here?' Our physical environment differs in climate, natural vegetation, soils, and landforms and culture has evolved in these varying physical settings. Human has developed different adaptive strategies to meet their needs of food, shelter and clothing. The concept of cultural ecology provides us better understanding of the cultural landscape. Say for example, study of cultural landscape help us to identify and describe a particular building type in a particular areas whereas of cultural ecology helps us to explain why that building looks that way. The evidence of cultural ecology may be local as well as global but it must focus on culture-environment interaction in the past as well as the present.

### 4. Scope of Cultural Studies in Geography

Richard H. Jackson et al (1990) opined that a central theme in geography is the study of differences and similarities that exist between places upon the face of the earth. Cultural geography also studies the origins and diffusions of culture groups or individual cultural traits to explain how similarities and differences among places in the world occurred. The scopes of cultural geography may be visualized by the following aspects-

- Cultural geography examines the spatial variations among cultural groups and the spatial relationships associated with society.
- Cultural geography is interested in the spatial distribution and functioning patterns of all culture systems, whether they reflect religion, politics, livelihood, language, or other cultural phenomena.
- Cultural geographers typically examine the long –term character of human development, viewing contemporary issues as only one point on a longer continuum of development and change associated with the human occupation of the earth.
- Cultural geographers examines origins, diffusions, distributions, and patterns related to the earth as the home of mankind to answer *the basic questions* that cultural geographers ask which are as follows-
  - ❖ How have people modified the physical geography of the earth to create today's landscape?
  - ❖ What types of distinctive patterns have emerged from the human occupation of the earth's surface?
  - ❖ What is the significance for the earth and its inhabitants of the use and change of the earth by humankind?
  - ❖ How the earth had been modified by humans?

### 5. Central Themes in Cultural Geography to Explain Cultural Geography

- Culture
- Cultural origins and diffusions
- Cultural ecology and process
- Cultural landscape
- Cultural regions

Francesco ADAMO concentrated on two important cultural values in geographical studies-

- The geographical representation of our world, as produced historically, particularly with regard to regional development, and
- Geographic planning, that is to say, voluntary or applied geography.

Accordingly, in both the representations and the planning of the territory, culture in its multiple manifestations can be considered both as an object (or component of territory), as in a true cultural geography, and as a factor (or determinant of the territory).

According to Dino Gribaudo cultural geography may encompass the followings-

- The representation of terrestrial space by each geographer, as by each human being, is largely a reflection of their values, beliefs and knowledge.
- The social asset of a territory and the relations of each social group and individual with natural environment-space is also a reflection of their collective and individual values.

### 6. Approaches to Cultural Geography

The Commission (previously Study Group) on the Cultural Approach in Geography was created during the IGU Conference of The Hague, in 1996. The initiative came from Jean-Robert Pitte. His demand was for the creation of a Commission on Cultural Geography. The IGU Assembly accepted his proposal, but changed the name into "The cultural approach in human geography".

1. IGU Commission on the Cultural Approach in Geography under the umbrella of '*Recent evolution and present situation of cultural approaches*', December 1996 has proposed the following approaches-

- In the first half of last century, some geographers focused their analyses on the material productions and expressions of culture: artifacts, housing, food, the way there named and spoken of, discourses and texts, work of art.
- Another approach starts from the ways in which men and women experience their environment: what is the role of seeing, smelling, tasting and touching, how these experiences are shaped and institutionalized by human groups?
- Contemporary geography has a keen interest in territoriality. Analyzing the way human groups cling, identifies themselves to specific places, and builds their identities through the way they inscribe their action in space, is an original approach to cultural geography.

- Many geographers prefer to start with the analysis of landscapes. They do not treat it in the same way. At the beginning of this century, focus was put down on the functional characters of present landscapes. Today, the prevailing interpretations stress the meanings of landscapes, and the way they are perceived in an aesthetic perspective.
- For other geographers, analysis is centred on the processes at work in the building of cultural categories. It deals with the construction of the categories of environment, city and countryside, place region, nation, or race, otherness, foreigner, sexes and ages
- There is also an approach which strives to precise the role of culture in the life and functioning of societies.

2. IGU Commission on the Cultural Approach in Geography under the umbrella of 'the major types of cultural approaches in geography' has proposed the following approaches-

- *The technical aspects of culture as key-factors of the socio-spatial systems:* In this perspective, the cultural approach seeks to understand how land use, human settlements, land ownership and forms of social organizations are organized into coherent systems. Some of the pioneers of this approach were Michael Man or Robert Dodgshon in the U.K., and Jean-René Trochet in France.
- *Landscape analysis:* During the 80s, the landscape-based cultural approach was practiced mainly in Germany and France. In Britain, Denis Cosgrove also spoke about landscapes. Since 1990, the rise of a concern with conservation strengthens the interest for landscapes almost everywhere in the World, in the Anglophone countries more particularly.
- *The analysis of cultural processes:* The cultural approach is centred on- the role of communication, the building of identities and the role of the Beyond which men use in order to build the normative perspectives necessary for action and the creation of a social order.
- *The critical approach:* The critical and radical approach is more directly linked with James Duncan's critique, in 1980, of the super organic conception of culture. Thus the radical approach stresses micro-analyses and case studies. It revived the curiosity for place, so strong at the beginning of the twentieth century and which had gradually declined. The critical approach is dominant in the English-speaking world. It took different forms according to the authors. Some are more sensitive to landscapes, the way they are conceived, drawn and used for ideological manipulation (Denis Cosgrove), or their role as bearers of messages (James Duncan). Others give more emphasis to the construction of race, sex and marginality (Peter Jackson).

## 7. New Cultural Geography

Cultural geography developed under leadership of Carl Sauer in America is often termed as "Berkeley School". There has been a great tradition of Berkeley School for extending Sauer's legacy cultural geography. But this tradition was challenged by front runner New Geographers especially Denis Cosgrove, James Duncan, and Peter Jackson. These writers held that cultural geography is synonymous with the Berkeley school (Jackson 1989, 10; Duncan 1990, 3) and it is defined largely through the work of Carl Sauer. They repeatedly emphasized the centrality of Sauer and claimed that cultural geography remains to this day "under his thrall".

Once, Denis Cosgrove (1983) suggested that the time was ripe for developing a "radical cultural geography", centered exactly on issues of power, dominance, and the control of space and culture by elite groups. Peter Jackson (1980) proposed a rapprochement with British social geography so as to better understand the geography of culture and society as they worked together to shape the experience of everyday life. James Duncan's (1980) thesis entitled "The Superorganic in American Cultural Geography" attacked on notion of culture as superorganic entity and suggested that it is not only unconvincing as an explanatory variable but also impedes explanation by masking many problematic social, economic and political relationships.

The leaders of the new cultural geography depict the scholarship of the Berkeley school as static, empiricist, and obsessed with relict landscapes and material artifacts. They claim that their aim is not the development of a new geographic subfield, but rather a progressive strengthening of a cultural approach that requires jettisoning an older tradition's exhausted concepts and analytical framework. Although members of the new school claim to be revitalizing the sub- discipline, they are in fact reinventing it, casting aside virtually all of the features that have long distinguished American cultural geography. New cultural geographers, on the other hand, devote much ink to explicating their intellectual relationship with an older tradition. New cultural geographers addressed the landscape issues on four forms (Don Mitchell, 2000)-

- They sought to connect the very idea of landscape to its historical development as part of the capitalist and Enlightenment transformation of Europe in the early modern period.
- The notion of reading the landscape to problematize the whole notion of exactly what constitutes the text to be read- and precisely how it is possible, in any event, to read it.
- Much traditional cultural geography had examined rural and past landscape, some new work interested in landscape and culture focused on urban and contemporary senses.
- A sustained feminist critique of landscape studies and of the very idea of landscape has been launched.

## 8. Cultural Turn in Geography

The term "cultural turn" was coined in the English-speaking World in 1998 (Barnett, 1998). It originally applied to the transformations of economic geography: geographers were discovering that demand was not a universal category; it differed according to place and time; it was a social construct. The cultural turn, which started in the 70s and gathered full momentum in

the 90s, relied on an enlarged vision of the forms of causality working in the world: what we discover around us, see and live, does not result only from past or present forms of causality; it reflects the way people dreams their future.

### 9. Importance of Cultural Turn in Geography

- As a result of the cultural turn, the role of culture ceases to concern only a sector of life; rather it permeates the whole of geography.
- It allows for an understanding of choices and behaviors and it influences social, economic or political processes.
- It explains the new interest for the relations between geography and ethics.
- It induces the analysis of the different forms of temporality present in social life.
- It integrates planning, as form of normative thinking, in sphere of geography.
- Cultural turn gives more relevance to contemporary geography and insure it a more important role and higher status in the concert of sciences.

### 10. Importance of Culture in Geographical Studies

The reorganization of the state and the degree of coherence between the political/institutional and socio-economic sub-system certainly depends upon cultural harmony of the state.

It is incomprehensible without due consideration of culture, and entire ideological-cultural sub-system that mediates the relationship between politics and the economy.

If culture in general and ethnic identities (local and regional) in particular do not become policy and politics with project for change for development, this cause the following problems-

- Obstacle
- Resistance to change
- Factors aiding stagnation and not progress
- Factors contributing to the break-up of the state and society instead of pluralistic and multicultural development.

### 11. Conclusion

Culture is a total way of life of a people and it is one of most important things that geographers study. The interest to study cultural problems developed in human geography from the second last decade of the nineteenth century but it was Carl O Sauer who coined the term "*cultural geography*" and from then it became one of important sub-fields of human geography. Cultural geography deals with study of the origins and diffusions of culture groups or individual cultural traits to explain how similarities and differences among places in the world occurred. Cultural geography studies the relations between human communities and the natural world, investigating the transformation of natural landscapes into cultural ones.

*The basic questions* that cultural geographers ask which are as follows- (a) how have people modified the physical geography of the earth to create today are landscape? (b) What types of distinctive patterns have emerged from the human occupation of the earth's surface? (c) What is the significance for the earth and its inhabitants of the use and change of the earth by humankind? (d) How the earth had been modified by humans?. Central themes in cultural geography are: Culture Cultural origins and diffusions Cultural ecology and process Cultural landscape Cultural regions.

The Commission (previously Study Group) on the Cultural Approach in Geography was created during the IGU Conference of The Hague, in 1996 by the initiative that came from Jean-Robert Pitte. The commission suggested a number of approaches to study of cultural geography and some of the most important approaches are- (a) Landscape analysis (b) The analysis of cultural processes (b) the critical approach.

The last year of 1970s and beginning of 1980s witnessed the rise of new cultural geography by its front runners such as Denis Cosgrove, James Duncan and Peter Jackson. New geographers were dissatisfied with the legacy of Berkeley School. They claimed that the scholarship of the Berkeley school as static, empiricist, and obsessed with relict landscapes and material artifacts. They claim that their aim is not the development of a new geographic subfield, but to revitalize the sub- discipline. In nutshell, the reorganization of the state and the degree of coherence between the political/institutional and socio-economic sub-system certainly depends upon cultural harmony of the state.

If culture in general and ethnic identities (local and regional) in particular do not become policy and politics with project for change for development, this cause the following problems- Obstacle, resistance to change, factors aiding stagnation and not progress, and factors contributing to the break-up of the state and society instead of pluralistic and multicultural development.

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