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# Iceberg Model of Culture

## What is culture?

Culture refers to the pattern of human activity, and the symbols, which give significance to this activity. Culture is represented through the art, literature, costumes, customs and traditions of a community. Different cultures exist in different parts of the world. The natural environment greatly affects the lifestyle of the people of that region, thus shaping their culture. The diversity in the cultures around the world is also a result of the mindsets of people inhabiting different regions of the world. Why is culture important? Let us try to find out.

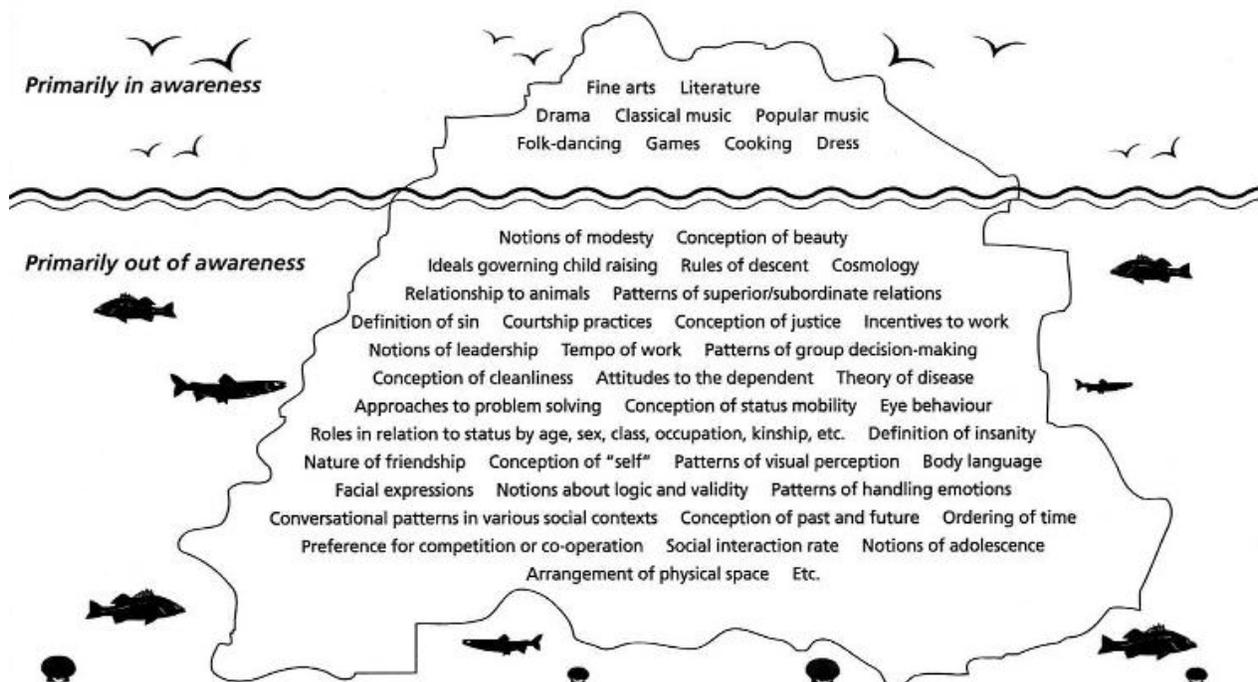
The cultural values of a community give it an identity of its own. A community gains a character and a personality of its own, because of the culture of its people. Culture is shared by the members of a community. It is learned and passed from the older generations to the newer ones. For an effective transfer of culture from one generation to another, it has to be translated into symbols. Language, art and religion serve as the symbolic means of transfer of cultural values between generations.

Culture is a bond that ties the people of a region or community together. It is that one common bond, which brings the people of a community together. The customs and traditions that the people of a community follow, the festivals they celebrate, the kind of clothing they wear, the food they eat, and most importantly, the cultural values they adhere to, bind them together.

Culture is seen as a man-made system of social control, wherein people shape their standards and behaviour. The cultural values form the founding principles of one's life. They influence one's principles and philosophies of life. They influence one's way of living and thus impact social life.

The importance of culture lies in the fact that it is a link between people and their value systems.

**Fig. 1: The iceberg concept of culture**



Source: p.14 AFS Orientation Handbook Vol.4, New York: AFS Intercultural Programs Inc., 1984

## Looking at culture: The iceberg model of culture

The idea behind this model is that culture can be pictured as an iceberg. Only a very small portion of the iceberg, can be seen above the waterline; thus, some elements are very visible, whereas others are hard to discover. The top of the iceberg is supported by the much larger part of the iceberg, which is underneath the water line and therefore invisible. Nonetheless, this lower part of the iceberg is the powerful foundation.

In culture, there are some visible parts: architecture, art music, cooking, language, just to name a few. But the powerful foundations of culture are more difficult to spot: the history of the group of people that hold the culture, their norms, values, basic assumptions about space, nature , time etc.

The iceberg model of culture implies that the visible parts of culture are just expressions of its invisible parts. It also points out how difficult it is at times to understand people with different cultural backgrounds because we may spot only the visible parts of their iceberg but we cannot immediately see the foundations that these parts rest upon. Often this problem leads to stereotypes.

### Elements within a culture

There are different types of cultures across the world and each culture has its unique essence. While defining the term 'culture', there are several elements that together constitute the culture of a particular region or the culture of a particular people.

**Language:** The various languages are essentially an important part of the culture.

**Norms:** Every society or every civilisation has a set of norms, which are an inseparable part, and an important element of the culture. This can include the folkways, mores, taboos and rituals in a culture.

**Values:** The social values of a particular civilisation are also considered as an element of the culture. The values of a culture often refer to the things to be achieved or the things, which are considered of great worth or value in a particular culture.

**Religion and Beliefs:** The religion and the beliefs of the people in a civilisation play an important role in shaping up of the culture as well.

**Social Collectives:** Social collectives refer to the social groups, organisations, communities, institutions, classes, and societies, which are considered as symbolic social constructions.

**Status and Role in Society:** A status or a social role is nothing but a slot or position within a group or society, which gives an overall idea of the social structure and hence is an important element of culture. This can also include traditional gender-based or age-based roles.

**Cultural Integration:** This includes the degree of harmony or integration within the various elements of culture. This can include elements like sub-cultures, local cultures and the difference between historical and cultural traditions.

Adapted from:

<http://www.swyaa.org/resources/handbook/Index/THE%20CONCEPT%20OF%20CULTURE.html>

<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/importance-of-culture.html>

<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/what-are-the-elements-of-culture.html>