

# **CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURES AND CULTURAL POLICIES IN GUATEMALA**

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## **0. Introduction**

This brief contribution highlights the different forms that the concept of popular culture takes on as it evolves towards popular cultures and how it can and should serve as a basis for formulating cultural policies.

There is no doubt that the basis of the cultural identity of a people is its popular culture, especially in Guatemala, which are expressed in so many ways and by so many ethnic groups.

But only the investigation, and this is the emphasis made in the second part of the work, of the traditional popular culture, as a reductive axis of its own and authentic cultural phenomena, can be considered as the starting point for the conformation of a multidimensional national culture.

The research can not be anarchic and isolated, it must be framed within more coherent policies, planned by the State to yield the necessary fruits.

The author insists that without this first diagnostic step, the impulse of popular culture falls into folklore, false nationalism, and, fundamentally, reducing the conception of the world and the life of popular groups to mere tourist merchandise.

It is therefore indispensable to meditate on the diverse types of popular culture that are formed in Guatemala, to then later make the diagnosis that allows a deep and systematic investigation of the popular culture of the country.

## **1. VALIDITY OF POPULAR CULTURE**

Since the middle of the century, in different Western countries, culture and the arts have ceased to be a sumptuary element and have gradually become centers of social attention for governments, private corporations, and civil organizations of various kinds.

In this context, a deep interest has arisen regarding the importance for Latin American countries of simulating and protecting the diverse forms of existence of the so-called popular cultures.

Succinctly, it can be said that this interest has been built around four fundamental concerns.

- a. The concern for the disadvantageous situation of the “popular” sectors of the population (possessed majorities of our countries) in their**

**unequal and reduced access to the global cultural capital of society, has forced us to rethink the principles of democracy and cultural democratization.**

- b. The growing appreciation of the richness, quality, and creativity present in the cultural manifestations of the popular sectors.**
- c. The recognition of the role of social integration, ethnic or community redefining, and elevation of collective self-esteem that the products, works, and processes that make up the so-called popular cultures can play, and, finally**
- d. The overcoming of prejudices and the broadening and change of the social schemes of understanding facilitated by the generalization of a new sense of the notion of culture as a consequence of the scientific innovation processes occurred within anthropology and other social sciences throughout this century.**

In conclusion, it can be said that the attention to popular cultures currently designates the interest, in the first place, for an identifying tradition, a cultural matrix that has its origin in previous and shaping circumstances of national life; secondly, for the disadvantaged cultural situation of large national majorities and a more balanced and permanent relationship between the specific manifestations linked to that identifying matrix and the other forms of cultural production circulating in our society and thirdly, for cultural creativity that has been wasted, cornered and devalued despite representing a great reservoir of contributions and current responses to contemporary challenges and conflicts.

## **2. A CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTION OF CULTURE**

It is known that, until now, the notion of culture was restricted to the designation of that part of human creation centered on the classical humanities, good literary or artistic taste, the proper handling and enjoyment of the Fine Arts, and the possession of a wealth of knowledge and “cultivation” experiences that distinguished its possessors. This notion, containing a clear discriminatory sense, led to the establishment of hierarchies and oppositions between “cultured” and “uncultured”, “barbarians” and “civilized” and, obviously, between “erudite” elites and “ignorant” majorities.

Subsequent developments in anthropology, sociology, and other sciences have led to a more rigorous conceptualization expressed in a variety of nuances ranging from the classical anthropological notion that extends culture to everything that is human creation as opposed to nature, to ethnographic approaches (beliefs, norms, values) and others that express culture in its symbolic functions and dimensions.

In any case, it is possible to highlight the **practical implications of these new conceptualizations.**

- a. It has been accepted that all peoples and individuals are bearers of culture, only that it varies according to the historical circumstances of each nation or ethnic group and depending on the location of each social group or individual within the social structure of which it is a part.
- b. Cultural ethnocentrism and class ethnocentrism have been questioned, a questioning based on the conviction that, since “cultures” are individual and unique entities, they are loaded with singular qualities that make any scheme of comparative valuation or hierarchization arbitrary and misleading. Thus, what had previously been accepted as savagery or backwardness, or cornered and “stereotyped” under the term “folklore”, has begun to be recognized in our days as diverse forms of cultural realization as valid as those that are proper to those who made the classification.
- c. The merely “spiritual” or “superstructural” character of culture has been demystified. That is, the profound interweaving between cultural processes and historical circumstances has been understood, accepting that the “cultural” cannot be located as a “complementary” dimension of the economic and political realities of social materiality as a whole, but as an essential part of those same realities.
- d. The idea of assuming culture in Edgar Morin's terms as the vital flow is shared, as a kind of bloodstream of the society, which metabolizes and ensures exchanges between individuals, between the individual and society, and between society and the “cosmos” (that which refers to the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the mythical and the practical, beliefs and their material support). Culture seen in this way is not a superstructure, it is not an aggregate, but the meeting point between the different collective instances.
- e. Finally, despite its insertion in all the spheres that make up social life, it is accepted that culture has its specific one and it is placed in the set of activities linked to creative, self-compressive, ludic, and aesthetic expression that allows to shape it, to make an expression of all the rest of the activities that constitute the vital collective expression.

Definitions such as the above lead directly to the notion of action culture, that is to say, to the overcoming of any exclusively analytical interpretation (whether of

(1) Marín, Edgar. “De la Culturanalyse a la Politique Culturella”. en **COMMUNICATIONS**, 1979

the order of “intellectual refinement” or the description of “lifestyle”) to move on to the projection of culture as a fundamental element in the construction of the collective future. This is what Ezequiel Ander<sup>(2)</sup> Egg has called CONSTRUCTIVE CULTURE to designate the goals to which any new strategy of cultural animation should aspire.

### 3. POPULAR CULTURES AND CULTURAL CIRCUITS OR FIELDS

From now on, we refer to the existence of different cultural fields to refer to the main modalities of cultural production, circulation, and consumption existing in our country. We will speak of cultural fields to designate, in addition to modalities of cultural circulation, the set of codes, forms of knowledge, and patterns-values-models that make them up.

Only three fields or circuits are mentioned because they summarize the general characteristics of those that have the greatest influence and presence in our cultural dynamics. Moreover, because of it is through them, albeit schematically, that we can understand the field that concerns us: popular culture. In any case, and it is prudent to insist on this, it is only a reduction, a simplification that pretends to account for a much more complex reality in permanent interaction.

In general terms, we will speak of:  
ELITE OR ENLIGHTENED CULTURE  
MASS CULTURE, AND  
POPULAR CULTURES

An approximate definition will be attempted of the salient features that will allow us to understand, later on, the specialty attributable to popular cultures.

#### 3.1 FIELD OF ELITE OR ENLIGHTENED CULTURE

The terms “elite or enlightened” underline two central features of this cultural field: its **distinctive character**, the need for a more or less extensive formal apprenticeship to properly handle its codes; and the cult of **originality and uniqueness** (taken to its extremes in the Plastic Arts) which allows an elite to advantageously appropriate objects and events marked by “authenticity”. However, because of its schools and postulates, Enlightened Culture has transformed its basic modes of circulation (specialized, for “initiates”), becoming more and more integrated into the circuits of mass societies.

We can associate this field with the following essential features:

(2) Ander Egg, Ezequiel. *Metodología de la Animación Social Cultural*. (Murica: Instituto de Ciencias Sociales Aplicadas 1983)

- It is a cultural system where the aesthetic-cognitive functions predominate(rational), sustained and transmitted through **Knowledge** from its roots, within which each element (work, author, school) refers to a genealogy whose knowledge is necessary to better understand the manifestation.
- It is socially accepted as **The culture**. Most of the cultural institutions are oriented to its attention. Its promotion, sponsorship, and official support are not subject to doubt.
- It is the cultural field that allows greater specialization, extensive training, “rest” in the production, and “virtuosity”, fundamentally produced through the classic model of “patronage” for the public also specialized.
- Its basic pattern-model is constituted by the image of the distinguished individual through the cultivation of his aesthetic qualities, tending to erudition based on the transmission and accumulation of knowledge.
- In Guatemala, the enlightened field has been constituted predominantly through the development of the educational system, the press, the prestige of institutions such as academies, patronages, Cultural Foundations, and, of course, Governmental Organizations of Cultural Administration. Its elitist character is quantitatively perceptible in figures on book circulation, theaters per inhabitant, attendance to symphonic concerts, geographic distribution of cultural centers, etc.

### 3.2 FIELD OF MASS CULTURE

With all the ambiguity that the generalized use of the term causes, we will use it to designate the set of messages, collective encounters, ways of living and relating, produced and put into circulation by the great diffusion systems, destined to cover a mass public from a centralized issuer that is difficult to identify in individual terms. It can be accepted as the dominant culture of our times, not only in its communicational circulation but in all forms of organization of work, taste, leisure, and social life in general subjected to mass production processes.

Therein lies its definitive feature: **mass culture is defined not as an elite of “initiates” but as society as a whole**. In that same feature are detected its main virtues and deformations, a permanent target of questioning and apologies. Questionings, from those who attribute to it the commercial and massive debasement of the “authentic” cultural forms: factor of social passivity, numbing of the critical capacity that dulls and stuns the citizens, apologies, from those who emphasize its anti-elitist and democratizing character.

It can be said that what makes its assessment even more difficult is that it is a cultural system, a form of social organization and a network of broadcasting apparatus, homogeneous in its processes and circuits, and extremely diverse and

juxtaposed in its contents. Its production processes are directly conditioned both by the demand to satisfy the greatest possible number of receivers and by the profitability and economic, political, and ideological efficiency demanded of its products by the decision-making centers of its complex apparatus.

### 3.3 POPULAR CULTURES

Unlike enlightened culture -characterized by its fidelity to certain universal roots and models, and by its restrictive and exclusive circulation- and mass culture -characterized by its serious production and the aim of reaching society as a whole-, popular cultures are characterized by being local creations that respond to the immediate existential circumstances of the groups in which they originate. In the field of popular cultures we are going to locate the scenario where, on the margins of or in response to formal education and enlightened circles, the popular sectors express their lives and produce their aesthetic creations, their knowledge, and their worldviews, appealing to their own creativity and reproducing or reworking the patterns coming from official cultures and from mass culture itself.

These **popular** and local creations are also **collective**. Although they generate artists in the sense of individualized **poiesis**, the cult of the work, the objects, and the images marked by the seal of an author or a school is not their most important practice. On the contrary, what gives them vitality and relevance is that they are the result of successive additions that are amalgamated with the **contribution, approval, or appropriation** of the members of a community or region, in close correlation with their cultural environment.

The use of the plural is not an arbitrary choice. We talk about popular cultures to be faithful to two conditions: firstly, to the local and immediate response (regardless of whether it is subsequently susceptible to processes of diffusion) of most popular manifestations, from which their undeniable and rich diversity derives, and secondly, to the great internal differences that make up what is generally and imprecisely understood as “people”, which range from the particularities of ethnic or geographical origin to class stratification and profound inequalities in access to society's material resources.

It is therefore impossible to speak of a **single popular culture** that constitutes “the soul of the Guatemalan people”, their “basic personality” or the “set of traditions that give them their identity”, or as Nils Castro points out, their “organic framework of national self-awareness”. There are popular manifestations in very specific conditions -traditional dances, handicrafts from the countryside and the city, new urban songs, cultural and community movements organized in neighborhoods and large cities, and traditional and updated forms of oral tradition- but they do not constitute a homogeneous whole with common features. On the contrary, many manifestations, the most traditional ones, for example, can exhibit more identifying

features with the “folklore” of the countries on the southern border of Mesoamerica than with that of Guatemalan socio-folkloric regions of more or less recent origin. (3)

Socially, the whole of popular culture has been considered a “second-hand” culture, fragmented in reductive terms such as folklore, **naïve**, or stereotyped through the versions that the commercial-industrial broadcasting system makes of them.

Internally, the forms of knowledge and the dominant codes in popular cultures, although they increasingly incorporate new resources, they base their transmission fundamentally on oral tradition and what Juan Liscano (4) has called “knowledge by communion and not by distinction”. For this reason, the most important signs of collective identity are present in them, transmitting a matrix and a memory different from the “official” one, and intuitive knowledge and diverse practices (natural and spiritual), generally undervalued and hidden but still effective for the popular sectors and, surely, a reservoir of a set of contributions for our civilization.

It is important to clarify that, until now, we have only discussed that part of popular culture that is self-generated within the very heart of the popular sectors and not about the whole of the culture that is current among them. (5) The latter, resulting, in addition to its creations, from the mixture of content and models disseminated or imposed from other cultural spheres. For this reason, in the following paragraphs, we will make qualified use of the expression to avoid false appreciations that attribute only positive elements to what we know are difficult, contradictory cultural conditions beset by difficult and deficient living conditions.

#### **4. CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL DYNAMICS**

Accepting that the division into cultural fields is a conceptual and simplified abstraction of a complex system of interactions in real life, it must be assumed that each of these fields is defined only as “circuits and modes of cultural production and consumption”, as abstractions, but their existence is interdependent insofar as it forms part of the social system. This is especially true in our contemporary, multicultural societies where it is practically impossible for any of these circuits to exist in a “pure state”. On the contrary, they are increasingly integrated and interpenetrated, to the extent that an individual participates or can participate daily in contacts and practices that correspond to the various cultural systems mentioned.

(3) **Cfr.** Celso A. Lara Figueroa. “Cultura popular e investigación participativa”, en **Revista INIDEF** 1982 (6): 53:55 y Daniel Mato “Criterios metodológicos para la investigación y reactivación de las formas tradicionales del arte de narrar”. Cumaná: Consejo Nacional de Universidades, **1er. Congreso e Universidades Nacionales sobre Tradición y Cultura Popular**, 1989.

(4) Liscano, Juan. “Folklore y Cultura” en **Archivos Venezolanos de Folklore**, 1967.

(5) La distinción entre culturas “autogenerada” y cultura “vigente” en los sectores populares ha sido desarrollada por Alfredo Chacón, **Ensayos de crítica cultural**. (Caracas; Fundartá, 1982).

This means that the cultural fields show between them, **Coinciding Areas, Specific Spaces, and Zones of Confrontation and Self-Protection**. In the first case, contradictory relationships arise, both of creative exchange and ethnocentric denial and homogenizing compulsion (as happens, for example, in the types of relationship that occur in the transition from the popular to the mass, or the opposite direction, in the influence of the masses on the popular). In the second case, **Specific Spaces**, we refer to those processes that express the features of each field in an extreme way (for example TV series produced in mass for a universal market, as an extreme case of mass culture; highly specialized scientific journals, as an extreme case of cultural dissemination aimed at a small group of initiates; and the secular flow and local commemoration of a pagan religious festival as extremes of the local sense). Popular understanding of a culture). In the third case, in the areas of realization and self-protection, conscious exchanges take place, forms of intervention that try to influence, positively or negatively, but in a systematic way, the cultural dynamics of each of the circuits in question (cultural actions).

In conclusion, the areas of institutional intervention and participation are found precisely at the meeting points between cultural circuits, which are the points of mutual enrichment and contribution that could be channeled within society as a whole.

## 5. TRADITIONAL POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL POLICIES.

On the other hand, one of the most important features of the research, promotion, and dissemination of culture, lies in knowing and managing its historical character, which in recent times has been tried to distort, transform, and mechanically reduce to the ultimate expression of itself: its concrete but abstract expression, in the sense of isolating it from all its historical and social context.

In this way, we talk about folk art, a traditional craft, which has to be modified to adapt it to the new trends in taste and fashions of contemporary capitalism, without taking into account the deep cosmogonic sense that these manifestations of collective creation represent for each of the peoples.

As has already been pointed out in the first part of this work and on repeated occasions, culture has an essentially historical character that determines it, it is the socioeconomic and social conditions that constitute its basis, so it cannot be understood in the **abstract**. (6)

Hence the correct criterion of Nils Castro when he indicates that one cannot speak of art, or man and culture in the abstract. They simply do not exist because they are outside of History.

(6) Nils Castro, **Políticas culturales e imperialismo cultural**. (Quito-Ecuador; Universidad Central de Ecuador, 1986), p. 15-18.



Culture only becomes concrete to the extent that it manifests itself as it acts and transmits as a collective inheritance to other generations that imprint their historical and social stamp on it.

So, if culture is concrete and is historically and socially determined, it exists as an expression of the social forces that make up society, it is the expression of a society divided into classes, which is why we can rightly speak of a dominant or hegemonic culture and a subordinate or peripheral culture.

The interaction of both cultures, with their dynamics, make up the social and cultural heritage of a people. (7)

This heritage is perceived through the work of its artists and its intellectuals, but also through anonymous creations, material or otherwise, that arise from the popular soul in the sense of Gramsci and not Heine, and through a set of unique and authentic values that give meaning to the collective life of a society.

In this way, it can be said that the cultural identity of a people is the sphere in which culture is experienced as subjectivity, in which the collective is defined as a subject.

Hence, cultural identity is the creative genius of a society, the dynamic principle by which a society, relying on its past, nurturing itself from its vicissitudes and selectively welcoming any external contributions, continues the incessant process of its creation.

Thus, in the face of external pressures suffered by the community, cultural identity and, in particular, its traditional popular culture, ends up being its main incentive to remain true to itself. (8)

We would like to quote here Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, former Director General of UNESCO, who states that today's societies are subject to external socio-economic and cultural pressures that are shaking the identity of Latin American peoples. Mr. M'Bow believes that a balance must be sought in the science and technology imposed on our societies, but combined with the fundamental elements of the culture of the peoples themselves. (9)

(7) Vid. L.M Lombardi Satriani. **Apropiación y y destrucción de la cultura de las clases subalternas**, México; Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1978, pp. 39-51y Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "De Culturas Populares y Política cultural" en **Culturas populares y política cultural**, (México: Museo de Culturas Populares, 1982) pp. 15-20.

(8) Cfr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, "La Cultura popular y la creación intelectual" en **La Cultura Popular**. (México: Premia Editora, 1982) p.21

(9) Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. "Discursos del Director General de la UNESCO" en **Conferencia Mundial sobre Políticas culturales** (México, 26 de julio-6 de agosto de 1982). Boletín de información, No. 31, 1982, pp. 7-11.

This interrelation between what is our own and the contributions of science and technology, highlights the need to create, at a cultural level, a kind of symbiosis that can be either creative or destructive.

It will be a destructive symbiosis if the power provided by science and technology is used for purposes of domination, to subjugate mankind, and to deculturate peoples.

Creative symbiosis if this power of science, technology, and culture frees man from his material servitudes, which continue to limit his capacity for full expression, and if it allows the genuine expression of all the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic values essential for the equilibrium of man and the cohesion of societies. (10)

It is not our intention to pontificate about culture, but to point out that within a global theoretical framework the problem that concerns us, traditional popular culture in all its manifestations, will remain at the level of academic disquisitions, at the level of discussion, at the level of tears and sighs, but not of scientific apprehension if action is not taken jointly with the bearer of this specific culture. And this is provided by scientific research and technological means. The single researcher who, like Prometheus, redeems the culture of peoples, no longer exists. It is participatory research, that of the researcher-cultivator binomial of culture, -pleonasm notwithstanding- which allows us to find the authentic roots of our peoples. Hence, only science enables us to structure, comprehend, understand, and contribute to the transformation of the laws that govern cultural processes. Like the whole field of culture, the authentic forger of traditional popular culture: the musician, the storyteller, the craftsman, and the witch doctor, among others, are not isolated from their social and national context, nor are they abstract: they are concrete.

Any action that is to be carried out for their benefit must be based on a cultural policy that prioritizes participatory research into the socioeconomic reality that governs the traditional culture sector.

Research into culture then becomes a priority. A great statesman once said, not without reason, that those who have not investigated have no right to speak.

This means that research is the preliminary step for any program that wants to develop in the traditional popular culture sector, and even more, it is the basis of any cultural policy structured not at the desks of bureaucrats, but in the field, together with the bearers of this culture. For this to happen, researchers in the field of culture must shed their academic robes and research must become a tool for finding solutions rather than a mere academic exercise.

(10) Cfr. Prem Kpal, "Valores culturales, diálogo de las culturas y cooperación internacional" en **Problemas de la cultura y los valores culturales en el mundo contemporáneo**, (París; UNESCO, 1983), pp. 54-55.

Within this conceptual framework, participatory research is the fundamental step. Here, the researcher and the researcher form a single process and together they manage to find the keys, the nodules that govern the world of traditional popular culture.

Only research can demonstrate that the bearer of traditional culture is a creator and not just a reproducer of the molds established by tradition; and also that only **he** can transform his aesthetic patterns because they respond to an alogical, non-Western aesthetic. (11)

In the field of traditional popular culture, the researcher becomes a receiver, plus the creative process of the culture. His role as a researcher is also intimately linked to the dissemination and application of this participatory research.

The dissemination and application of these results must be done at various levels. At present, pure research does not make much sense.

The levels of dissemination are therefore also marked by the social strata of the community:

1. At the level of the bearers of traditional popular culture themselves (craftsmen, storytellers, musicians, etc.), so they revalue their cultural elements. **Understand**, in the sense of Gramsci, the importance that their work plays in the formation of national self-awareness and take the perspective of their role as protagonists of the culture of a nation.
2. At the level of other social groups, "in particular the middle classes, so that they also **feel and understand** in Gramsci's sense" that in popular culture lie the foundations of the identity of our Latin American peoples, and that if they do not rely on it, and if they do not delve deeper into their roots, their history has no concrete meaning, their history appears deculturated and in the limbo of peoples who repeat history rather than forging their own. (12)
3. At the level of national organizations of culture and education, so that they know that the creative process of a country is developed at the base of traditional popular culture. So that bureaucrats become imbued with their very roots and propose concrete cultural and educational policies, according to the prevailing needs in each country, in the countryside and cities, and stop planning culture and education with models preconceived in other latitudes.

(11) Vid. Antonio Gramsci., "Observaciones sobre folklore" en **Literatura y Vida Nacional** (México; Juan Pablos Editor, 1976), p.239.

(12) L.M Lombardi Satriani, Op, Cit., p.51

4. At the level of international organizations, so that they understand -by dint of repetition- that the manifestations of Latin American popular culture do not constitute laboratories for experimentation, but rather that our multiethnic and multicultural peoples form a mosaic of men and women who have their cultural patterns that are just as valid as those of the Western world.

The new research alternatives in the field of traditional popular culture are therefore directed towards two main lines of action in cultural policy:

- a. The bearer of traditional culture and the organizations that have arisen from within its history.
- b. To education policy, to formal and non-formal education program plans. At this point in the development of science, the interaction of popular cultures, cultural identity, and education is decisive.

In other words, without expecting a catastrophe in the education system, it is essential to incorporate traditional popular culture into the education of our countries. It is now the number one priority.

This application should not be isolated, but as part of their popular culture, the basis of their national culture.

Although there are many alternatives in the field of popular culture, it is true that participatory research and self-management are the basis for the formation of coherent cultural policies, which in Latin America and Guatemala are yet to be developed and implemented.

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