



## Culture and Civilization

**Abstract** This chapter tries to explain the difference between “Culture” and “Civilization,” because without understanding the meaning of each concept and how they relate to each other, the evolvement of history and the fates of civilizations and cultures and societies would not be understood correctly.

**Keywords** Webster dictionary · Civilization · Culture · Society · Community · Traditions · Customs · Belief systems · Literature · Media · Science · Technology

This is a short essay to explain the concepts of culture and civilization; the reason for this explanation is due to the fact that most people and even social scientists do not differentiate between the two concepts and without understanding the meaning of each concept and how they relate to each other, the evolution of history and the fates of civilizations, cultures, and societies would not be understood correctly. Many ordinary people and even social scientists often use the words culture and civilization interchangeably, as if they have the same meaning.

Although the two words have similar definitions that tend to confuse many people, the connotations of the two words represent distinct concepts. Explaining the meaning of each word and the importance of

its connotation requires an explanation of how they relate to each other in a historical context. Such a clarification is important to understanding the course of human development over time and to identifying the issues causing cultures and their followers to often misunderstand each other, and at times to clash with one another.

Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary defines "civilization" as an advanced state of human society, in which a high level of culture, science, industry, and government has been reached."<sup>1</sup> An alternate definition by the same source refers to civilization as "modern comforts and conveniences, as made possible by science and technology." As for "culture," it is defined as "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another."<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, "culture stands for the way of life that a group of people follows and defines the social cement that binds its members together, forming a community or society."<sup>3</sup>

The first definition of civilization as the achievement of "a high level of culture, science, industry and government" considers culture, just like science and industry, one component of civilization, rather than its equal or its other face. This definition suggests that culture does not include science, industry, or government; it includes only such intangible things that may be transmitted from one generation to another as traditions, customs, literature, beliefs, and value systems. Culture, defined by Constantine Zurayk, is "the sum of the creative achievements of the human spirit in society."<sup>4</sup> In Thomas Sowell's formulation, culture "involves attitudes as well as skills, languages, and customs."<sup>5</sup> Michael Naumann, Germany's former Minister for Cultural and Media Affairs, said "culture is a symbol for spiritual innovation, for satirical laughter, for imagination, for intellectual challenge – but also for comfort, for relaxation and for all those forms of entertainment that do not automatically dull people's minds."<sup>6</sup>

Since civilization includes culture and culture is only one of several components of civilization, neither concept should be used to refer to the other. Using both concepts interchangeably therefore confuses issues related to both culture and civilization and makes it hard to understand how each concept relates to the other, and this makes it difficult to identify the place of culture as well as the place of civilization in the past and present history.

Culture, as defined above, concerns itself with the quality rather than the quantity of what society has developed over time in the visual arts,

literature, values, traditions, and similar fields of human endeavor. It refers to “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings,” interacting with each other in what is called society. This suggests that culture includes traditions, customs, attitudes, laws, belief systems, world-views, social activities, ways of thinking, and relationships developed by a group of people or by a nation over time and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture, therefore, is particular, rather than universal. It is a product of people living and working together for a very long time in what we call society.

Civilization, which refers to both the quality and quantity of human achievements, is a product of people interacting with each other and with nature over long periods of time and in countless places. It therefore tends to underline the comforts of life that are attainable through industry, science, technology, as well as culture. These are developments that in and of themselves reflect the accumulation of knowledge developed by all peoples throughout history. Because the interaction of humanity with nature is meant to discover nature’s secrets and laws and exploit its resources, economic factors, and technology become decisive forces in making and shaping civilizations. Civilization, therefore, is produced by humanity and belongs to all peoples of the world; culture is produced by society and therefore belongs to one nation. Consequently, culture is more particular and portable, while civilization is more global and non-transferable; the first is communal; the second is universal.

It is clear from the above explanation that civilization includes the material and non-material achievements of all peoples, while culture is confined to the non-material accomplishments of one people only. Since culture is a component of civilization and one of its many aspects, a civilization can and does produce more than one culture. Being an attribute of one civilization, culture owes its very existence and basic traits to the particular civilization that produced it, and not to any other civilization.

Because cultures are products and attributes of civilizations, their developments follow that of their mother civilizations. This is not to say that cultures do not influence or impact the development of their mother civilizations. On the contrary, after a civilization is fully developed, its cultural component usually assumes an active role in shaping the direction and influencing the pace of change in society. Cultures, being the total of ways of living, shape the way younger generations think, influencing their attitudes toward other cultures, the environment, science and technology, industry, the workplace, education, and other peoples. The most

important elements of culture, I believe, are the values it espouses and the attitudes it impels people to adopt, particularly toward the environment, work and time, science and technology, and the pursuit of happiness and material gain.

Being a product of people's interactions with one another, the development of culture as an important aspect of life had to wait for societies to be formed. Only after agriculture was developed and human settlements appeared did culture begin to develop in a systematic way and influence change in society. Since the age of agriculture lasted about ten thousand years before the Industrial Revolution began, all cultures produced during that period were products of one single civilization, the agricultural one, and therefore were similar to one another. "Until comparatively recently in human history, all humans had the same subsistence pattern. In a certain sense, they all shared a similar, though not identical culture."<sup>7</sup> Describing life conditions and the way of life in Pacoma, a village in Bolivia, Jack Weatherford wrote, "In many ways Pacoma seems typical of village life across South America as well as throughout India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa."<sup>8</sup>

Each of the so-called civilizations of the ancient past is acknowledged as such because of its noted achievements in cultural attributes, economics, science, technology, and political and military organization. All great civilizations, regardless of their time, duration, or comparative level of achievements, have produced refined cultures in the form of works of art, literature, architecture, and behavior and belief systems. No group of people was able to join the ranks of the acknowledged civilized nations at any time without enjoying a noteworthy cultural life.

Cultures, therefore, are products of civilizations; and their levels of achievements are functions of the achievements of the civilizations that produce them. Advanced civilizations produce refined cultures, and refined cultures reflect the achievements of advanced civilizations. The material and non-material achievements of civilizations thus go hand in hand, and their internal dynamics and mutual influence are what make progress, stagnation, and/or regression possible.

One last word on civilization and culture and how they relate to each other. The only civilization in history whose people had the ethical and moral values to be humanely civilized was the agricultural civilization because these values needed a family environment to develop and cherish. Subsequent civilizations were more scientifically, technologically and economically advanced but lacked the ethical and moral

values to be civilized. Economic progress leads people to become greedy and materialistic, and technologically advanced weapons lead people to become colonizers determined to subjugate poor people, steal their natural resources, and deny them their human rights, even the freedom to manage their life affairs. Therefore, Western civilization, being materialistic and expansionist, could not develop the ethical and moral values to be civilized.

## NOTES

1. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, New York: Portland House, 1989, 270–271.
2. *Ibid*, 353.
3. Stuart Chase, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 61.
4. Constantine K. Zurayk, “Cultural Change and Transformation of Arab Society,” in *The Arab Future: Critical Issues*, ed. Michael C. Hudson, Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1979, 17.
5. Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, 10.
6. Michael Naumann, “A Dialogue of Cultures,” *Deutschland*, No. 3, June/July 2000.
7. Jack Weatherford, *Savages and Civilization*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, 26.
8. *Ibid*, p 45.