10 Culture

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In 2003 UNESCO published a Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, some thirty years after the World Heritage Convention had been issued by the same organization. Now UNESCO's stamp of recognition would be extended to include, not only the visible landmarks of 'world civilizations', but also the 'intangible' heritage represented by a song, a dance, a piece of local knowledge. Article 2 of the 2003 Convention defined Intangible Cultural Heritage as:

> the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.[1]

As this definition of 'the Intangible Cultural Heritage' implies, the Convention was in part an expression of a recognition of the importance of 'cultural diversity' and of the diverse modes of cultural expression, reflecting a wider shift in the politics of culture and rights in recent decades, to which I will return. At the same time, this represented an implicit move from an exclusive concern with the elitist and material products of 'civilizations' (temples, pyramids, palaces, cathedrals) towards a range of practices that would encompass just about everything human beings engage in. The list includes 'oral traditions and expressions', including 'language', 'social practices', 'rituals', 'knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe', and 'traditional craftsmanship'. While the emphasis of the Convention is on cultural heritage as a property of groups, whose diverse identities it is

important to safeguard, it also implies that under some particular circumstances (presumably those in which the very survival of a group is under threat), a cultural heritage might be the repository of one individual ('and in some cases individuals'). At the same time, through its insistence on the use of the definite article throughout the document ('The Intangible Cultural Heritage') the UNESCO Convention seems to be reminding us that diverse and varied as these practices might be, ultimately they constitute one common 'intangible cultural heritage', which belongs to us all.

In 2005 a UNESCO 'Proclamation' recognized two 'outstanding examples' of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Malawi.[2] One was the 'Gule Wamkulu', a 'ritual dance' traditionally part of a 'secret cult', entirely composed of men. The other was the 'Vimbuza Healing Dance'. Described by UNESCO as 'a useful complement to other forms of medical treatment', which has 'artistic value and a therapeutic function', Vimbuza is part of a wider healing tradition in the region involving spirit possession. Most 'patients' are women, who, having become possessed by Vimbuza spirits, undergo sometimes lengthy treatment by specialists, including a 'dance' during which male drummers employ rhythms identified with specific spirits, 'calling' them and allowing them to be 'danced out'.[3] The UNESCO website includes video and audio clips of one such ritual 'dance', showing a woman entering into a trance, falling to the ground, and being assisted by other women. One clip focuses in on the face of a small child watching as the ritual takes its course.

Few casual visitors to Malawi are likely to be aware of the involvement of UNESCO in this aspect of the country's 'intangible cultural heritage', but in 2007/8 no one in Malawi will have escaped the massive public awareness campaign of another UN agency, UNICEF. Huge billboards on every tarred road in Malawi advertise the UNICEF-funded 'Stop Child Abuse' campaign. Alternating between English and local languages the posters deliver the message to 'STOP' child labour, sexual abuse, child trafficking, and 'harmful cultural practices'.[4] 'Culture', UNICEF reminds us, can have its dark side: one person's 'intangible cultural heritage' may be another's more tangible cultural prison. But the UN has already thought that one through. In a clause in the 2003 Convention on ICH it declares that 'For the purposes of the Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human

rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.' In the end, the culture of human rights must trump the culture of cultural diversity.[5]

The UN's dilemma (if that is what it is) is not a new one or even a surprising one. It is central to the history of European thinking on this thing called 'culture'. In the tradition of the French Enlightenment, 'culture' came to mean something akin to 'civilization', embodying a historically specific notion of 'rights' and asserting without embarrassment its superiority to other ways of being and thinking. In the German Romantic tradition, meanwhile, 'cultures', in the plural, were diverse, historically specific, and relative, embodying the 'traditional' virtues of a people. While UNICEF draws on the former tradition, UNESCO draws on the latter. It was a tension inherent in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European empires—between the 'civilizing mission', with all its ambiguities, and the desire to 'protect' the primitive from extermination. Since it is largely people in the former colonial world who are now the subjects of UN attentions, it may come as no surprise to them that their 'intangible cultural heritage' is being offered protection, while their 'harmful cultural practices' are the target for elimination.

In the modern world 'culture' is the subject and object of a vast and powerful industry. This material basis may be viewed as a relatively recent development but it is also an apt reminder of the origins of the word 'culture' in the practice of material transformation (though the 'stuff' to be transformed has changed). The word 'culture' comes from the Latin *colere*, with its original meaning apparently referring to the practice of agriculture or husbandry.[6] As Terry Eagleton reminds us, etymologically 'culture' derived from 'nature', but the two terms are inextricably interdependent, rendering both the Marxist conception of 'base' and 'superstructure' and the split between naturalism and idealism irrelevant:

> ... nature produces culture which changes nature ... if nature is always in some sense cultural, then cultures are built out of that ceaseless traffic with nature which we call labour.[7]

All human societies depend on some degree of transformation of 'nature', and so, presumably, all have some concept or concepts akin to

this early European notion of 'culture' with its dual reference to both material and symbolic production. But in the European tradition(s) the concept made some historically specific leaps in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the French Enlightenment tradition 'culture' became synonymous with 'civilization', a wide notion embracing political, economic, material, intellectual life and entailing a sense of progress and ethical superiority. In German Idealist thinking, usually traced to the works of Herder, 'Kultur' came to carry a radical and reactionary meaning as a distinctive way (or ways) of life, whose values needed to be defended against the universalism of 'civilization'. In this Romantic tradition, cultures in the plural were organic, traditional, authentic, and embodied the 'spirit' of a people.[8] For Matthew Arnold, culture was the repository of value and order, while 'civilization' entailed anarchy.[9] 'Culture' in this sense was a utopian critique of the imperialistic and repressive aspects of 'civilization', and stood for an entire way of life, but in the course of the nineteenth century, and as one consequence of this dialectical way of thinking, 'culture' also became more narrowly associated with the arts and artistic creation. It was, writes Eagleton, as if the arts were now 'forced to stand in for God, or happiness, or political justice'.[10] 'Culture' was represented, not by the advances of science and economy and industry, but by opera, literary pursuits, painting, and (in a move which has its own trajectory) the 'primitive' pre-modern.

Tracing the genealogy of 'culture' in European thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is inseparable from tracing the genealogy of what Francis Mulhern calls 'metaculture', or a discourse on culture.[11] Culture had become its own topic. In Britain in the mid- to late twentieth century the political 'left' took energetically to the discursive field of 'culture', attacking in the process the by now entrenched association between culture and an elitist artistic aesthetic. The ensuing 'culture wars' reflected wider political and social processes, particularly in relation to the British class system and its material basis, but the debate on culture also became something of an industry in its own right. The critique took a variety of forms. In *The Uses of Literacy* and other works, Richard Hoggart, an inheritor in some senses of the pessimistic Romantic tradition, lamented the passing of an authentic proletarian working-class culture which he saw as under attack from mass marketing. Hoggart's was not just a

contribution to academic debates on the meaning of culture—it was a politically engaged and policy-oriented criticism with significant institutional ramifications.[12]

In Britain another central figure in the elaboration of a cultural critique in the twentieth century was Raymond Williams.[13] In a series of works Williams traced the historical development of the concept of culture and constructed his own, cultural Marxist, interpretation.[14] 'Culture is ordinary' is one of Williams's more famous catchphrases, summing up his view that culture was a whole way of life, a product of the creative and non-deterministic relationship between human consciousness and material circumstances. Culture was about to become everything again. In *The Long Revolution* Williams defined it as 'a structure of feeling'. If there were serious problems with this new expansiveness, there is no doubting the creative energy that it helped to unleash. Cultural materialists like Williams brought the economy back into discussions of culture, but in a formulation which moved beyond 'base' and 'superstructure'. Economic relations were themselves cultural entities and it was their cultural qualities which helped embed their inequalities.

By the 1960s this vibrant field of cultural Marxism was being further expanded and informed by new currents of postcolonial criticism and feminism. At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, Stuart Hall succeeded Richard Hoggart in 1968 as Director (the latter, significantly, leaving for a post in UNESCO).[15] A diffuse Gramscian Marxism still under-girded what had by now become 'Cultural Studies' but it was continually and productively challenged by those who claimed that 'race', ethnicity, and the structural inequalities of gender relations were as central to British society and culture as class relations.[16] Hoggart's somewhat nostalgic lament for the authentic culture of the English working class now appeared rather dated and ethnocentric. Britain was a post-imperial nation and the empire was 'writing back'. The 'writing back' would entail, not simply putting the 'Black in the Union Jack', but insisting that in the diasporic, globalized world of which Britain was a part, it was not enough simply to couple categories such as 'blackness' and 'the nation'—some more radical rethinking of cultural politics was required.[17]

As the work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues reminds us, the subject of culture in Europe, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, is also the subject of empire and the conceptualization of difference. Inherent in the Romantic strand of European cultural thinking were two ideas that related directly to European imperialist expansion: the diversity of cultures and primitivism. The Radical Romantics exalted the authentic creative energy and organicism of 'primitive' cultures and in the late nineteenth century the new discipline of anthropology made these primitive cultures its subject. It appeared that for primitive societies culture was everything. In 1871 E. B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture* defined culture 'or Civilisation' as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.[18] For historians of anthropology the fact that for Tylor 'Culture' and 'Civilisation' were synonymous is significant since it indicates that his conceptualization of culture as a whole, organic thing did not necessarily entail complete relativism.[19] For Tylor, it is implied, understanding the internal logic and meaning of a culture did not involve ditching an Enlightenment notion of 'progress'. If Tylor's subject was 'culture', his successors would soon pluralize the noun. Cultures became the subject of twentieth-century anthropology and in some hands these cultures assumed the self-determining qualities of that other great late nineteenth-century invention, 'race'. This is despite the fact that one of the principal founders of cultural anthropology, Frank Boas, constructed his theory of culture explicitly in opposition to race theory.[20]

The political context in which twentieth-century social anthropology constructed its subject is of course critical. Working often in African and Asian colonial contexts, where racial theory had a long life and a deep reach, many anthropologists saw their organic theories of 'tribal' cultures as liberal interventions and critical counterpoints to colonial thinking and, in some cases, as weapons of resistance against capitalist exploitation. Yet their reifications of 'tribal' cultures and their paternalist tendencies also lent their theories a utilitarian function within colonial systems.[21] The dual European heritage of culture as civilization and culture as the embodiment of the spirit of a people permeated European colonial systems. If colonialism was often justified in terms of the advancement of 'civilization', in practice many colonial systems found more useful the alternative version of culture which could be used to

justify (often with a paternalistic twist) keeping 'primitive' people firmly in their place. Willingly or unwillingly, anthropologists found that their 'science' of cultural analysis had become a tool of colonial rule and, willingly or unwillingly, colonial subjects found themselves employing the language of culture to press their claims for rights and representation. In the mid-twentieth century as biological racism became discredited and colonial empires sought to justify their existence along liberal lines, 'culture' came in useful. In extreme cases, as in apartheid South Africa concepts of culture not only coexisted happily with 'race', they added intellectual and ideological force to it. Elsewhere 'culture' could be usefully set to work in many contexts in which straightforward talk of biological 'race' had become unacceptable. To take just one example, in the work of a highly influential group of French psychiatrists working in colonial North Africa, Islamic religion and culture (static, all-encompassing) were interpreted as determining the collective 'Arab' psyche through their effect on brain structure—an unusual application of the more general notion that culture is the human capacity to transform nature.[22] Meanwhile colonial nationalists were obliged to employ a dual discursive strategy. On the one hand the leaders of nationalist movements had to demonstrate their commitment to a progressive notion of modernization (culture as 'civilization'), on the other, their claim to self-determination rested on the assertion that they represented a people with a distinctive 'traditional' culture (the 'spirit of the people') which had been unjustly repressed under colonial rule. Frequently this appeal to 'culture' was heavily gendered and women (and 'Woman') became the repositories of an 'authentic' pre-colonial and pre-modern morality and 'tradition'.[23]

It is little wonder that in the period of colonial nationalism and decolonization, anthropology as a discipline came to re-think, and ultimately deconstruct, its concept of culture. But ironically, perhaps, this move coincided, more or less, with the increasing political mobilization of 'culture' in the identity politics of the postcolonial world, as we shall see.

In the 1960s anthropologists, like populist leftist cultural critics, had been expanding the scope of culture until it began to look dangerously like all and nothing. Culture was society, human consciousness, economic structure, religion, politics. It was all these things as manifested

in the products of what was now a huge industry of 'popular culture', but it was also all these things as evidenced in our everyday modes of being, down to the way we brush our teeth.

In the 1970s some anthropologists and cultural historians turned to versions of structuralism in a move which promised to rescue culture as a useful concept. The work of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz was particularly influential and his account of the Balinese cock-fight so widely quoted, in so many different contexts, that it became a fetishized cultural object in its own right.[24] For Geertz, a culture was a 'signifying system', a dense web of symbols and meanings:

> The culture concept to which I adhere denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.[25]

In order to 'decode' these complex and multilayered systems of meaning that made up a culture, the anthropologist had to adopt a strategy akin to literary criticism—attentive to style as well as structure, to irony and ambiguity as well as deliberative performance. Though Geertz's theory of culture was essentially a structuralist one, his method ('thick description') implied that the full meaning of a cultural system could not be grasped through a mechanistic structural analysis.[26] The cultural system provided a framework and a set of guidelines within which individuals expressed themselves and acted and the understandings of participants were central to his analysis. His theory allowed a space for human agency, contestation, and the possibility of change, up to a point, but he was criticized for (amongst other things) an apparent lack of attention to power structures. Nevertheless, 'thick description' caught on as a mode of analysis well beyond the confines of the discipline of social anthropology, and Geertz's concept of culture remains influential.

The influence of social anthropology, and of Geertz in particular, was felt very powerfully in the field of cultural history, which was 'rediscovered' in the 1970s, producing a large corpus of innovative historical scholarship.[27] The origins of the 'cultural turn' in historical writing are, however, multiple. In Britain the labour historian E. P. Thompson had been exploring the limits of orthodox Marxism for an understanding of the history of industrialization and class relations.

Thompson contested Raymond Williams's 'culturalist' paradigm, but in his own work he was also concerned to theorize the 'cultural and moral mediations' of class, and to describe the cultural components of class consciousness.[28] This British cultural-Marxist tradition was just one factor influencing the growth of the field of 'cultural history' between the 1960s and the 1980s.[29] The French *Annales* School, with its emphasis on *mentalités*, was another direct influence and antecedent. Cultural historians, perhaps sensibly, spent relatively little time trying to define 'culture', but generally took a very expansive view of their field. For some the common ground appeared to be an attention to the symbolic realm and its interpretation, but as Peter Burke (himself a major figure in the field) points out, even this cannot serve as a general definition.[30] The corpus of work included histories (informed by new modes of interpretation) of topics traditionally defined in the 'Western' tradition as 'cultural' (the arts, architecture, music) but now expanded to include 'popular culture', as well as 'cultural histories' of topics conventionally labelled 'politics' or 'religion'. Meanwhile path-breaking work in gender history led the way in theorizing the relationship between the symbolic and material realms. Gender history has its own history, as Dorothy Ko demonstrates in this volume, but this history intersects at many points with currents in cultural history. Gender historians anticipated many of the debates in the wider field by insisting that gender roles and ideologies could not be bracketed as an aspect of 'culture' but were constitutive of those areas of historical experience conventionally labelled 'political', 'economic', and 'social'. Gender historians also wrestled with an issue that went to the very heart of the definition of 'culture'—that is the construction and role of the biological in human history (see Ko's chapter).

Many of the more heated arguments over cultural history revolve less around the delineation of the field than they do over methods. The cultural historians' interests led them to a much more direct exploration of historical consciousness and historical memory than had generally been the case for those who defined themselves as social or political historians. In exploring the dimensions of subjectivity, consciousness, and the unconscious, some looked to psychoanalysis, others to poststructuralist theory, taking a 'linguistic turn'.[31] Critics of the new cultural history feared that entire university history departments would be staffed by scholars whose intellectual energies were directed

at proving there was no such thing as history. Predictably, perhap critics had a tendency to label every cultural historian a deconstruc tionist, which was far from being the case. Others bemoaned the fac that, running fast and loose in the terrain of literary theory, historian were losing altogether the close relationship with the social science which had characterized much historical investigation in the 1960 and 1970s.[32] While defenders of the new cultural history argued tha it continued to provide a more grounded account of the way in whic social action was historically constituted, others worried that in th process concepts such as 'identity' were being used without any refer ence to their theoretical underpinnings.[33]

Despite these doubts, it is clear that some versions of the 'new cultur al history' held a powerful appeal, not least in the area of colonial an postcolonial history. In South Asia a new 'school' of history emerged i the form of 'Subaltern Studies', which drew on new currents of cultura analysis to re-examine the histories of the peasantry, of nationalism religion, and gender. Part of the attraction of this new approach la in the apparent restoration of agency and consciousness to colonia subjects whose histories had previously either been erased entirely b colonial modes of thinking, or had been subsumed under a mechanisti version of a neo-Marxist 'modes of production' analysis.[34] In my own field of African history a similar trend brought forward new account of the impact of colonialism and capitalism which gave room for a appreciation of the ways in which African communities had creatively negotiated these forces and of the role of historical consciousness i this process. Histories of labour migration, for example, were trans formed by this approach, as were studies of the impact of Christian ity and literacy, while the long-term social and political consequence of the slave trade were traced through studies of social memory an ritual practice.[35] Histories of colonial governance in Africa meanwhil moved beyond the idea of 'invented tradition' (with its stress on th power of colonial knowledge) to an analysis that emphasized th agency of certain groups of African colonial subjects in engaging wit colonial rulers in the definition of 'culture', custom, and difference.[3 Cultural history looks different in a postcolonial setting. No historie of cultural production in Africa can avoid the politics of the definitio of the cultural sphere and so in the field of plastic arts scholars hav examined the role of colonial and postcolonial collecting in redefinin

artefacts as 'art', and in literary and music studies the enduring effects of the colonial binary of traditional/modern.[37]

Though the influence of Foucault and Said was certainly felt in the area of African studies, 'deconstruction' as a mode of analysis held little appeal to historians on the Continent. The reasons are not hard to find. Whilst we might agree that 'Africa' was discursively constructed, we were not keen to see it disappear. The field of African history had only emerged in the 1960s and that had involved a long hard struggle to prove that the 'dark continent' did, in fact, have verifiable pre-colonial histories. To argue now that these histories were mere 'constructions' was not an attractive option.[38] Neither was it an attractive option for subordinated groups in African societies whose historical experiences were finally being written about and made available in school textbooks.

An examination of 'culture' in African historiography raises the more general question of whether doing 'cultural history' is better described as doing 'history'. 'Culture', as I have indicated, is a particularly loaded term in a postcolonial context, with its implication of the importance of 'difference'. Certainly we need to acknowledge the historical importance of changing concepts of culture in the colonial and postcolonial histories of African societies, but it is not clear that we need to carry on employing the term ourselves, except in relation to specific areas of 'cultural production'. For example, in their recent critique of the field of comparative politics, Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz make a case for the importance of culture (defined as a system of meanings) for an understanding of African politics that goes beyond the ethnocentric models of Western political science. Certainly they have a point when they argue that analyses of the democratic process in Africa need to take account of local meanings of power and might (for example) have to include an examination of the 'occult' in the process.[39] But is it helpful to describe this as taking account of the 'role of culture'? I prefer to read this as an appeal for studies of African politics that are properly grounded in histories of power relations and take account of historical consciousness.

Historians of Africa have long been writing histories which, had they been written of European societies, might well have been defined as 'cultural history', but they have done so largely without recourse to the term 'culture'. The context and conditions of production of African

history have always necessitated the use of a range of non-literary sources and an engagement with other disciplines, and this in itself entails an ongoing enquiry into meaning and historical consciousness.[40] Jan Vansina, for example, has been researching and writing on the pre-colonial history of Central Africa since the 1950s. Employing a range of methodologies including historical linguistics and oral history, he has produced *longue durée* accounts of political traditions which are embedded in an understanding of environment and population history, but also in ideologies, concepts, and values.[41] Vansina was certainly influenced by the *Annales* School, and so his work could be described as 'cultural history' in that tradition, but I think it would be better described as 'history'. Vansina's reconstruction of pre-colonial political traditions would be impossible without his use of multiple forms of evidence and an interrogation of the meanings of this evidence that goes far beyond conventional questions of 'reliability'.[42] This mode of historical practice is not confined to work on pre-colonial Africa, however. Two outstanding works on the history of reproduction in the colonial period, by Nancy Rose Hunt and Lynn M. Thomas, demonstrate clearly the centrality of 'cultures' of reproduction to political and economic history, but they are able to do so precisely because they do not employ a concept of 'culture' as a separate sphere of historical analysis.[43] Such strategies of historical writing are not confined to African history, of course. In his recent study of death in Mexican history, Claudio Lomnitz argues convincingly for the centrality of death to any understanding of the political history of Mexico. This goes much further than arguing that 'cultures' of death are politically influential, or politically manipulated in Mexican history. Rather, Lomnitz explores the ways in which death is constitutive of the very idea of Mexico, and of sovereignty.[44] If the concept of 'culture' begins to look redundant in these works of history, nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that they have been directly or indirectly informed by the critical debates on culture that have energized social anthropologists and historians over the last twenty years.

In the 1980s and 1990s social anthropologists seemed intent on deconstructing the subject of their discipline.[45] This self-questioning crisis was induced in part by the influence of postmodernist theory, but also by a postcolonial politics in which the 'native' subject, no longer prepared to be passively observed, was answering back. Social

anthropological methods now seemed hopelessly implicated in a representational power system which reified difference and elevated one system of knowledge production over all others.[46] Not only was it now incumbent on the anthropological observer to be aware of his or her 'subject position', but the very acts of observation of and writing about the 'other' could be seen as forms of violent appropriation. Furthermore, there was this thing called 'globalization' and the world itself was changing (it always had been of course), so now cultures were increasingly 'contested', 'contingent', in flux, hybridized, and essentially indescribable.

But if 'culture' had done a disappearing act in anthropology departments, it was far from dead in the real world of late twentieth-century identity politics. Disillusionment with conventional politics and the increasing pace of globalization (particularly in the 1980s) produced the mobilization of 'culture' as 'identity' among minority ethnic and religious groups, feminists, and gay activists. In the United States in particular, where, in the face of neo-liberal policies, the traditional leftist struggle for economic equality looked doomed, the political language of equality was overtaken by one which stressed 'identity'.[47] Rights were now claimed less on the basis of equality (as in the Civil Rights era) than of difference, and an essentialist concept of culture re-emerged in a range of social movements that emphasized the distinctiveness of group beliefs, ideals, values, and styles. Encouraged, in some cases, by non-governmental and international organizations, this pattern of political mobilization also gathered strength in the former colonial world. For social anthropologists there was a certain irony in all of this, for 'just at the very moment in which anthropologists were engaged in an intense and wide-ranging critique of the more essentialist interpretation of the concept, they found themselves witnessing the increasing prevalence of "culture" as a rhetorical object'.[48] Fortunately for social anthropologists, this has produced a productive new field of study and analysis. It is not simply that 'culture' was once again being set up against 'civilization' in the form of 'rights'. Rather, something more interesting and complex was happening. A more generalized culture of rights, encouraged by liberal democratic constitutions and the activism of human rights organizations, was providing a space in which groups were claiming their rights to culture. The assumed opposition between a rights-based politics and one based on 'culture'

seemed to have been dissolved, but the field in which these notions coexisted was full of revealing contestations. Global capitalism, meanwhile, seemed to be feeding very productively off this re-invention of cultural difference.

The re-invention of an essentialist version of culture, and the deployment of this idea of culture as a 'right', has significant political consequences. In liberal democracies all over the world 'culture' appeared, in the 1980s and 1990s, to have become the keyword in a range of political debates, with varied results. In northern countries a number of issues consequent on rapid globalization, neo-liberal economic policy, and migration have been glossed as questions of 'multiculturalism'. In some cases the 'right' to culture was appropriated by the Right, as in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, where New Right ideologues productively utilized Gramscian notions of hegemony and anti-racist notions of cultural difference in order to promote an idea of the distinctiveness of a (white) English nation and culture.[49] British Conservative Party leaders claimed that the recognition of cultural difference ('multiculturalism') was divisive and indeed dangerous as likely to provoke racist attacks from white Britons who felt that their 'culture' was under attack. The discourse of 'Culture' had been very effectively mobilized as a euphemism (once again) for racism and as a means of exclusion.

In France, where Republicanism and secularism apparently made formal recognition of 'multiculturalism' a political impossibility, the *affaire foulard* has refused to go away. As Benhabib shows, beginning in 1989, when three scarf-wearing Muslim girls were excluded from their school, the 'affaire' raised difficult issues for the French state, which sees itself as an agent of women's emancipation. The French authorities' interpretation of scarf-wearing as a symbol of cultural oppression was belied by the fact that the girls had clearly been making a conscious though complex gesture, claiming to 'exercise their freedom of religion as French citizens' and on the other hand to exhibit 'their Muslim and North African origins in a context that sought to envelop them, as students of the nation, within an egalitarian, secularist ideal of republican citizenship'.[50] Some see it as 'ironic' that this kind of claim to difference is made possible by the freedoms of expression afforded by liberal political traditions. In the Netherlands this 'irony' has taken a further twist. In the wake of two political murders in 2002

and 2005, some citizens of the Netherlands claim that 'tolerance' is an essential and defining feature of the nation's 'culture', and that groups which do not subscribe to this value have no place in the nation.

The hazards of a politics in which 'culture' is synonymous with 'identity' and forms the basis for claims on rights and resources are particularly striking in the many cases around the world in which indigenous or aboriginal peoples seek legal redress and restitution from states claiming to operate a form of liberal 'multiculturalism'. In Australia in 1992 a court ruling (*Eddie Mabo* v. *State of Queensland*) for the first time accorded recognition to native land title on the part of Aboriginal Australians. Previously, it had been held that at the moment of colonization indigenous Australians had lacked the degree of social organization and cultural evolution necessary for a concept of land title. Now the law admitted the validity of a form of native title, but there were conditions attached to this recognition. Under the Native Title Act of 1994 granting of title was dependent on claimants demonstrating, not only that they were direct descendants of the original inhabitants of the land and had occupied that land continuously, but that there existed a form of customary law relating to the land, a law to which they had shown a consistent allegiance. At the same time, however, it was reiterated that only those native laws and customs which were not 'repugnant' to natural justice and equity would be so recognized. Furthermore, if it could be shown that Aboriginal heritage had been seriously diluted through 'interbreeding' with another heritage, then recognition would not be accorded. As Elizabeth Povinelli argues in her account of this process, it would not be true to say that the Australian government engaged in this process in bad faith. Rather, they engaged in it with an 'excess of optimism' in the possibilities of a liberal multiculturalism. But the position in which it placed Aboriginal communities was an invidious one, forcing them both to re-invent themselves in the image of the primitive, to emphasize 'difference' and at the same time to disavow those elements of 'difference' which offended white Australian sensibilities.[51] It is an injunction that invites an ironic and mimetic approach to 'culture'.[52]

Clearly 'culture' cannot do all the work being asked of it in many contemporary political contexts, where large issues of colonialism, inequality, and racism are at stake. These strains on 'culture' as a language of accommodation and contestation and rights have become all

the more evident since the events of 11 September 2001, after which some discussion of religion in its own right has seemed unavoidable. As Slavoj Zizek wryly remarks:

> Culture has commonly become the name for all things we practice without really taking seriously. And this is why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as 'barbarians' with a 'medieval mindset': they dare to take their beliefs seriously. Today we seem to see the ultimate threat to culture as coming from those who live immediately in their culture, who lack the proper distance.[53]

Though an essentialist and ahistorical definition of culture appears to be in the ascendant in a world of liberal multiculturalist democracies, this is a world simultaneously marked by an unprecedented degree of mobility. While Australia in the 1980s and 1990s grappled with the historical legacy of the treatment of Aboriginal Australians, it was also faced with the economic and political ascendancy of its East Asian neighbours and the question of how 'Asian' it wanted to be. This posed issues which could not be resolved by recourse to the notions of nativism and continuity of culture which had been applied to Aboriginal communities. 'Globalization', migration, and the development of new technologies have had complex consequences, as I have indicated. Global capitalism, far from eradicating difference, has sought to profit from it, and the internet has facilitated the reinvention of local communities and identifications, even though members of those communities may be physically located on different continents. But it has also produced new identifications and associations. Whilst legislators in liberal democracies struggle to fit people into cultural straitjackets, millions of people are willingly or unwillingly on the move, physically and culturally.

This is not a new phenomenon, of course, and for some the genealogy of modern culture lies in the very circumstances that made authentic 'family trees' (of the sort that would be recognized by legislators according 'native title') impossible to reconstruct. When millions of Africans were forcibly displaced by the Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, their 'cultures' were inevitably disrupted, dispersed, and in some cases brought to the point of extinction. But there is a variety of ways of describing this historical process, which reflect very different understandings of what constitutes culture. Transplanted to the plantation factories of the new world, slaves laboured collectively,

and the labour they performed was cultural as well as manual. The work of culture was the work of creating new meanings for their lives. But nothing is completely new. Depending on specific circumstances (death rates, ethnic preferences of slave buyers, and labour practices), to different degrees African slaves brought with them, and passed on to future generations, elements of their former lives or the lives of their ancestors, ranging from ritual practices very consciously re-enacted, to rhythms and bodily praxis more or less unconsciously performed. The circumstances in which these historical elements were practised were radically different, not least because many slave communities consisted of individuals with very multiple origins on the African continent, speaking different languages, and worshipping different gods. How should we describe this process? Is it best described in terms of loss and trauma, or of 'African cultural survivals'? Some approaches to the history of the Atlantic slave trade emphasize the latter and attempt to trace the exact origins of slave practices in the New World to exact locations on the African continent. This is the cultural equivalent of the tracing of one's ancestry through DNA (another popular and not unrelated pastime), and it is easy enough to point out its dangers and shortcomings, which include oversimplification, and a re-invention of 'Africa' as a patchwork of clearly defined ethnicities and closed cultural systems.[54] But the perceived need for and attraction of such an approach are themselves indicative of a very real cultural phenomenon born out of the brutality of slavery. For as long as the dominant narrative of culture is one of origins, and for as long as such a narrative remains integral to claims for recognition, people will be looking for their 'roots'. When historical narratives are too complex, contradictory, or ambivalent to satisfy us, we seek biological evidence to satisfy our desire for cultural continuity.

There is an alternative approach to this history, however, which conceptualizes culture in a very different way. This is one which privileges process over origins, mixture over purity, the creole over the native. This approach is fundamentally at odds with a multiculturalism which conceives of groups coexisting and interacting from their self-contained cultural bubbles, each with its clear narrative of origins, but it comes out of the same history. In his account of the 'Black Atlantic', Paul Gilroy replaced a search for 'roots' with an epistemology centred on 'routes' and webs of diaspora identities from Africa to the

New World to Europe.[55] Slavery, he argued, with its shared experience of terror, was central to the creation of modernity. Violence and displacement are constitutive of modernity.

The Black Atlantic, in Gilroy's analysis, is not a free-floating web of diasporas. It is a real historically produced entity, but one which cannot have recourse to neat genealogical narratives of race or kinship. Gilroy's emphasis is on identifications rather than identities but the processes involved are historically located within fields of power relations.[56] To argue that cultures are made and re-made, mutually constitutive and often in flux, is not to imply that there is not also loss involved in this process or the operation of power. To claim that we are all subject to these processes to the same degree, and all happily embracing our creolized identities, would be a gross misrepresentation of the contemporary world. 'Asian fusion' cuisine is not on everyone's daily menu. Some people would never be able to afford it. Others just do not like it.

This is where 'culture' in one of its more conventional guises comes in. While social theorists, historians, and anthropologists struggle to find words to describe the processes which constitute contemporary global culture, artists are both creating and simultaneously commenting on this phenomenon. The work of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare explores some of these issues in the conceptualization of a cosmopolitan culture with a specific history.[57] African-born artists are often confronted with the demand, implicitly or explicitly made, that their work should reflect an authentic African cultural tradition. Shonibare's reply to that demand is to reflect it back. Shonibare creates sculptures dressed in the Dutch wax printed cloth that, since the nineteenth century, has been widely adopted by women in West Africa (undermining in the process a vibrant local textile industry) and has come to be regarded as 'traditional' clothing. The story of this cloth's production is part of the history analysed by Gilroy. Produced in Britain and the Netherlands, 'Dutch wax' production incorporated Indonesian technology and was designed to satisfy changing West African tastes, incorporating traditional motifs and signs and symbols of 'modernity'. Shonibare's work displaces the cloth, using it in ways that reflect on the nature of African diasporic identities. In dressing 'English' figures like Dickens and the Brontë sisters in Dutch wax cloth, he goes beyond this, destabilizing metropolitan self-conceptions.

Dickens, read by generations of African schoolchildren, and regarded as the quintessential Englishman, becomes an 'African', in just the same way as Africans have become 'English' by reading him. But describing Shonibare's figures is no substitute for seeing them. These powerful but enigmatic creations are a reminder that we need cultural productions more than we need cultural studies.

11. Yinka Shonibare, MBE, 'Girl on the Globe', 2008, mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile and globe, 220 × 100 × 100 cm, SHO 490. © the artist and Stephen Friedman gallery (London); photography courtesy Stephen White