

Culture and Climate Change

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Culture causes conflict. According to Van de Vliert, the ultimate cause of human culture is the position of the earth in relation to the sun [1]. Their optimal position has enabled the survival and thriving of all the currently available species including humans. If the distances were a little too much or too little we would have either frozen or burned to death. Consider the definition of culture. Culture can be defined as the learned behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that are characteristic of a particular society or population and as a shared system of a society [2-4]. In light of this we understand culture to be a set pattern of behaviors and beliefs shared by a specific group of people. Culture is often defined as a human-made part of the environment [5]. Protection of this human made environment is often the cause for the numerous worldwide violent engagements. Rituals, customs, beliefs and institutions have been established as man tried to master his natural environment. This interaction between man and nature has been impacted by the climatic conditions of the area, thereby affecting the cultural development.

Although it is difficult to pin-point the exact time when divine control became a part of human tradition, we can consider the possibility that as the hunter-food gatherer evolved into the farmer-agriculturist mode, he became more aware of the natural environment around him. It is seen that different religious groups that belong to the same region will share as much similarity as the same religious group spread across different regions. As the human-nature interaction developed, the belief in a power that controlled the forces of nature grew stronger and stronger. But always, these beliefs were affected by the climatic conditions. Over the years a system of practices was developed that helped man acquire food, safety, warmth and prosperity. The history of man is the history of his struggle to acquire food, maintain his comfort and dispose of the waste. In this process, factors that were completely beyond his control were attributed to divine causes.

This process developed over the centuries into a stringent system with clear regulations about in-group behavior and out-group expectation. The concept of governance, leadership and economies developed from this need to bring about the maximum benefit for the maximum good. Corruption as a process also started seeping in as competition increased for scarce resources. However religion and politics stayed greatly intertwined till almost the fifteenth century. And even when the separation did happen, both politics and religion continued to remain as important components of culture. According to Vliert [1], winter cold, summer heat and monetary resources interact in modifying cultures. Culture therefore is not just a recipient of changes that occur in society, but also a participant in creating those changes.

If we accept the possibility that culture is caused by the optimal climatic conditions existing on this planet for the last 10,000 years, we can now begin to see the ramifications of this argument. Every cultural institution, practice, belief or behaviour has its source somewhere in the geography of the region. The first man walked out of Africa somewhere between 2,00,000 and 1,40,000 years ago [6]. Since then civilization and human life has progressed to all parts of the world. Cultural practices have become specialized according to the needs of each group. The needs in turn have been based on the specific geographical terrain and climate. In places where water was scarce, community living and sharing became imperative. In places where resources are available in abundance, living in groups was less mandatory. The socialization process was dictated by the religious beliefs that developed which in turn were the outcomes of the requirements of the group. Tracing the process of the development of culture as a phenomenon, the importance of weather and geography cannot be underestimated. This historical journey

of culture proves that Van de Vlierts contention that the ultimate cause of human culture is the distance between the sun and the earth.

In the same article, he has mentioned that the next-to-ultimate cause is the rotation of the Earth around its axis. The planetary positions and their journey around the sun ensure the regular seasonal effects that we see on this planet. Further inquiry reveals that this seasonal cycle affects not just systems but human psychology too. Culture is inherited biologically and socially. Although cultural norms are passed on from one generation to another, in the form of rituals and practice, one cannot deny its relation to the genetic structure of humans. Culture is enabled by humans' genetic endowment [8]. A newborn is an incomplete human for various reasons, many biological and a significant number, social. The process of enculturation makes the newborn complete.

Each new generation, receives a cultural manual generated from some old sources and many new ones. Consequently, each successive generation is culturally different from the previous one, even in the same geographical area. Add to this the large amount of movement that is occurring globally as a result of economics, wars and natural disasters. Maintaining one's cultural practice in a geographical area that is vastly different from the original one, leads to conflicts and confusion but over a period of time assimilates into the main fabric. In the meanwhile, the complications that arise leave deep scars on the people and the environment around. For instance the conflicts revolving around religion have a strong cultural base. Religions having evolved as part of the cultural system have at their foundation certain tenets that constitute their existence and position. Take for instance the development of monotheistic beliefs versus polytheistic beliefs. The three major Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all developed from the same geographical region and have one source. However regions that are more temperate have more of polytheism as obvious from the multitude of Greek and Hindu gods and goddesses. Historically, Egypt too practiced polytheism but one group left the Egyptian system to adhere to their monotheistic practices. Traditionally Eastern religions largely have a pantheon that provides the divinity required. There are various reasons why this has occurred but it's interesting to note that globally, the presence of one supreme force has originated from only one geographical area.

The climatic conditions that currently govern us are affected both by the conflicts and peaceful developments inherent in all cultures. People are constantly aiming for bigger and greater ways to fulfill their needs. They still want to fulfill their need for hunger, but the need is now enforced on a more lavish scale. The need to use bigger cars, have larger homes and use more resources to run them is nothing but a magnified version of acquiring resources, maintaining security and warmth and being prosperous. Even waste disposal is a matter of superiority thinking. Developed countries dump their waste in underdeveloped countries. The so called rich countries achieved their social comforts at a heavy climatic price which the underdeveloped nations are paying for. The European Environment Agency, which estimates between 250,000 tonnes and 1.3m tonnes of used electrical products are shipped out of the EU every year, mostly to West Africa and Asia. The global volume of electronic waste is expected to grow by so much that it will weigh the equivalent of eight of the great Egyptian pyramids, according to the UN's Step initiative. The effluents from industries have already flown into the oceans and have now reached the shores of the poorer countries. The thermal demands on countries affect their way of functioning. Colder countries are considered richer than hotter countries [1].

All these instances of culture impacting the climate and vice-versa, brings into play the question of the role psychologists play in the environmental scene. Psychological research relating to environment emerged in the 1970's on the relation of individuals and their interactions with the environment. Substantial links have been found between climate & human conflict [9]. Threats to human survival and human culture are linked [8].

CONCLUSIONS

The disproportionate influence that humans have on the planet cannot be ignored. It is a matter of concern not just for the environmentalist but also for the psychologist. Culture which served to bring together humans for the greater good of all appears to be slowly taking a life of its own and growing into an institution that affects not just the human citizenry, but the human non-human

interaction on the planet. The cultural impact on the climate is a study of human psychology. It places the psychologist in the path of deciding not just the future of his or client, but the future of the entire planet.

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Acknowledgements – Nil

Source of Funding – Nil

Conflict of Interest – Nil