



Culture: A Dynamic Process of Social Behaviour

Netra B Khadka

Alice Spring Remote Health Services
Australia

BACKGROUND

Each individual when sets foot in this world starts being influenced by the culture of the place, ethnicity or social system he/she belongs to. Consequently, each individual tries to become conscious of himself/herself and of others based on the values and norms of the culture he/she exposed to. Being conscious is very important for each individual in order to maintain self development and development of the 'organised society or social group' (Mead, 1967, p. 253).

For many decades, many scholars, philosophers, and development experts have been trying to define culture in various ways. During the nineteenth century Marxist philosophers saw culture as typically related to class origin and mode of production, and that it was related more towards reflection of economic activity (Grossberg & Nelson, 1988, pp.2-3). By contrast, however, the capitalistic view observed culture as closely associated with social behaviour. In line with this, Milner (1991, p.3) believes culture essentially as a human behaviour 'whether religious or artistic, scientific or educational'. Culture, in this sense, can be referred to as characteristics of a society and its social behaviour affecting social life. Culture has rules and that these are 'far more complex and infinitely more abstract and subtle than the rules of physics or biology' (Bohannon, 1995, p.4). These rules in every society are the guiding principles of human behaviour and existence. Hence, within the boundary of these rules a member of each society perceives the world and develops its own worldview. Consequently, each member of a society follows its own worldview in order to effectuating certain goals and objectives of life. However, such worldview is always dependent on the limits of cultural rules that often become a subject to revision or renewal for proper growth and development of a society. Any revision or renewal of cultural rules is largely related to 'cultural renewal' which is 'operationalised as a systematic self-examination of heritage and human ecology at all levels of community' and that it takes 'a holistic view of communities assessing their cultural context through participatory research, critical reflection and analysis' (White & Nair, 1994). Such a process involving participatory research, critical reflection and analysis is very essential in all aspects of

cultural contexts and issues affecting important human behaviours, such as food preparation, consumption and distribution.

Many contemporary scholars believe that culture has a strong impact on the food behaviour of people. Barasi and Mottram (1990, p.129) view food habits and practices as being 'closely related to the typical behaviour of a particular group of people or culture'. They assert that such behaviour 'follows codes of conduct in relation to food choice, methods of food preparation and eating, number of meals eaten per day, time of eating, and the size of the portion eaten'. Similarly, ethnicity is the best cultural predictor of food preferences. Christian and Greger (1991, pp.286-287) contend that 'ethnic groups and nationalities have developed unique cuisines through a combination of environmental and social factors'. Such factors influence the cultural norms of people, which determine whether they accept and reject various foods and food preparation practices. For example, Bryant et al. (in Christian, and Greger,1991, p.287) state that each ethnic group encourages its people to eat foods which are theirs and available to them and discourages the consumption of other foods even to the extent of creating cultural taboos. Christian and Greger (p.287) point out that 'some foods, accepted or even praised by one culture, may be unacceptable or even disgusting to another'.

In the light of culture as one of the major factors affecting food behaviour of people, the following sections, based on a case study carried out in Nepal, examines the villagers' perceptions towards fruits and vegetable in relation to their nutritional wellbeing.

A CASE STUDY AND STUDY METHOD

Nepal, like many other countries, has its own culture affecting nutritional health of people. One of the major nutritional problems now the country has been facing is vitamin A deficiency, which is largely associated with food consumption, in this instance, consumption of fruits and vegetables. In 1989, the vitamin A deficiency problem related to Bitot's spots was as high as 2.1% among the children of the southern belt of the country (National Planning Commission Secretariat, 1995, p.2). Bitot's spot is an eye ailment 'associated with greyish or glistening white plaques formed of desquamated thickened conjunctival epithelium, usually triangular in shape and firmly adherent to the underlying conjunctiva' (Davidson, Passmore, Brock, & Truswell,1979, p.305). This prevalence of vitamin A deficiency was unforeseen for the southern belt since this belt produces plenty of green vegetables and yellow fruits. The prevalence of vitamin A deficiency problems particularly in this belt clearly indicate that people living in this belt either do not adequately utilise vegetables and fruits they grow or do not have a good understanding of the importance of these foods.

In resolving vitamin A deficiency problems, especially in the southern belt of the country, the Government of Nepal, in co-operation with the national and international development organisations designed and implemented some vitamin A-related projects in various parts of the country. These projects basically contained nutrition education activities carried out through the existing infrastructure of public health care networks, utilising the district public health office, health post, sub-health post, village health workers and female community health volunteers.

Three districts containing vitamin A-related projects and representing each separate ecological zone in Nepal - Nawalparasi (southern belt: plain areas), Gorkha (hill areas), and Ramechhap (high hill areas) - were selected for the case study (see Table 1). It should be noted that the southern belt is the low flat land area of Nepal that runs from east to west along the southern side of the country. Hill areas, on the other hand, are situated in

Table 1: Demographic Information on Survey Districts*

District	Ecological Belt	Population	Literacy (%)	Mainstay
Nawalparasi	Terai (Plain Areas)	436,217	40.0	Agriculture
Gorkha	Hill Areas	252,524	43.3	Agriculture
Ramechhap	High Hill Areas	188,064	30.0	Agriculture

*Central Bureau of Statistic, 1991

the middle of the country with varying altitudes of 610 to 4877 meters above sea level, while high hill areas (mountains) lie in the northern part. It is in the high hill areas that the highest peak of the world 'Mount Everest' locally known as 'Sagarmatha' is brought into being.

For the purpose of assessing villagers' perceptions about fruits and vegetables, focus group interviews were used as the main study method. In effect, focus group interviews were carried out in each of the three survey districts with the support of each village development committee chairman, and the help of social workers in each district. Interested village men and women were invited to participate in focus group interviews. In each district, there were more participants than were invited. In Nawalparasi there were 21 participants, comprising 11 women and 10 men, while in Gorkha, there were 31 participants with 12 women and 19 men. Similarly, there were 51 participants in Ramechhap, a very large number, of which 28 were women and 23 were men. The participants of focus group were between 20 - 60 years in each survey district. In the focus group, many of the questions were directed particularly towards the villagers' attitudes and beliefs concerning fruits and vegetables. All the data and information received from these focus groups were analysed primarily qualitatively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Field observations in all three-survey districts clearly revealed that the villagers culturally do eat some fruits and vegetables. For example, one participant of the focus group in Gorkha affirmed, 'Nobody has to teach the villagers to eat fruits and vegetables as they eat them during their seasons according to traditional practices'. Despite this, however, unless they were otherwise reminded of fruits, the focus group participants in all three-survey districts generally tended to mention only vegetables during the interviews. The reason for this could be that vegetables are culturally a part of the daily meal of many Nepalese people, while fruits are eaten only occasionally when they are available.

As for vegetables, according to the majority of participants, their meal is assumed to be incomplete without some vegetables. Thus, a meal set for lunch or dinner without any vegetables, specifically green leafy ones (locally known as 'saag paat'), is regarded as a poor meal. This culture, however, was viewed by many participants as based largely on the taste factor of food: 'vegetables add taste to meals'. It may be argued that this cultural practices of using vegetables in daily meals might not have been related simply to the question of adding taste to meals, but might have something to do with securing a balanced diet necessary for maintaining good health. Reminding the long tradition of eating green leafy vegetables, one of the participants of the focus group in Nawalparasi emphasised:

The traditional belief is not that they contain vitamins necessary for our body but that we should eat them daily as a part of our regular meal. It is our traditional custom; therefore, though most of us do not know about their importance, nobody has to tell us or insist on us eating them.

The above statement linked to the tradition and custom of villagers obviously reflects the culture of villagers' unawareness of the importance of vitamins contained in vegetables. This means villagers need some education and information to review their culture so that they may be able to get maximum benefits from their eating practices of vegetables based upon their long standing traditions. In the process of such education and information, villagers should be fully involved in assessing and evaluating realities and benefits of their culture and tradition. Such process, however, should not, in any way, involve any radical departure of local culture and tradition, but may make some refinements or revisions in the existing cultural and traditional practices. For example, it was observed that the cultural and traditional method of cooking green vegetables by villagers in all three-survey districts needed some revisions for securing better nutritional gain. The way villagers cooked vegetables in Nawalparasi reduced vegetables' nutritive value. According to the village practices, the green vegetables are chopped up and then steamed. When they are half steamed, they are

squeezed to drain all the water out of them, and once they are dry and free of water, they are fried with oil and spices. With this method, nutrients such as vitamin A are lost, because when leaves are bruised, pounded or chopped, their cell structures become damaged and enzymes that destroy vitamins are released. In addition vitamin A is oxidised in the presence of oxygen if subjected to high temperatures (Davidson, Passmore, Brock & Truswell, pp. 212-213). When the research team of this article was in Nawalparasi, on many occasions that the vegetable served to the team at lunch and dinner was cooked in the way described above: squeezed and fried. The result is tasty, but the level of nutrient retention is probably low. In Gorkha and Ramechhap, on the other hand, the cooking method was a bit different from Nawalparasi, but still reducing nutritive value.

Field observations indicated that most villagers believe in 'superior' and 'inferior' foods due to their cultural beliefs. Many high caste (priests and ruling castes) and rich villagers, therefore, do not use locally available wild vegetables on the ground that they are only meant for the 'poor people'. This belief appears to have been still deeply enrooted even in the hearts and minds of the young generations. For example when the author of this article visited to a local school in Nawalparasi during the field survey and suggested to its Year Nine students to utilise locally available vitamin A-rich, wild green leafy vegetables, such as stinging nettle ('*urtica dioica*'), in an emergency, almost all of the students reacted negatively, as though it was a disgusting idea. In fact, wild vegetables, including amaranths ('*amaranthus leucocarpus*'), pigweeds ('*amaranthus vididis*'), stinging nettles ('*urtica dioica*'), and garlic pear ('*crataeva religiosa*') are considered as inferior foods all over Nepal and are eaten only by very poor and low caste people. Despite this, however, interestingly, some of the high caste participants of focus group in Gorkha posited 'such situation based upon culture and religion is gradually disappearing'. They, however, strongly viewed that there is an absolute need of nutrition education for villagers to alter their misconceptions about the locally available food resources. Similarly, a majority of focus group participants in Ramechhap also indicated their great interest in maximising the use of locally available wild green vegetables for their nutritional needs if they are nutritious:

There are some vegetables, which are easily available in our wastelands, and in nearby forests, such as garlic pears, amaranth, pigweed, lamb's quarters and stinging nettles that have long been used by poor people as their food. But others do not care for them, which is no good. We can use them as an alternative supply of vegetables when required.

In the focus group interviews in all three-survey districts, a majority of participants expressed their dissatisfaction that the level of information or

knowledge provided by the vitamin A-related nutrition projects they had had was not sufficient to change their knowledge and eating behaviours. For example, many participants of Gorkha stated, 'Although we know now we must eat green leafy vegetables and yellow fruits regularly to protect our eyes, many of us still do not know why this is so?' This view suggests that the villagers are unsatisfied with and sceptical about the projects' information. Hence, it appears that in order to anticipate any behavioural change a project needs to sufficiently exchange appropriate information with villagers that may eventually help them review their cultural and traditional beliefs affecting nutritional health.

CONCLUSION

This article presented in the village context of Nepal confirms that culture is highly influential to food behaviour of people. However, based on the field investigation of villagers' perceptions, this article suggests that culture is not always a barrier to nutritional development if it is reviewed or renewed with appropriate education and information. Further, this article clearly informs that culture is not a static phenomenon or set rules developed for human identity and survival. It is, by far, a flexible tool to social growth and development that requires exchange of information and ideas among members of society involved in the process of human development. In this view, there is no any absolute boundary in any culture inhibiting social growth and development.

REFERENCES

- Barasi, M. E., & Mottram R.F. (1990). *Human nutrition*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Bohannan, P. (1995). *How culture works*. New York: The Free Press.
- Christian, J.L., & Greger, J.L.(1991). *Nutrition for living*. New York: The Cummings Publishing.
- Davidson, S., Passmire, R., Brock, J.F., & Truswell, A.S. (1979). *Human nutrition and dietetics*. New York: Churchill Livingstone.
- Grossberg, L., & Nelson, C. (1988). Introduction: The territory of Marxism. In L. Grossberg & C. Nelson (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Mead, G.H. (1967). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviourist*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

Milner, A. (1991). *Contemporary culture theory: An introduction*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

National Planning Commission Secretariat. (1995). *The national plan of action on nutrition: A plan document*. Kathmandu: NPCS.

White, S.A., & Nair, K. S. (1994). Cultural renewal: An operational model for sharing diversity through participatory communication. *A conceptual paper for presentation to the 44th annual conference of the Interculture and development communication division, International Communication Association*. Sydney, July 11-15.