

“One Culture – Many Perspectives”

Understanding Cultural Diversity Through Rural Livelihoods A Reflection from the Rural Craft Communities in Kandy, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

There is no universally accepted definition for the concept of culture. Culture should be understood as a specific and unique phenomenon that affirms community's identity and diversity. Judging one culture by the values of another, over-simplifies the distinctiveness and the wealth of a particular culture. Recognising, understanding and respecting dynamics of cultural norms, and defending and expanding cultural freedom are crucial in assuring secure and sustainable well-being of any community. This paper investigates different perspectives of culture by referring to everyday livelihood activities of rural communities that engage in traditional craft industries in the Kandyan region, Sri Lanka. In a livelihood perspective, culture is defined as a structure, function, product and identity, through its influence on everyday lives of people, and accordingly people's engagement with and uses of culture. Culture is multifaceted and extremely diverse entity that varies from place to place and person to person. The strengths of cultural diversity should be respected and accepted by mainstream society, if any initiative is to be truly about satisfying human desires.

Key words: culture, livelihoods, craft community, Sri Lanka

Introduction

People in different societies define and understand culture differently. Even though culture is a universal element, there are many different ways in interpreting the concept of culture. The way that culture interprets and perceives vary according to people's lifestyles, behaviours, and more importantly people's attachment with their past, inherited customs and value systems. Raymond Williams, a renowned Sociologist, believes that 'culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in

English that notoriously difficult to define’ (Schech & Haggis 2000:16). In the present day society we are familiar with different types of culture, namely: global culture; popular culture; urban culture; rural culture; young culture; pop culture; modern culture; western culture; traditional culture; drug culture; and cyber culture etc. However, there is a marked emphasis on traditional and indigenous cultures due to their potential economic values and significance in meeting day-to-day survival needs of people (see Jenkins 2000). Development scholars seem to have accepted that cultural attributes and values actually matter in development (see Sen 2004; Rao & Walton 2004; Escobar 1995; Tucker 1999; Commonwealth Foundation 2008; UNFPA 2008), but there is still much debate over how, why and where they matter (Radcliffe 2006). According to Sen (2004:38), there are appropriate questions to be asked in this regard; what are the different ways in which culture may influence development processes? How can such influences be better acknowledged and understood? and, how might be cultural context modify development policies? Part of the answer for all these questions relate to the way of understanding and defining the concept of culture. The concept of culture first comes from the Latin word of *culturare*, which means ‘to cultivate’ (Baldwin *et. al*, 2006).

The term *Kultur*, as in the Classical German implies to ‘spiritual brotherhood’, and in English, the notion of *culture* refers often to represent ‘high’ culture – arts (see Throsby 2001) and manners of educated elites (see Bourdieu 1986). Anthropology, the major discipline that deals with culture in all its aspects, refers to symbolize ‘human behaviours’ (see Nanda & Warms 2007). Therefore, in its simplest sense culture implies to human activities, and different definitions of culture represent different perspectives of human activities and behavioural patterns (Oswalt 1972). The development of culture depends upon humans’ capacity to learn and to transmit knowledge to succeeding generations. According to Fortier (2009:163) group consensus in a particular society dictates the elements of culture, and are preserved and sanctioned as paramount. It can be viewed as patterns (e.g. cultural areas, cultural traits) and, as institutional structure and functions (e.g. social organisations, religion and beliefs, customs and norms). Nevertheless, definitions of culture still remain highly ambiguous and the concept has become more contested within development debate. Apart from its theoretical intricacy, this paper attempts to interpret culture through a livelihood perspective, based on rural communities survive with various types of traditional livelihoods. These people engage with a number of traditional craft industries that have been maintained by their families for generations. They understand culture through their everyday livelihood activities that considerably shaped by their family traditions, cultural values, norms, traditional knowledge and belief system, or simply their ‘way of life’. Before entering into a detail analysis, the following perception given by a villager, who has been engaged in traditional brassware industry, clarifies the complexity and diversity of the concept of culture. In his context he perceives that; ‘*Sanscrutiya* (culture) is about our *sirith-virith* (customs). It includes what we have been maintaining and preserving for generations, and what we have practised and experienced in our lives’.

According to another elderly craftsman; ‘We have nothing else other than our *jeewanopaya* (livelihood) to describe our *sanscruthiya* (culture). We know what culture is and its meaning as we have been living with our *sampradyaika rakiya* (traditional livelihoods) for generations’. As revealed from these two examples there are different phases and complexities inherent in all cultures. They are diverse from place to place and person to person, according to their experiences and the influences of cultural values on their lives. Therefore, as Skelton (1997 in Bergendorff 2007:197) argues, ‘culture is not fixed and static but rather dynamic, changing over time and space’. According to the second example, villagers perceive culture through their inherited *jeewanopayan* (livelihoods). Thus, culture is seen as something passes from generation to generation. However, these interpretations of culture may not equally valid for every community or society. Every human society has its own distinctive culture and value system. Thus, this paper argues that the existing propositions of culture need refinement, particularly with respect to how people recognise, define and utilise culture in everyday life. With empirical evidences, the paper justifies that ‘it is risky to generalise, and it is particularly dangerous to judge one culture by the norms and values of another. Such oversimplification can lead to the assumption that every

member of a culture thinks the same way. This is not only a mistaken perception but ignores one of the diversity of culture’ (UNFPA 2008).

Why rural livelihoods?

Rural communities establish livelihoods in a variety of ways with varying degrees of resources available to them. They instinctively use the most of their traditional norms, customs, traditional knowledge, religious and spiritual elements and other creative sources to meet everyday livelihood objectives (Daskon 2010; Daskon and Binns 2010). Thus, there are tangible reasons to argue that rural communities can derive significant benefits if ‘cultural livelihoods’ are supported and, traditional social capital, cultural values, historical relations and traditional knowledge are incorporated into development process (UNESCO 2003; UNCTAD 2008; UNFPA 2008; Commonwealth Foundation 2008). For many rural communities, recognition of and support for the realisation of the potential of their own cultural values will be critical in attaining their sustainability. Paddy cultivation for example, has always been a multifunctional ‘cultural practice’ (see Tennakoon 1988), providing not only the material subsistence but also serving as the central focus for family and community life as well as spiritual and religious expression (Groenfeldt 2003). Pastoral societies in many African countries (e.g. Patterson 2000; Njoh 2006), and Andean communities in Latin American context, portray their livelihood systems as ‘cultural artifacts’ (Radcliffe 2006; Radcliffe & Laurie 2006). Writing about the Fulani people of Senegal, Adriansen and Nielsen (2002) and Adriansen (2006) for example, describe their ‘cattle culture’ by defining cattle as being ‘cultural capital’ among the Senegalese. Cattle are the most ‘culturally valued resource’ for Fulani communities and, as Adriansen (2006:223) quotes: ‘Because I’m Fulani...a Fulani without cattle [is] like a woman without jewels...Cattle are gold for the Fulani...Cattle are the honour of the Fulani’.

In this pastoral context, cattle are treated as a wealth object, and a source of prestige and cultural identity. Referring to rural livelihoods in Latin American context, Radcliffe and Laurie (2006) explain that these communities are really maintaining their culture, their own identity, there’s really a lot of vigour in their culture, their technologies, their wisdom (2006:94). Subsistence economies of traditional crafts produced by the Zapotec community in Mexico and Otavalo weavers in Ecuador for example and, the mountain communities live in the places like Andes, Himalaya and Appalachia have also developed their natural cultures as their means of living. Mountain regions are inherently multifunctional and its livelihoods system is also running parallel with its natural, historical and cultural diversity. Livelihoods of these people are fundamentally determined by their capabilities and existing tangible and intangible resources, with the latter essentially representing the values, norms, customs and knowledge systems that are traditionally embedded in their societies. As Chambers (1998) emphasises, people construct and contrive their livelihood portfolios using inherent knowledge, skills and creativity acquired within their families. Chambers and Conway (1991:6) argue that, ‘many livelihoods are less singular and largely predetermined by accident of birth’. They are culturally determined and ‘people may be born, socialised and apprenticed into inherited livelihoods as a cultivator, a pastoralist, a forest dwellers, a fish person or craftsmen/artisans as determined by their caste and social system’ (Chambers & Conway 1991:6). Their skills and values are passed down for generations as indigenous and traditional knowledge, or are modified through innovation and their own experiments. Therefore, livelihood systems are important in exploring not only culture, but also genuine claims and demands of rural communities and in designing appropriate strategies for their sustainable well-being.

Different perspectives of culture

Culture represents a range of components that embody diverse socio-economic structures, forms of social organisations, meanings, connections, inequalities among people and ‘behaviours which are socially produced’ (Cochrane 2006:322). Based on a comprehensive review Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952 in Baldwin et. al, 2006) examined 156 definitions of culture and categorized them under six different themes. Based on this original definition Faulkner et. al, (2006:30) redefine culture as a structure; function; process; product; refinement; membership; and ideology. Therefore culture, in a broader sense;

...consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.

(Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, in Baldwin *et.al*, 2006:8)

This definition frequently uses in Social Sciences. Anthropology commonly adopts Sir Edward Tylor’s (1871) definition of culture, which refers to the ‘complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of the society’ (Nanda & Warms 2007: 86). This perspective has been established in academic anthropology as a separate category, and combined with open definitions of culture which represent racial formations, political economies and history (Radcliffe & Laurie 2006:232). Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern Sociology, defines culture as a ‘design for living, an aspect of the social structure ensuring the cohesion and continuity of society as a whole’ (Schech & Haggis 2000:21). However, Kluckhohn (1949, in Baldwin et.al, 2006:187) is more elaborative and argues, that ‘not all social activities are culturally patterned. Every culture supplies standardised orientations towards the deeper problems; every culture is designed to perpetuate the group and its solidarity, to meet the demands of individuals for an orderly way of life and for satisfaction of biological needs’. Modern Sociology defines culture as a social practice that produces various meanings based on the ‘symbols, rituals, and activities involved in the construction of everyday social reality’ (Schech & Haggis 2000:21). Thus, ‘culture is socially constructed and determined by such social factors as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, geography etc.’ (Skelton, 1997 in Bergendorff 2007:197). UNESCO’s cultural conventions define this concept more broadly. For example UNESCO (2003), in its convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines ‘intangible’ culture as the:

...practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events and traditional craftsmanship – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Intangible culture is 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.

(UNESCO 2003: 2)

This form of culture exists in various art forms such as music, dancing and literature, traditional craftsmanship and all forms of traditional and popular folk culture, including collective works originating in a given community based on tradition. One of the main characteristics of these elements is that they transmit from generation to generation and provide people with a sense of belonging, identity and continuity (see Kurin 2004). However, culture in a livelihood aspect may relate to that which is interpreted by UNFPA (2008: 12):

Culture is made up of ‘inherited patterns of meanings that people share within particular contexts’. Through socialisation, people develop common understandings of what is significant and what is not. These common understandings, which may be reflected in ‘symbols, values, norms, beliefs, relationships and different forms of creative expressions’, influence how people ‘manage their daily works, large and small’; they ‘shape the way things are done and understanding of why they should be done so’; they ‘provide the lens through which people interpret their society’.

However, at opposite ends of the spectrum are Marxist analyses that have suggested there is ‘no such thing as culture’ (see Mitchell 2000). To Verhelst’s (1990: 17) all encompassing definition that culture incorporates ‘every aspect of life; know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language symbols, socio-political and economic behaviours, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations and so on’. As stated by Marshall Sahlins (in WCCD 1995) sometimes, ‘a great deal of confusion arises in both academic and political discourses when culture in the humanistic sense is not distinguished from culture in its anthropological senses, notably culture as the total and distinctive way of life of people or society’. Even with these conceptual ambiguities, it is important to understand all aspects and contested meanings of culture (WCCD 1995). Awareness of such multifaceted aspects of culture helps in realising the difficulty of establishing a fixed definition, while providing different perspectives in incorporating cultural phenomena into development processes.

Sri Lankan village life – Kandyan region

Sri Lanka is an island state of 65,610 sq km, situated in the Indian Ocean to the south and east of the Indian sub-continent. Known as ‘the pearl of the Indian Ocean’, it is classified as a Middle Income country by UNDP and has achieved impressive progress in human development, particularly in the areas of life expectancy and literacy (UNDP 2009). The current population of the country is 20.4 million (World Bank 2010), and the country has a diverse ethnic and religious composition (e.g. 74% Sinhalese (Buddhists); 12.6% Sri Lankan Tamils (Hindu); 7% Sri Lankan Moors (Islam); 5.5% Indian Tamils (Hindu); 0.9% Burghers (Christian) Malay and others (DCS, 2001)). Despite the thirty years of civil conflict in the North-Eastern province, the country has had notable achievements of development over the past few decades, and with the end of the war in 2009 the country hopes to become another ‘Asian miracle’ in a new post-conflict era of development.

Sri Lanka has a rich historical and cultural heritage covering more than 2500 years. Ancient legends and chronicles such as the Ramayana, the Skanda Purana and the Mahavamsa provide the cultural and historical legends of the country. The country’s traditional economy and social formation were exposed to powerful foreign influences during the colonial period (15th to 18th century), which exerted

profound impacts that continue to reverberate today. However, traditional rural economies and social practices exist beside modern economies, and the majority (75 per cent) of the total population lives in rural areas relying predominately on the traditional agricultural sector for their living. Rural village society is considered to have been a prosperous and harmonious, which is based on a system of relatively self-sufficient and sustainable village life. As Hennayake (2006: 51) describes one of the prominent features of the rural village has always been the Buddhist temple that provides the ethical and moral support and makes development of the society more holistic (see Yalmen 1967). Thus, rural villages in the country are regarded as ‘living heritage’ blurring traditional and modern distinctions. Majority of the rural people are held to have a natural affinity for paddy cultivation, and the ‘peasantry’ was conceived as the true locus of indigenous culture (Kemper 1991, in Brow 1999: 68).

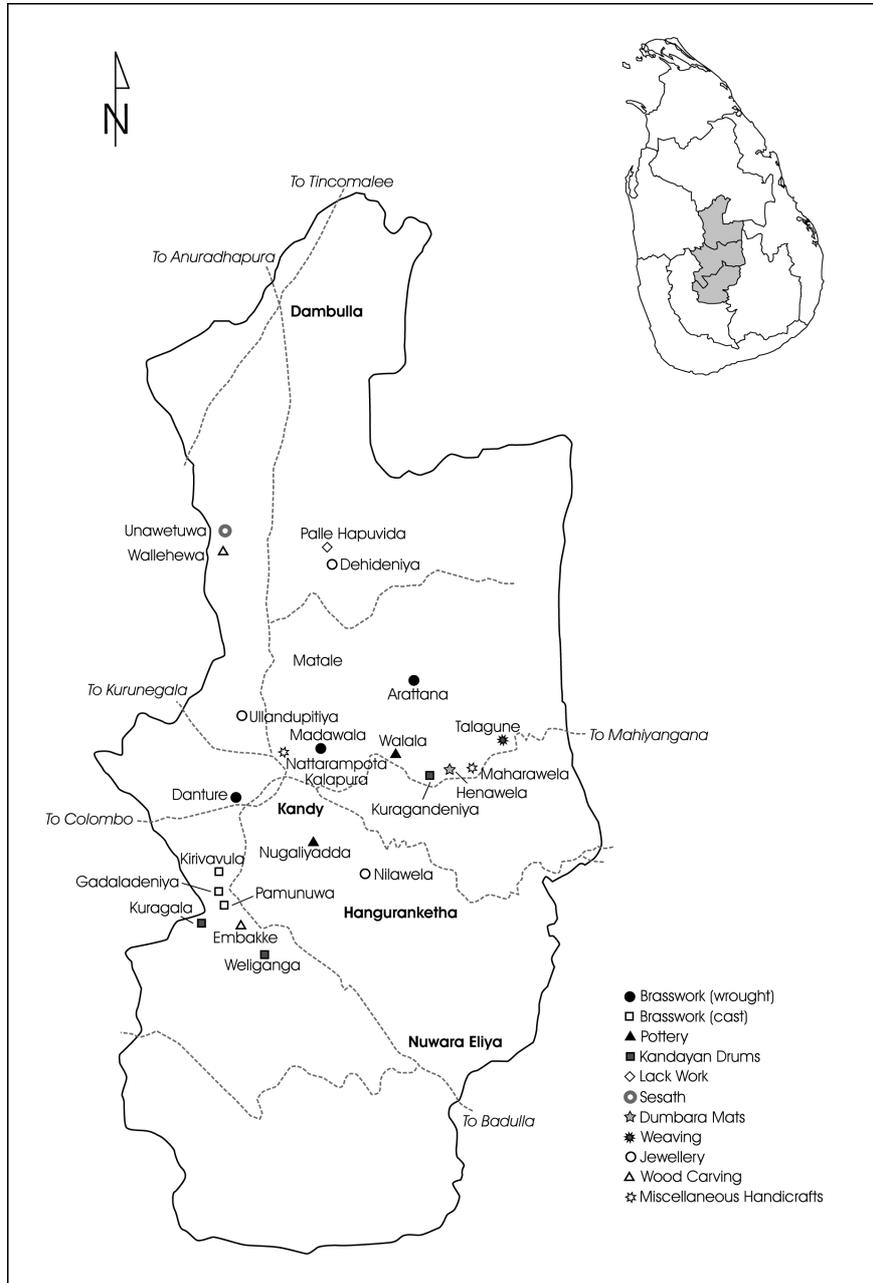
The rural villages in the Kandyan region, where I conducted my field research are closer to traditional Sinhalese ways of life and, are differ from the life of the pahata-rata or low-country people. The Kandyan region is called uda-rata or up-country and remained politically independent from the Europeans. The traditional craft industry makes up-country or the Kandyan community unique and cohesive, providing them a suitable environment for conducting their craft industries as a traditional base of the early society. Rural Kandyan villages with sufficient traces of traditional culture, skilful craftsmen and their handiworks claim the superiority as the proud upholder of traditional customs, religion and national cultural identity (Coomaraswamy 1956:10; Gunasekara 1994:9).

Especially, in relation to traditional craftsmanship, Kandyan craftsmen are considered superior to the low-country counterparts as they had not faithfully maintained the craft traditions (Thilakasiri 1994:4). These crafts people’s life provides an ideal setting to understand culture, as they have been engaged in culture-based livelihoods from generation to generation. Many of the Kandyan villages are well-known for traditional craft industries, and it is estimated that there are about 3,500 people engaged in traditional craft industries. There is evidence in information gathered for these communities of a culturally rich society, which prevailed in the 18th century and before, indicating that rural Kandyan customs are enduring through the centuries and have been virtually unaffected by the passage of time. Both paddy farming and hereditary craft industries play a central role in the Kandyans’ lives. Although the number of traditional craft families may increase and decrease from generation to generation, they have a long-standing connection with their traditional villages and traditional ways of living (Thilakesiri 1994). The views present in this paper represent the communities in villages named; Kiriwaula, Embekke, Talagune, Kalapura and Henawela (Kalasirigama) (Figure 1).

The majority of the people in these villages engage respectively in traditional brassware, silverware, woodenware, *Dumbera* weaving, and drum making industries. According to Coomaraswamy’s (1956) description, these craft communities are descended from ancient Indian institution. In historical Kandyan society, caste was an important factor, and social, political, economic and religious functions were regulated on the basis of caste (Seneviratne 1978). According to the existed caste hierarchy *Govigama* (farmers) and, *Navadanno* (artificers), including *Áchari* (blacksmith), *Badal* (goldsmith), *Vadu* (carpenters), *Galvadu* (stonemasons), *Sittara* (painters) and *Lokuru* (brassfounders) (Seneviratne 1978), were held in high esteem, second only to *Govigama* (farmers) in society (Pieris 1956).

The majority of the villagers that participated for this study mainly represent the *Navadanno* group, which means the ‘experts in nine traditional skilful industries’. The outstanding craftsmen belong to the *Navadanno* group worked for the royal household. They have formed a close-knit body with the hereditary groups known as the *Patal-batara* - four workshops. As Coomaraswamy (1956) describes, these people took pride in their ‘caste-based professions’ and ultimately the caste system has become a legal recognition of the natural division of society into functional groups. This represents the places ‘automatically assigned by legal and religious sanction’ to the early Kandyan village communities (Coomaraswamy 1906, in Brow 1999:76). Although these caste divisions or caste-based activities are not functioning in present day Kandyan society, the traditional professions assigned by the early caste system are still ‘observable’ in these villages.

Figure 1: Traditional craft villages in the central province of Sri Lanka – Kandy



(Source: Author)

In fact, this connection is much more evident at an event like the *Daladā Perahara* (*Daladā* procession) (see Seneviratne 1978). People perform their traditional functions at the ceremony, as assigned to their families from the early times. Some outstanding craftsmen still work on projects such as decorating Buddhist temples, and painting religious scenes etc (Thilakesiri 1994). New craft villages

(e.g. Kalapura) have resurrected these glorious traditions and brought the traditional craft industry to new localities (Thilakesiri 1994). The young people, descendants of the traditional craftsmen, are enjoying the reputation of their forefathers and the birthright of gifted craftsmen from the past.

Rural perceptions – defining culture through village livelihoods

Villagers' perceptions of culture are significantly connected with their everyday livelihood activities. When villagers were inquired how they recognised culture, they referred to different perspectives based on what they 'see' and 'experience' in their everyday lives. Villagers' interpretations reflect not only the way they perceive culture, but also their relationship with cultural values and long-standing traditions. For example, one villager clarified the way he understands culture by asserting; 'we are part of this culture. We were born into a unique tradition. My great grandfather used to supply decorative brassware to the royal palace and the temples in Kandy. Following our ancient traditions we preserve our precious culture'. This villager believes that culture is integral to their lives, and inherited livelihood is a symbol of culture. According to another craftsman; '*sanskerutiya* (culture) represents what we have, what we do and our different modes of living'. His understanding of culture is not limited only to 'customs, norms and values', but to their 'distinctive ways of life'. Thus, their 'creative livelihoods' symbolise the capacity of villagers not only to be creative, but also to perceive and understand the meaning of culture in their context. They recognise the significance of inherited knowledge and skills of their livelihood activities in order to preserve cultural values in their society. According to an interviewee in *Henawela*, who has been engaged in drum making industry for more than 30 years, his livelihood is precious for him since it is an ancestral heritage. While he produces and supplies traditional drums for various places, he also attends the *Dalanda Perehara* (the temple procession) as a drummer following his fathers' step. As he clarifies:

'my livelihood teaches what our culture really means. This industry keeps me connect with our past. Drum making is not a 'prestigious profession' in today's society. But I can't get rid of it. It is disrespect for my ancestors and our cultural traditions. I can't find a job at this age, and this is the 'only' thing we have specialised'.

Aged 60, this villager has had a long-standing association with the Drum making industry and decided to join at age of 20 to continue a family tradition that has spanned five generations. He runs the industry with the support of his wife and two sons. He further clarifies that; 'our livelihood represents all our traditional values, customs, beliefs and knowledge and – 'everything' in our lives'. Thus, he understands the meaning of culture through his own engagement, and defines culture as 'everything', including traditions, values, knowledge and belief system etc. As revealed from his interpretation 'caste' is also a fundamental factor of culture. He confesses that; 'people think *berakárayó* (drummers) are *adukula* (low-caste). Some are ashamed to be drummers. But *kulaya* (caste) is not a matter, if we keep our precious traditions alive'. According to the available literature, *berevá* people (drummers) were categorised as low-caste in historical society (see Seneviratne 1978; Silva *et. al.*, 2009). However, in modern day society these people regard that being a drummer as a special privilege, since they represent their inherited customs and obligations in various traditional rituals. Although these people are not satisfied with the economic gains from their industries, they still believe that they are entitled to 'protect' their cultural heritage. They are genuine about their status in society, and contend that caste has been a help in attaining a life they enjoy, and believe it is a privilege to honour the traditions and heritage of their ancestors. In this regard it is worthy to recall Hocart's (1936) interpretation about the drummers; 'although anyone can drum, only a drummer can drum ritually: no other person's drumming

is “real” and “meaningful”. Reality or meaningfulness in drumming does not belong to the quality of the drumming, but to the quality of the *drummer*; i.e., his caste’ (in Seneviratne 1978:27). Similar to the drummer’s perception another young villager who has been performing as a *Kandyan* dancer, understands culture through his industry; ‘what we have been received from our past is our culture. People underestimate our past, and when chase money, they easily forget *apé deval* (‘what belongs to us’ – identity)’. This villager is happy about his involvement in dancing, and he earns his pride and respect of being a *Kandyan* dancer. He further clarifies that; ‘we know what real “culture” is. It is an inherent value that we have been associated with for a long time’. He defines culture as an ‘inherent value system that people have been associated with for a long time’. He considers his livelihood as a symbol of cultural heritage that provides the self-esteem that are important in present day life. Literally, if the dancer’s caste (*Oli*) has described as low-caste, dancers are also highly regarded as ritualistic performers and traditionally they have not performed outside the specific ritual context (Seneviratne 1978). Thus, both dancers and drummers believe that their inherited livelihoods provide them with not only income, but also the feeling of culture.

A skilful young jewellery maker, who has been engaged in the silverware industry for the past 10 years, understands culture differently. He perceives culture as a ‘source of learning and teaching of ancient tradition, customs and values’. His present livelihood helps him to experience the wealth of cultural traditions. As he explains; ‘real culture means our past. All our values come from the past. I believe that they teach and guide us to have a better life’. Villagers learn culture from their family industries and believe that they are good means of exploring traditional knowledge and disseminating them to future generations. Most of the villagers appreciate their learned cultural values and use them purposely and effectively to meet present requirements and transmit to the next generations as independent occupations. According to this perspective culture is something that ‘guides’ and ‘teaches’ past traditions and the ‘way of life’, whilst helping people to ‘survive’ and ‘adapt’ to the changing situations. A similar perspective revealed by a female weaver in Talagune by declaring; ‘this is an invaluable source of learning about our *sanscrutiya* (culture) and the life of our *mutun-mittan* (ancestors)’. She belongs to a family that thrived in the weaving industry from the time of ancient kings. She is proud of her ancestral connection and her talents, especially in *Dumbera* weaving and design. As she further clarifies; ‘this is not just an industry. Activities like these simply explain “what our culture and its values are”. We have been learning of our ancestors’ lives, their skills and knowledge from our weaving’. The *Dumbera* weaving is a very old cottage industry in Sri Lanka, and Talagune is the only place where these oldest forms of livelihood have survived.

Certain people in this community understand culture as a ‘process’ that helps in building social cohesion in their society, and a source that gives them a feeling of ‘belonging’. The long-standing customs and traditional values strengthen interactions and relationship among different communities. This idea revealed from one of the villagers’ explanation; ‘we are from *párampárika paul* (families that thrive for many generations) and these traditions “belong” to us’. These people represent a unique and irreplaceable identity that is solely generated through their traditional industries. In order to distinguish their uniqueness another respondent declared that; ‘everyone engages in these industries do not belong to ‘traditional’ families. They don’t have specialised skills and family heritage as we do’. According to this interpretation villager distinguishes his community as *páramparika minissus* (followers of the particular traditions), by comparing with those who are not follow such traditions or ‘outsiders’ of their industries. The above respondent is a descendent of the renowned *Devendra Mul-árchar?*s family that was outstandingly talented in wood carving during the Kandyan era. According to this interpretation he tries to understand culture through their belonging to ‘originality’ of the ancient craft traditions. Another respondent clarifies this by referring to the new comers to their industry, or as he says *aluth aya* or *pita aya*; ‘we are born to these traditions that cannot break away from us. They give us the feeling of belonging to “something special” and that is the way we feel “what culture means”. *Pita aya*, (those who are exterior to the traditional families) spoils and misuses our industries for the sake of money’. As

revealed from these interpretations and as clarified by a government key informant, such craft communities in the Kandyan society are regarded as ‘small groups’ with a distinguished system of knowledge, skills and customs preserved through generations; ‘traditional craft communities are like a ‘subculture’ of the country. They are a separated ‘group’ distinguished by their crafts, knowledge and even in their behaviour, social attitudes and caste. They understand things differently than we do’. Caste-based professions, Kandyan ancestry and traditional craftsmanship are crucial determinants of these groups and their membership. They interpret culture through their ‘identity’ which has been established by their values and aspirations. Those who specialized in a particular type of traditional skill and descended from an ancestral family are recognized as a ‘group’ or a guild. They refer their group and belongingness to understand and define culture in their context.

Creativity is unique to every society, and involves originality, imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, and inventiveness and in this setting *sampradayan*, (traditions) as well. This is a strong aspect of every culture. Creativity represents a stock of ‘intangible culture’ of a particular community which articulates people’s identity, traditions and values. During a discussion with an elderly villager who produces silverware, explains this by showing one of the ornately decorated *páthrá* (bowls), made by his grandfather; ‘this is unique due to its special design and fine decorations. I have been keeping this as a ‘sample’ of our precious culture, which makes me feel that my forefathers are looking after me’. According to his comment, these products have a greater ‘value’ beyond their simple utility – and are expressions of culture. As another villager declared; ‘craft products purely symbolise what is our culture. They are original and are the bridges to our past’. Craft products connect people with their past traditions and portraits of a great culture. They also convey the embedded meanings, traditions, knowledge and values of society and its people. A woman engages in traditional brassware industry implies that their products as; ‘real “materials” of our culture. You can “touch” and “feel”’. These are unique to Kandyan people, they tell who we are, where we from, and our craftsmanship and the spirit of culture’. Compared to ordinary commercial products, the products of these communities differ in quality and representation. Their products are ultimate representations of both cultural and aesthetic values and these views explain how villagers perceive culture through their everyday experiences and livelihood practices.

Explaining different perspectives of culture

It became clear from above examples that most of the families that were studied maintain strong family traditions and depend on their ancestral occupations for living. The villagers’ responses illustrate the diverse perspectives of culture, traditions, their lives and work, and how they prioritize cultural values in their everyday environment. These examples also demonstrate that diverse expressions of culture emanate from the hearts, minds and souls of these communities - the very source of their values, identity and sense of purpose or meaning. On one hand their views show the extent to which their livelihoods influence their understanding and interpretations of culture. On the other hand, how culture and traditional values have become factors that determine their livelihood choices. In this context culture is a dynamic force and a crucial part of people’s life that cannot and should not be confined. Culture is intrinsic to people’s everyday activities, and perceived differently as a set of values, a process, a product and a source of identity. The above examples revealed how village people interpret and understand culture by referring to ‘what they see and experience’ in their lives and, most of these are historical phenomena permanently embedded with these communities. Understandably, a generalisation of such a complex and diverse phenomenon may lead to think that every member in a society perceives and experiences culture in an identical way. The findings prove that such an assumption is mistaken and ignores the diversity and complexity of society, its people and their value systems.

As revealed from the villagers’ interpretations, culture can be recognised as a set of inherited attributes

constantly transmit, both shaping and being shaped by their social and economic interactions. These patterns and regularities of a society, according to Faulkner *et. al.*, (2006:31) describes culture as a ‘structure’ that provides particular ‘norms’ for human behaviours. Thus, in a structural sense culture is defined as a system or framework of elements including beliefs, norms, customs, rituals, attitudes, behaviours, ceremonies, skills, knowledge, symbols, language, religion etc., that evolves over time. In a structural perspective culture can be referred to every aspect of human life and encapsulates all ‘socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns’ (Faulkner *et. al.*, 2006:35) and regularities of the ‘way of life’ (2006:32). These structures explain their ‘way of life’- or, as the villagers put it, ‘everything in their lives’. Most of the villagers references to culture are ‘observable’ and, useful in dealing with everyday life. Thus culture as a structure represents all ‘observable patterns that utilised by a group’ (Newmark & Asante 1975, in Faulkner *et. al.*, 2006:31) of people to meet recurring social and private situations in their lives. These ‘patterns’ constitute a sort of ‘social heritage’ that people receives from their past, which they share with others in their society or social group (Horton & Hunt 1984, in Faulkner *et. al.*, 2006:31). The inherited livelihood patterns of these village communities have enabled them to deal with their everyday circumstances, whilst representing the principle that they are all ‘creative, have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making their own culture’ (Hawkes 2002:11).

Villagers referred to caste as a significant element of understanding culture. As previously explained caste is one of the underlying factors in determining villagers’ livelihood activities. Among these villages, the caste system has been established as a form of ‘social organisation’ that is permanently bound and entangled with the broader system of family and religion, and the economy of their society. According to Gunasekera (1994), the religious justification of the caste system has led some anthropologists to perceive caste primarily as an ideology. Others, although not denying the religious aspect, see it as a system of social stratification (also see Silva 2006). However, in the rural Kandyan context, caste is referred to as an ideology - identity - and also as a system of social stratification. It is often used to describe a person’s status, power and economic position (Gunasekera 1994), or simply as a group possessing differential degrees of ‘social honour’ and ‘prestige’ (see Daskon 2010). Hence, in these particular village contexts, caste is a recognition of the natural division of their society into different functional groups and these people take pride in the traditional professions entitled by their ancient caste. Such a significant recognition of caste is contrary to the situations, where see caste negatively or as an extreme barrier for human interactions (see North 1990; Carswell 2000; Acharya 2003).

It is evident that culture is not merely a structure or a historical set of values and norms, but is rather a tool for achieving some purposes or ends. Therefore, culture can be defined in terms of its functions and services provided. The above examples reveal ‘what culture does, or accomplishes’ (Faulkner *et. al.*, 2006:38), or how culture helps people to solve their everyday problems. Villagers located their interpretations of culture in the services and needs - the ‘functions’- provided by their traditional knowledge, values and customs. Hence, culture refers to something that helps people to ‘adjust and cope with their living environment’ (2006:38). This perspective explains how different elements of culture function in the society, by providing various services such as teaching/guiding of survival and adaptive strategies, controlling power relations, giving identity and a sense of belonging, and furnishing raw materials for life. Thus, as Gardner (1999, in Faulkner *et. al.*, 2006:38), points out, ‘every culture addresses certain universal needs’. The guidance and learning functions are two aspects that clearly articulated by the village respondents. As confirmed by village craftsmen, cultural values guide their lives, and teach them about their history and ancestry, and how their traditions have been evolved from the past, and are useful in adjusting their lives appropriately. In this context, culture is an ‘intellectual heritage’ and, what Lenski & Lenski (1987, in Baldwin *et. al.* 2006:189) term, a ‘learned heritage’ that is passed from generation to generation by providing a ‘design for living’. In functional sense, the transmission of accumulated knowledge and traditions is a vital role played by any culture. Therefore

culture itself provides the ‘logic of communication’ (Applegate & Sypher 1988, in Baldwin *et. al.*, 2006:142) for its own inhabitants. As confirmed by interviews with the villagers culture is also identified through the ‘identity and strong sense of belonging’ that foster through their family customs, ancestral relations and traditional craftsmanship. They understand that they have their own unique history, which is associated with ancestral heritage, knowledge, skills and traditions. That is culture allows these communities to define their distinctiveness and authority as *sampradáyika* (traditional) and *páramparika* (comes across generations) craftsmen/women/families by differentiating them from ‘others’. It gives them a ‘sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and of what they should be doing’ (Harris & Moran 1996, in Baldwin *et. al.*, 2006:179).

Villagers’ interpretations of culture were based to a large extent on a variety of artefacts, including brassware, silverware, *Dumbera* weavings, drums, jewellery and various other streams of cultural activities, which are ‘cultural products’. These cultural products are bearers of the ‘Kandyan’ identity, values and meanings of these societies, as well as being absolute factors of economic and social development. As Faulkner *et. al.*, (2006:44) describe, culture is a product that generates through a ‘meaningful activity’ of people, which is ‘representative’ and ‘significant’. As revealed in the examples, villagers perceive culture through the meanings and values embedded in their livelihood products and, consider them as sources of ‘representation’ that convey their identity, traditional knowledge and customs to future generations. Thus, culture consists of the totality of people’s products; ‘some of these are material, others are not’ (Berger 1969, in Baldwin *et. al.*, 2006:147). Such products are important instruments in the preservation of expertise underlying diverse cultural expressions. *Kandyan* dancing is a distinct species, “possessing on its own right the attributes of refinement and distinction associated with highly evolved classical tradition inherited from the past” (Molamure 1956:27). Therefore, culture exists as a series of tangible and intangible products that are the results of the application of manual skills and knowledge of the people (Salzmann 1998). Such artefacts and cultural performances represent intellectual, moral, artistic, aesthetic and sacred qualities of village communities and are inspirations and symbols of a distinctive culture (see Klamer 2002, 2004).

According to Throsby (1999, 2001) and UNCTAD (2008), however, in order to perceive ‘culture as a product’, there are important characteristics that are essential to be considered. First, cultural products and activities should incorporate some distinctive ‘creativity’ that involves ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’. Secondly, such products should essentially have a ‘cultural value’ in addition to whatever monetary/commercial value they may possess. The examples showed that there are embedded values in villagers’ craft products that give them economic value by converting their cultural products into economic products. As Throsby (2001:28-29) explains, cultural products differ from ordinary economic products in terms of their aesthetic, spiritual and historical values that cannot be evaluate in monetary aspect. Thirdly, which is more important, skills and knowledge of particular products should essentially pass down from generation to generation, and should be a vehicle for symbolic messages of history, heritage and traditions of particular group of people, to those who consume them.

In order to have a broader understanding and to bring culture into an operational level, recognition of culture in different perspectives is important. In this regard, the examples discussed in this paper showed that rural livelihoods help us by providing a pragmatic framework to investigate different perspectives of culture and also the significance of culture in attaining livelihood objectives. This proposal was supported by one key informant stating that; ‘many rural livelihoods are deeply rooted in family customs and their traditional values. But we can’t see them clearly, and are misleadingly overlooking such relationships’. Hence people’s livelihoods provide useful information on different ways in which culture can be perceived and may both integrate and influence well-being of rural communities. Therefore, in the final analysis, this paper argues that all cultural values, traditions, beliefs and knowledge must be nurtured and ‘equally’ valued and respected, since they all contribute to cultural distinctiveness. Cultural values are ‘relative’ to individuals within their own socio-cultural context and,

whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ depends on cultural specificity. As Groenfeldt (2003:922) observes, even indigenous values can be accommodated, but mainstream society has not been able to accept competing worldviews as serious descriptions of how life can be experienced. Hence, he further questions, ‘will this be the fate of indigenous values? ‘are we about to experience the end of (other) values?’ No one has a right to adjudge ‘other’ culture, and all cultures must be regarded as equally legitimate, since they reflect not only their identities, but also community capabilities and knowledge about the world. Hence, on the one hand, cultural values are universal, yet on the other hand they are specific. Since we all (society/groups/individuals) share values, norms, beliefs and traditions, culture is ‘universal’, but cultural values are ‘specific’ because such values, traditions and knowledge are essentially shaped according to people’s socio-cultural context (place-based/specific) (see Daskon and Binns 2010; Daskon 2010; UNFPA 2008; Tucker 1999; Bergendorff 2007; Commonwealth Foundation 2008). The research findings justify that all cultures must be equally valued and respected, and demonstrate the significance of valuing ‘other cultures’ rather than ‘western culture’ within a broader development context, and also evaluating their capacities in building a secure and sustainable living environment for human societies.

Conclusion

The paper has set out to investigate both the feasibility and effectiveness of a livelihood perspective within which culture can be recognised, understood and defined, by using different perspectives drawn from the craft communities in rural Kandyan villages. Culture has been recognised as a concept that ‘highly ambiguous and notoriously difficult to define’ which remains culture as a less treated and integrated phenomenon within development context. Taking culture in different perspectives to development agenda is vital in fostering a genuine respect and understanding ‘every culture’ – ‘different ways of seeing, thinking and valuing’ of people’s living world. It is suggested that livelihood perspective helps in understanding and effectively internalising culture as a significant part of development processes, and minimising the difficulties of monitoring invisible aspects, which has often led to an underestimation and misunderstanding of certain cultures. Being more flexible and culturally sensitive to the local context is vital, in order that grassroots initiatives to be more effective. In attempting to bridge culture-development divide, this paper has endeavoured to show that interpretations of culture must go further than mere customs, norms, beliefs, or forms of artistic expression. It should embrace the complex and distinctive spiritual, aesthetic, historical, symbolic, intellectual and emotional aspects of societies and communities. Every society has a continuity of cultural values that are inherited from the past, and which help communities to be distinctive from others. Thus it is suggested that development should not be a process where one particular perspective dominates over others, but instead it is a process which should equally accept and respect everyone’s perceptions, capabilities and ingenuities. The strengths of cultural diversity should be accepted by mainstream society, if any initiative is to be truly about satisfying human desires. Appreciating and respecting cultural distinctiveness and nurturing distinct cultural values are vital for fulfilling spiritual, aesthetic, material and intellectual well-being of human societies.

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