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Language, Religion and Culture

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Abstract

Ever since the inception of human civilization, religion and culture have stood side by side, interwoven with each other and it is difficult to detach them or contemplate their existence individually. Religion has always come wrapped in cultural guise and reflexively, when we think of religion; it is always determined by culture. Humans have the tendency to spin themselves in webs of significance and also thus cherish their own identity and value within the society. This paper is an attempt to delineate the fine thread of relation between religion, society and culture. It is a study of some theories underlying these elements and also how they interact and interfere in a dynamic manner. If culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings and conceptions embedded in symbols, religion is a system of symbols which serve to lay down powerful and pervasive moods and motivations in human beings. Religion gives a kind of orientation to human beings and provides a meaning to their lives which is purely abstract and remains in the psychological domain. At the same time, religion enables man to have a distinctive conception of the world; it serves as a guide to his ontological and epistemological set up and also helps him to understand the relations between his fellow beings. In the society, religion has a unifying effect in the sense that it unifies the different social elements in it. Simultaneously, religion is also subject to changes in the society through time. Man's way of life influences the approach to religion and the religious attitude influences the way of life. At the same time it is religion which initiates profound and even revolutionary changes within culture.

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> I don't want to build a wall around the walls of my home or cover its windows. I would like all the cultures of the world to blow freely into my home and among my family. However, I will not let them cut the ground from under my feet. I don't want to live as a slave and beggar in the homes of others.
>
> – Mahatma Gandhi (*Young India*, June 1, 1921)

Introduction

Religion, culture and language are interwoven elements which hold the essential fabric of a nation. To be specific, culture and religion are very close inseparable relatives and language is the medium through which these propagate and remain suspended. A close scrutiny reveals that irrespective of the geographical location of the place, religion becomes a marker of cultural identity and also in a way is the custodian of culture. At the same time the dynamics and studies on culture would remain incomplete without considering the kinesics of culture due to migrations, movements of people globally and across various diaspora throughout the world. It is believed that the word *ethnos* was used to describe people outside Greece, who had different religion and culture; and in general they were considered uncivilized and barbaric. Similarly, in Europe this concept of uncivilised and primitive for the non European people came during the Enlightenment period and it is still carried forward even today. In both the cases, the logic was to view religion and culture together, or culture to be the mirror image of the religion a person practised. It is a well established fact that religion and anthropology share many theories between them. "In case of culture, one can say that culture would be the webs of significance (which many times are without any rationale or explanation) which human beings have suspended around themselves and continue even doing so generation after generation." (Cai)

On the other hand, religion may be the cluster of symbols followed by humans which gives them a direction and meaning, a sense of superiority. Religion plays an active part in the sense that it motivates, encourages and in a way controls the mood of the individuals. Therefore, a religious society or a person following a religion finds anything and everything realistic with respect to his religion; and incorporates these as an integral part of his life, which then becomes his culture. Thus, religion has an

orientating function and helps the society to find its criteria to establish an identity in this world.

Language- Meaning and Significance

Language is the most powerful way in the communication world. On the other hand, it improves the quality of life and shows how people from different places live and think. Because of sociability of human beings, language is one of the vital factors that influences human life and its progress. Not only language and culture are linked together but also act as a significant feature in intercommunication and so we can claim that language is a vital factor in cultural interaction. The relationship between religion and culture is inevitable. They are inter-related and impact each other in different ways. Both of them extend through language. Whenever there is a change of place, there is a change of language, culture and even religion. Claire J. Kramsch identifies three ways how language and culture are bound together.

> First, language expresses cultural reality (with words people express facts and ideas but also reflect their attitudes). Second, language embodies cultural reality (people give meaning to their experience through the means of communication). Third, language symbolizes cultural reality (people view their language as a symbol of their social identity) (2).

Noam Chomsky claimed that language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied from place to place. The process of recreation is also involved in the interpretation and use of words. (90) The British Linguist argues that the term culture is referred to all the ideas and assumptions about the nature of things and people that we learn when we become members of social groups and it can be defined as a socially acquired knowledge. Because of the relationship between language and culture, American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz defines culture as something which -

> Interprets symbols through 'thick description' with a goal of 'enlarging the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from each other.' He offers a famous definition of religion as a cultural system: 'a system of symbols' which 'establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations' and naturalize 'conceptions of a general order of existence.' (3)

Role of Language

If language as a part is transmitted through culture, it is no less true that culture as a whole is transmitted very largely through language in so far that it is explicitly taught. Human cultures are as divergent as are human languages over the world, and they can and do change all the time, sometimes with great rapidity, as among the industrialized countries of the 21st century. Language is intrinsic to the expression of culture. Language and culture have a complex, homologous relationship. Language is complexly intertwined with culture (they have evolved together, influencing one another in the process, and ultimately shaping what it means to be human). In this context, A. L. Krober writes, "culture, then, began when speech was present, and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other." (Guessabi)

As a means of communicating values, beliefs and customs, language has an important social function and fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is the means by which culture and its traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved. Language is fundamental to cultural identity. This is so for people everywhere. For any community on the earth, its unique world is expressed in their language. For this reason, it is important that people keep their own language alive. Cultural and linguistic diversity is a feature of most nations today as people from different groups live together as a consequence of historical events and human migrations. Within multilingual societies, the maintenance of the languages of the various ethnic and cultural groups is critical for the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. The loss of language means the loss of culture and identity. In many societies throughout history, the suppression of the languages of minority groups has been used as a deliberate policy in order to suppress those minority cultures. As a result, a large number of the world's languages have been lost with the processes of colonisation and migration.

> There are many factors of societal organization that influence language endangerment and death, which can be divided into categories of physical danger or language shift. Physical danger includes natural disasters, famine, disease, and acts of violence like war and genocide. When a speaker population is diminished, so is its language. Language shift, the second category, occurs when intergenerational language transmission is disrupted by discouragement and preventative efforts, or voluntarily when speakers choose to assimilate to another group (Nettle & Romaine 4).

As languages disappear, cultures die. The world becomes not only a less interesting place, but we also sacrifice raw knowledge and the intellectual achievements of millennia.

The Relationship of Language and Culture

If language is 'doing' then culture is verb. For both culture and language, various scholars have independently noted that these concepts are better understood as activities or processes, not as things – they are something we do or something that happens rather than something that exists or something that we possess. To illustrate this idea, we may try to use the names of these concepts as verbs instead of nouns. For example, we may say – we culture, instead of - we have (a) culture, or also languaging is an important activity in human life; instead of -language is an important tool for humans. The cultural anthropologist Brian Street used the statement: "Culture is a verb" in the title of a paper about the problems of defining culture." (25)

Reasoning about the nature of language, Wilhelm von Humboldt argued already in 1836 that language is not a product or result of activities, but the activity itself, and a creative force. (Tomashpolskaia 42) This perspective leads us to new questions regarding the connection between culture and language, for example: How and in which situations do we do culture with language? Which linguistic activities are cultural practices? What forms do they have in different cultures? We may distinguish everyday cultural practices and those performed only at special occasions. Another distinction is between practices shared by all members of a community and customs which are performed only by special members, because they require more training or talent (such as writing poems) or a special status (such as preaching). Examples of customs performed by ordinary members of a culture are: exchanging greetings, saying grace before a meal, thanking for a gift, writing text messages wishing a happy birthday, singing Christmas carols, sending cards at weddings, reading a newspaper at breakfast, reading bedtime stories to children, writing diaries or blogs…. Some of these customs are universal – greeting and thanking are found everywhere in the world – others are more culture specific. Some are oral practices (performed by speaking and listening), others are literary practices (using writing and reading).

Intermingling of Language and Culture

In this era of globalization and advancement of technology, one cannot ignore the shifting locations of people in different parts of the world. Hence, it is very important to study the aspects of language, culture and religion in the populations who have

migrated and settled in different lands, and thus an idea is drawn to understand the interplay of these elements in the diasporic context. People encounter one another now not as oppressor and oppressed but in new circumstances as equals. When two religions interact, then the principle of integration plays a dominant role. In these kinds of situations there is no situation of isolation, and neither is there any place for obsession for identity and withdrawal. Instead, creation of an authentic dialogue will eventually lead to mutual enrichment and 'partners in action'. In the end, the interaction between religions is not about relativising one's own convictions and seeking universal neutral principles; it is rather about acceptance and respect of pluralism, diversity and the belief of the other. When an individual belonging to a particular religion comes from a specific cultural background and ends up in a different cultural environment, the individual integrates the religious convictions into the new cultural context, as there should be a clear difference between the religion and the culture of origin.

> Because of globalisation, religions all over the world rarely exist in isolation. Steven Vertovec in his book, *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns,* writes that they are "much more exclusive and homogenic. Out of feelings of inferiority, many Hindus have tried to re-define Hinduism according to the dominant Western concept of religion." (152)

Religions are constantly exposed to a multi-religious environment. In this plurality, each religion is in need of maintaining its unique identity. Studying religions will need to take into consideration not only the culture from which a religion originates but also the cultural network a religion ends up in because of globalisation and migration. Creating harmony between religious communities living in close proximity needs to take cultural and ethnic considerations into account. It is also important to note that cultural identity is ideologically motivated. People profess something about their culture to motivate the manifestation of a particular group. This religio-cultural identity provides people with a feeling of certainty, order and meaning – a general feeling of belonging. This may serve as explanation to the struggle for power in multi-cultural societies, confirming Bruce Lincoln's theory of 'hegemonic struggle'. This states that:

> It is clear from this that struggle as well as attempts at reconciliation between cultures should be seen as efforts at establishing identity. Understanding the effort of creating identity requires an understanding of how people perceive the interplay of religion and ethnicity. (qtd. in Beyers)

Societies construct religion. Religion, as culture, is always associated with a struggle for power. Culture, especially religion, becomes a site where power and privileges in society are negotiated. Lincoln refers to this as the 'hegemonic struggle'. Culture has an ideological role in this hegemonic struggle. Culture ignores its historical origin and makes transcendental claims to authorise its own position of power and discredit other claims. Further, the origin of religion from the point of religion is always an authoritative transcendent or supra historical source. Religious affiliation does not need to overlap with aspects of ethnic identity. The role of religion in culture, however, changes from one context to the other. Religion, however, does play a 'role of prime importance' in culture although this role is inconsistent. The argument by Lincoln makes provision for a situation, as Lincoln points out, how religion as one of the essential elements in culture can from time to time dominate that which is considered as culture. (qtd. in Beyers)

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart:* Perspective on Language and Culture

As a case study and to further enhance the quality of the research, close study of Achebe's timeless novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has been taken. *Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of the issues of identity and culture because it focuses on the conflicts between the Igbo people and missionaries pertaining to a great transition in Nigeria after colonialism. Achebe emphasises on the aspect that the Igbo people have a firm belief in their sense of identity and take a pride in it. It is also intended to make the rest of the world know about Africa's rich culture and heritage. The novel puts across, in convincing and authentic fictional terms, that the African societies had a great culture of their own. The issues of identity and culture are successfully portrayed to uphold the systematic process of destruction wrought upon the Igbo identity by the colonial power and their alien culture.

It is also evident from the novel that identity is a fluid concept; it is constantly changing and not fixed because the culture of any society has its own changing social patterns and it changes as per the changing needs and conditions. If any society or person does not accept the changes, the issues of identity and culture cause disintegration, disruption and pacification. In that context we can consider culture to be innovative, and with change of time, new patterns evolve and appear at the front. On identity, Mai Palmberg says:

> Language plays a crucial role both as identity marker and as the medium for national symbols. … This situation has provoked a language debate

> which has raged for many decades. On the one hand, we find many who base their support for the use of the languages of the former colonial masters on arguments of expediency, or by saying that "language has no nation". (15)

Religion is the main arena and an influential part of any society. It shapes the moral and ethical boundaries to regulate the acts and actions of human beings into a particular mode of existence. The religious identity among Igbo people plays a pivotal role in day to day activities. The Igbo people lived in the villages surrounded by their farms till mid-twentieth century. They focused on their religious beliefs on three types of supernatural beings: God, spirits and ancestors. *Things Fall Apart* deals with the supreme God '*Chukwu'* who is seen as a powerful, munificent God, the one who holds the knife and the yam and provides people with wealth, rain, and children, and who is merciful toward rich and poor, male and female, child and aged.

Cultural identity is one of the aspects that goes to change in order to suit the changing needs and conditions. However, in all the societies there are certain basic values that constitute the culture and these need to be perpetuated because the loss of culture would mean a loss of identity for that society. *Things Fall Apart* mirrors the cultural identity of the people through the multidimensional panorama of the Igbo society. However, culture can be transmitted or acquired through information or symbol. According to Omekwu, "Cultural identity is those attributes, behavioural patterns, lifestyles, social structures and norms that distinguish a people from other peoples." (Omekwu)

The harmonious existence of Igbo people in the nine villages of Nigeria perpetuates the cultural aspects of their own. The arrangement of wrestling matches is one of the parts of it that is used to decide the identity of the village. The columnist, Michael Dirda says that "*Things Fall Apart* has long been revered for its imaginative re-creation of Igbo culture just before it collided with British colonialism." With the introduction of a new language, religion and a culture by the Europeans, the original culture of the Igbos was shattered and destroyed.

Languages in India and Their Effect on Culture

Looking into the Indian context, we can find a complex interplay of language, culture and religion ever since the country came under the colonial rule and also even before that since thirteenth century when India came under the dominion of the Turks from Central Asia and Afghanistan. Awadhi and Sanskrit used to be the languages of ancient north India, but from the medieval period when Arabic and

Persian made entry into Indian society, the language and also the cultural fabric of India changed drastically. Urdu, which is an innovation of the renowned poet Amir Khusrau, is actually a language formed by a fine blending of Persian, Arabic and the local dialects of North India in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

> Hindustani is the lingua franca of North India and parts of Pakistan. It has two official forms: Modern Standard Hindi and Modern Standard Urdu and may be called Hindi-Urdu when taken together. The colloquial languages are indistinguishable, and even though the official standards are nearly identical in grammar, they differ in literary conventions and in academic and technical vocabulary, with Urdu retaining stronger Persian, Central Asian and Arabic influences, and Hindi relying more heavily on Sanskrit. (Andovar 2)

Regarding English, a sea change came in the culture and outlook of the country during the East India Company and later when Indian administration went into the hands of the crown. Lord Macaulay came up with his Minutes for reform in Indian Education System and introduction of English education in the country in 1835, wherein English was made compulsory in the academic curricula of Indian universities and colleges. The purpose of the English was to prepare a work force Indian in colour and blood but western in thinking, perceptions, culture and opinions and who could assist the British in administering this large sub-continent. (Sharp10) The English were pretty successful in their endeavour and the result was a colonised society awestruck and charmed by this alien language and western culture. The Indians neglected their own regional languages at the cost of English and their own culture and age-old traditions began to be replaced by the European way of life, mannerisms and thinking. Through a tacit and manipulative promotion of their language and religion, the British forced the Indians to bring down their Aryan culture and ethos from the pedestal where it was, and ironically the Indians began to look their own traditions, language and customs with contempt. During the National Movement, leaders like Nehru and Gandhi (who though were fine exponents of western education) tried hard to encourage the society to go back to its roots, language and culture; but the damage had been done, and in today's contemporary India we find English well established and strongly ramified; and a heavily tilted cultural shift towards the western ideals and outlook of life.

With the change in culture and language, the religious set up of the country has also not remained untouched. With the advent of progress and the influences of

modernisation, attitudes have changed to religion and towards the celebration of the many festivals. Rituals, procedures of ceremonies, taboos associated with these ceremonies, the value and amount of sacrifices to be made, are now all subjects of constant change, especially in the mushrooming urban areas. Even the celebration of festivals has become a kind of emphatic projection and a necessary expression of belonging to a particular community and culture. Modernisation has given way to universal commitments and cosmopolitan attitudes. The truths of calculation, utility and science have taken precedence over those of the sacred, the irrational and the emotional. Today the individual, and not the group, is the primary unit of the society. The concept of identity has also shifted in the sense that identity is something which is chosen and achieved and not ascribed and affirmed. Traditionally, seasonal cycles determined the days of the celebration; now dates for the celebration have been formalised with each day marked on the official government calendar. Instead of festival celebrations, flags of no definite design, chief guests and speeches, and Miss Festival contests have become the new necessities. With rational concepts and worldviews infiltrating the minds of the people, the practice and performance of the old faith is under due and undue scrutiny.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that language is not just written letters or bundle of sounds, but it is the very symbol of human expression. Language reveals the inner and outer world of an individual and it is by language that a person shapes his own world too. The operational practices of a society collectively form its culture, and religion is the manifestation of the cultural values. And we can see that, religion and culture are blended together; they are intertwined. But the binding force is language. Religion in any place of the world can never be understood unless we go into the culture of that place. Similarly, the culture of any place is spoken by the language; and it is impossible to understand one's culture without having understood the language of a place. Language thus, is intrinsic to the expression of culture and at the same time it is religion which influences culture.

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