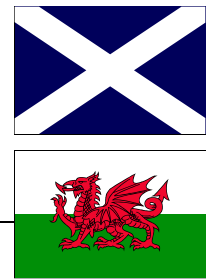


Scotland and Wales: A Sense of Culture



As you read the following passage, think carefully about the implications of the words and phrases in *italics*.

Culture may well be the key issue in this news story. But what is culture? Culture involves almost every aspect of our lives. It is so close to us that we frequently do not recognize it for what it is until someone points it out to us. Sometimes people are placed in a different *cultural environment* when they travel to another country and they experience different foods, customs, laws, and ways of life. Sometimes different cultural environments can be experienced within one's own country or even within the same city. For instance, many large urban areas are multicultural in composition and are home to people from Italian, Greek, Chinese, Portuguese, Indian, and many other cultures. Quite often these cultures are found in certain areas of the city where they have fostered strong communities devoted to the preservation of their specific culture.

Culture is sometimes misconstrued as something that you “get” if you go to the ballet or listen to classical music. However, if you go to the mall or go to a fast-food restaurant you are also “getting culture.” In these situations a person is experiencing day-to-day aspects of his or her culture. Every person *possesses culture* because he or she is a member of a society. Social scientists often define culture as *society's way of life*, and the manner in which its members conduct their day-to-day lives. Culture includes the knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, and behaviours of a society.

Everything that occurs within a culture has meaning because cultural elements represent the view and outlook of that cultural group. By looking closely at a variety of cultural practices and attempting to interpret the view of these practices, we can try to figure out how a cultural group thinks and what the members think is important. To analyze a society, social scientists examine certain components of culture. A few *indicators of culture* that exist in society are symbols, norms and rules of behaviour, values, and objects.

Symbols

Symbols can be anything that, over time, a group of people has come to recognize as having a specific meaning. Language, for example, is full of shared symbols. Informal figures of speech can define cultural groups. There may also be more fundamental language differences: dialects, accents, or different languages altogether. These can define a group of people and serve as symbols of identity. Symbols also take the form of flags, national anthems, emblems, mottoes, heroes and heroines. Even literature, the arts, and important historical events have symbolic importance in a culture.

Norms and Rules of Behaviour

People who share a culture also share rules of behaviour. Rules regulating behaviour in certain situations are called *norms*. The table manners of a particular culture would be an example of a norm. Some of society's norms are flexible and vary from situation to situation. For instance, different norms of table manners exist for different dining experiences. At other times norms are more rigid and less open to interpretation. Norms that are considered very important to society are called *mores*. Mores are essentially basic "moral" views of a group and are generally accepted by the majority of a group without question. Societies tend to show how important mores are to their particular culture by writing laws to protect them. This partly explains why laws vary between different cultures.

Values

Values are an important component of culture because they help people explain and interpret their actions in the world. Values can vary within a culture and are shaped and formed by a variety of *socializing agents* in our societies such as parents, schools, television, peer groups, and religion. Cultures are not *monolithic entities*; some are more uniform than others, but there are always individual differences because of the different socializing agents. This partly explains the wide differences in values we find when comparing different cultures.

Objects

Physical objects are given meaning in cultures. The *material products* produced by cultures tell us a lot about what that culture deems to be important. Material objects may also tell us a lot about human interaction and behaviour. For instance, the television is a material object that, through its programming, tells us many things about our culture. The way we use television also reveals our cultural habits. Similarly, *cultural anthropologists* who study both present-day and past cultures can tell a lot about ancient cultures by studying their tools and weapons. Cultural anthropologists can tell us a lot about our own culture by examining simple, everyday items. For instance, suppose you emptied your pockets. What objects would you find? How are they used? What meanings does our culture assign to them?

Social Organization

The fundamental basis of culture is social organization and the *social cohesion* that forms an identifiable group. A culture's social identity involves the cultural practices that serve to distinguish a social group from other social groups. It has been said that all cultural practices that serve to bestow identity on a social group involve *an idea of "other."* "Other" is used in the sense that cultural groups often define themselves in terms such as "We are not like them." As a subset of social identity, *social memory* serves as a means of defining a cultural group. Social memory not only defines cultural groups positively—"We are who we are because of our history."—but it also defines *patterns of behaviour*, ritual, and other social practices. The primary function of social memory is to explain the origin and meaning of cultural practices. Social memory takes many forms: religion, mythology, and history.

Nationalism

Over a long period of time, the identities of some cultures become strong enough that they resemble *national entities* and even become nations unto themselves. There are many historical examples that demonstrate this phenomenon. In the 1860s the German-speaking country Prussia conducted a series of wars against Denmark, Italy, and France to unite many German provinces and subsequently to form a nation in 1871. This *shared sense of culture* by Prussia and other German-speaking provinces fostered an intense feeling of patriotism and national consciousness to promote the German culture and interests above all others. This sentiment and social force is referred to as nationalism. In this example, nationalism emerged as a force to unite a loose confederation of provinces into a single strong united German nation. However, nationalism does not always work to foster a sense of unity. Quite often nationalism works in the opposite way and can weaken a country's unity or, when pushed to an extreme, can lead to war—as was the case in the two world wars. Conflict of another kind occurs frequently when a culture attempts to gain the status of a nation for itself when, politically, it is part of a more *dominant culture* and nation. Quebec's separatist movement is a good example of this type of nationalism. Quebec nationalism is rooted in pride in and identification with francophone culture—of which language is the principal ingredient—and the protection of that culture in a strong, independent Quebec. These examples illustrate the inherent *special status* that, because of nationalistic beliefs and feelings, a culture may ascribe to itself. Such *cultural affirmations* have frequently been the cause of conflict between cultures.

Follow-up Discussion

1. Do we have a Canadian culture or is Canadian culture by definition the composition of many different cultures together? How do we as Canadians define Canadian culture? Brainstorm a list of symbols, norms and rules of behaviour, values, and objects of Canadian culture. Is it possible to define Canadian culture without referring to the idea of “other”?
2. Examine your description of Canadian culture from the above question. What are the characteristics of our culture that contribute to a strong sense of nationalism? What are the characteristics of our culture that weaken our sense of nationalism? Is a strong sense of nationalism always a good thing for a country?
3. What does this notion of culture have to do with the recent events in Scotland and Wales? In terms of culture, what might be the cultural impact of devolution on these two countries?
4. Is the devolution that Scotland and Wales are undergoing about nationalism, culture, or democratic reform? How might the three be interrelated?