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A social constructivist understanding of culture for environmental justice and policy

In addressing the environmental threats to cultural resources, some environmental ethicists have taken for granted the idea that culture has an essential character of change that is to be welcomed. In this article, I show that there are pressing moral issues, in this age of environmental crisis, that lurk behind the idea that culture has an essential nature of change. One question that I address is whether, if change is always a pervasive part of culture, we should be morally neutral about changes to cultural values and resources, especially when such change is harmful and external forces are responsible. To address this question, I adopt a social constructivist understanding of culture to show why concerns for loss of culture in the event of environmental crisis that is qualified as cultural change is normatively flawed. I argue that this perspective on culture, yet to be considered in environmental justice literature, prescribes not being neutral about cultural change in addressing environmental issues that affect cultural resources. I demonstrate that seeing culture in this new light has revealing implications for environmental justice. I conclude that failure to integrate this idea of environmental justice runs the risk of dismissing what is harmful to some cultural groups under the guise of 'normal' cultural change.

Keywords: culture, cultural theory, climate justice, environmental justice, climate treaty

Introduction

One area of environmental justice concern is the negative impact of climate change on culture that some scholars have addressed (Zellentin 2010, 2015; Strauss 2012; Adger *et. al.* 2013). How and in what way climate change affects culture has been the focus in climate ethics and environmental justice discourse. Some scholars have discussed the range of tangible and intangible cultures that are negatively impacted by climate change (Kim Hee-Eun 2011: 259-290) and why it has to be addressed using a human rights framework (Maus 2014: 699-715). The problem of loss of culture exacerbated by climate change has also been dealt with as an issue of cultural justice because climate change threatens “cultural identity” and “traditional ways of life of indigenous people” including “territorial dispossession” (Heyward 2014: 149-169).

However, there is a dearth of literature interrogating the normative implications of characterising culture as “always changing” when articulating the cultural dimension of climate change impacts and adaptation. Some environmental scholars have been neutral about the normative idea of cultural change when addressing the impact of climate change on tangible and intangible cultures (Strauss 2012: 112-117; Heyward 2014). For instance, Sarah Strauss provides a lucid explanation of how cultures are endangered by climate change. She points out, among other things, that the changes to culture caused by climate change should be expected since the essence of culture is to respond to change (Strauss 2012: 371-377). She specifically argues that instead of being concerned with the damaging effects of environmental challenges (particularly climate change) on culture as well as the causal agents responsible for such changes, we should instead focus on ‘adapting’ to ‘climate change’ (Strauss 2012: 372). Strauss’s idea has also been adopted by some environmental scholars without any scrutiny (Hulme 2015: 2-5). What is wrong with the idea of cultural change? Should we be neutral about changes to cultural resources, especially when such change is harmful and external forces are responsible? I contend that the experience of loss of cultural resources makes it unjust to be neutral about the idea of normal cultural change in this era of environmental crisis.

The evaluation of the normative idea of cultural change in this article will show that dealing with loss of culture and cultural injustice in this age of environmental crisis requires an understanding of culture in a way that does not marginalise the significant cultural resources of people. I will make the case that if environmental ethicists and policy makers want to be serious about addressing the loss of cultural resources and values like identity, heritage sites, and homelands to climate change, it is required that they see culture in a new light, one that puts meaning, rather than mere acceptance, at the centre of understanding cultural change.

To achieve the aim of this article, which is to rethink the idea of cultural change as an essential feature of culture, I rely on the social constructivist theory to interrogate the nature of culture, especially its character of perpetual change in the age of anthropogenic climate change.¹ This approach to understanding culture is particularly important because it does not essentialise cultural ideals in ways that obscure their normative implications in environmental ethical analysis. I will show how the neutrality about the nature of cultural change disregards cultural identity, obscures what is lost, and ignores people's agency to react to environmental injustice.

I divide the rest of the article into four sections. In the first section, I will provide an overview of the challenges to persuasively articulate the concept of culture in social and political theory. In the second section, I will discuss the social constructivist approach to understanding culture that will guide my engagement with the idea of perceiving change as an essential character of culture. In the third section, relying on the social constructivist understanding of culture, I will show the normative challenges to the view that culture has an essential character of change. Specifically, I will address three normative challenges springing from this naturalised view of cultural change by showing that it (a) erases the ontological character of recognition and continuity that is involved in people's claim of cultural identity, (b) obscures the nature of what is denied, damaged and ultimately lost as a result of environmental threats like climate change and (c) risks ignoring people's agency in their ability to speak and act against the environmental challenges they are facing. In the fourth section, I suggest that based on the understanding of how climate change results in loss of cultural resources that is overlooked as cultural change, culture should be seen in a new light where meaning and engagement with people's experience of cultural resources is prioritised over mere acceptance of cultural change. I conclude that the idea of culture as always changing, which was prominent in environmental ethics, is fundamentally inadequate because it harbours insinuations that encourage overlooking loss of significant cultural resources in the event of environmental crises like climate change.

Therefore, climate policy initiatives must embrace this social constructivist approach to culture so that the risk of harm to, or loss of, cultural resources is better understood and addressed in environmental justice, particularly climate justice.

1 I adopt anthropogenic climate change as an environmental transforming event causing cultural change, assuming that anthropogenic climate change is happening without any need to show the scientific explanations to prove its reality. For the scientific explanations of anthropogenic climate change, see Garvey 2008; Toulmin 2009; Weart 2012.

The concept of culture: from classical understanding to contemporary struggles

In this section, I will briefly discuss some of the controversies surrounding the definition and description of culture from classical to contemporary periods. The aim is to show that the concept of culture has aroused contestations among scholars and these contentions have become inescapable in cultural politics because the notion of culture intersects with issues of recognition and justice (Appiah 2005), even though some of the layers of these intersections are still very obscure.

The concept of culture derives from the Latin root *colere* or *culturare*, which means 'to till' or 'cultivate the ground' (Benhabib 2002: 2; Mathews 2005: 21; Baldwin et al. 2006: 6). These words are associated with activities of 'tending to', 'caring for' and 'to preserve' thereby suggesting that culture penetrates human lives and at the same time requires the active engagement of human beings (Mathews 2005: 21). Culture can be classified into two distinct parts, namely, material or tangible, and non-material or intangible. On the one hand, material culture is the physical objects that human beings manufacture for the purposes of their flourishing, and on the other hand, non-material culture comprises the norms and mores of the people. Although material culture is concrete and takes the form of heritage sites, artefacts and crafts, non-material culture is abstract or intangible but could have a very pervasive influence on the lives of the people of a particular society (Idang 2015: 100). Non-material culture includes customs, beliefs, language, values and symbols.

In trying to define culture, one of the first definitions was put forward by Edward Tylor. He defines culture "as a complex whole which encompasses knowledge, belief, customs, values, interests, arts, morals, law and any other capabilities and habits acquired or exhibited by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1958: 1). This description of culture seems to be a time-praised design for subsequent anthropologists to portray human conditioning that is reflected through their peculiar ways of living. Edward Tylor's definition of culture might have stood for a long time as an all-encompassing description of culture, but this view of culture cannot necessarily become univocal and in fact it has been refined and developed in several directions by anthropologists over the years (see Baldwin et al. 2006).

The original power of Tylor's definition is commendable, but it seems that in this global age, where cultural identity is often dynamic, this understanding of culture obscures a good deal more than it reveals. Tylor's definition is a less penetrative account of the uniqueness of culture, as well as its significance, to the lives of people. In short, it is a reductionist account because it puts culture beyond

the reach of a critical evaluation that signals the possibility of its repression, harm, and loss. The terrain of describing culture should be expanded to include more than what was captured in Tylor's definition, even though this expansionist agenda might open more complex descriptions of what culture represents to human beings in different societies. Given the complexity of human culture, Markku Oksanen admits that "culture is a notoriously elusive concept that denotes a complex aspect of the spatio-temporal existence of the human species" (Oksanen 2014:542). Oksanen's opinion suggests not only the difficulty of describing culture but also the normative implication of cultural ideals, particularly when there are concerns about the risk of harm to or loss of cultural resources.

Scholars from different disciplines like sociology, psychology, and political science after Tylor have since defined culture to capture the nuances in their disciplines (see Faulkner et al. 2006: 27-52). Hence, one can say that the meaning of culture has received a hefty analytical workout by many scholars to the point of making the concept reducible to the nuances of their disciplines. Candidly, it might be hard to align with a generic definition of culture simply because of the harm of obscuring significant cultural concerns of specific people. In the same vein, a discipline-specific understanding of culture must be cautious of the irrational tendencies that come with guarding boundaries when describing such a complicated concept.

The demand to put forward an all-inclusive view of culture has never been more challenging for cultural theorists than this time, when our world is faced with an environmental crisis like climate change, that is having an impact on sustainable living (Amantova-Salmane 2020: 13) including cultural representations. What culture is, and what it represents for different people, have become keenly contested in this era of globalisation. Are all cultures the same? Why are some cultures marginalised in a liberal democratic society? How do we reinvent the idea of culture to reflect its true significance for the sake of recognition and identity? These questions have ignited passionate responses from cultural theorists of notable repute, but I will not delve into the debate.² While some cultural theorists caution against the extremism in the liberal characterisation of culture that has enhanced the domination and subjugation of others (Kymlicka 1995a and 1995b; Appiah 2005), others like Charles Taylor provide better ways to describe and argue for cultural recognition (Taylor 1994). The increasing controversies on cultural identity prompt Seyla Benhabib to suggest that culture is now "an identity marker and differentiator" for people in every place, making it puzzling to arrive at a settled narrative on the idea of culture (Benhabib 2002: 1).

2 For some interesting discussion on the politics of cultural recognition, cultural identity and multiculturalism see Taylor 1994; Benhabib 2002; Appiah 2005; Kymlicka 1995a.

Although these cultural theorists have their critics,³ what is familiar in all of them is that they signal a new imagery for understanding culture. That is, they suggest that culture cannot be understood in any homogenous way. They also demonstrate that the meaning of culture and what should be regarded as cultural resources cannot be determined ahistorically without consideration for current context, place and situation. More importantly, their different views of culture or cultural identity, to be more specific, suggests that there is the need to expand the understanding of culture through guided dialogue with other cultures to understand the internal complexity of cultural ideals, especially when there is a risk of upending it. The point I have tried to make in this section is that describing culture has been controversial over time and much more in this age of environmental crisis, where there is the risk of cultural repression. Hence, the conceptual ideals associated with culture need to be further interrogated to understand how the risk of harms, or loss, to culture should be dealt with. I undertake this task in the next section.

Social constructivist understanding of culture

Social constructivism is a very broad concept in social theory that can cover distinct methodological strategies, ranging from postmodernism to critical social theory, from postcolonial studies to Marxist or non-Marxist functionalism (Berger and Luckmann 1996). Although I adopt the social constructivist approach to understanding culture from Seyla Benhabib's (2002) work on *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, I stretch the explanations beyond what Benhabib puts forward.⁴ Social constructivism, as a method of explanation, posits that "social reality" is produced through "subjective and intersubjective process of construction" by social observers and social agents (Becker, Pohn-Lauggas and Santos 2023: 4). Human beings, as social observers and social agents, play an active role in shaping social reality through their actions and interactions with one another. In this vein, a social constructivist approach to understanding culture suggests that what culture is, both at the empirical and normative levels, must be subjected to 'contestations' by social observers and social agents (Benhabib 2002: 3). Integral to this approach is that in evaluating culture the social observer and social agent must be clearly distinguished. On the one hand, the social observer, Benhabib says, "imposes unity and coherence on

3 For the critique of Kymlicka's theory of multiculturalism, see Carens 2000: 52-87; Teo 2021.

4 Benhabib uses social constructivism as a comprehensive explanation of cultural differences to resist the attempts to reify cultural groups and their struggles for recognition in normative political theory. See Benhabib 2002: 5-11. I stretch her explanations to reveal how social constructivism can address loss of culture.

the idea of culture as an observed entity” for the purpose of control (Benhabib 2002: 5). This set of people could be regarded as the cultural theorists who analyse cultural realities but are not active participants in those specific cultures. The social agents on the other hand are the participants in culture. They have first-hand experience of the cultural traditions that have been formed through intersubjective experiences (Benhabib 2002: 5-6). This latter group of people could be regarded as members of a specific culture, say indigenous people, who actively experience their cultural traditions.

Benhabib posits that “culture presents itself through narratively contested accounts” of social observers and social agents, thereby suggesting that understanding what culture means and what it signifies is borne out of people’s evolving relationship with themselves and their environment (Benhabib 2002: 6). Culture, in the constructivist sense, is embodied by human beings. That is, through the process of interacting with other people, including objects and places within a society, human beings acquire culture. Hence, cultural objects and places bear marks of meaning that later become intersubjectively sedimented and integral to what people regard as culture (McGrath 2023: 489). For instance, a drum is not merely a natural thing. It is what it is because of the intentional acts of human beings that have made them. Hence, constructivism takes seriously the human intentions behind the formation of culture. This notion of culture is in tandem with Kwame Gyekye’s idea of culture when he defines culture as “an enactment of a community of people, created and fashioned in response to the whole gamut of problems or questions that arise in the context of a people’s particular situation” (Gyekye 1997: 225).⁵

The social constructivists see culture as a human good that has a normative impact on human lives. When we are shaped culturally, our subjective lives are changed and this in turn influences how we experience our world and express ourselves in it. The influence of culture does not end with one individual. As “something derived from shared meanings, culture is a way of human beings influencing each other” (McGrath 2023: 490). It is for this reason that a constructivist approach to culture evaluates the norms of truth and evidence that births cultural ideals to determine their continued veracity, given the prevailing realities that might have allowed culture to accrue meanings that impact on human well-being negatively.

5 In the chapter ‘Tradition and modernity’, he posits that “tradition is any cultural product that was created or pursued by past generations and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present” (Gyekye 1997: 221). I prefer to use the term ‘culture’ and ‘cultural tradition’ to mean the same thing in this article.

The social constructivist approach to understanding culture is quite different from cultural essentialism. Essentialism as a term searches for the intrinsic “nature” of things as they are, in and of themselves (Fuchs 2001: 12). This approach to culture finds it difficult to accommodate the nuances of cultural change and cultural differences even when situated experience suggests otherwise. Cultural essentialists see culture as the property of an ethnic group or race. However, they have been criticised by Terence Turner on the grounds that such a view of culture:

[...] risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing their boundedness and distinctness; it risks overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimize repressive demands for communal conformity; and by treating cultures as badges of group identity, it tends to fetishize them in ways that put them beyond the reach of critical analysis (Turner 1993: 412).

Unlike social constructivism, essentialism does not give credence to the normative claims of both the social observers and social agents, especially when they suggest more than just merely agreeing with the intrinsic nature of culture (Fuchs 2001: 18). Social constructivism does not deny the traditional characteristics of culture like cultural change. Rather, this approach contends that cultural ideals must not be taken at face value. They must be constantly tested and “contested” based on location and movement in a network or system of forces (Benhabib 2002: 8). Constructivists admit, for instance, that cultural change and cultural differences are real, but suggest that the nature and circumstance of change or difference is not fixed since it is guided by human imagination and their experience within the community. Since the nature of problems that are dealt with in any society changes over time, cultural ways of addressing them cannot be static. The “context” of the people must be considered in admitting what passes for culture as well as the intricate nature of change that applies to culture (Gyekye 1997: 225).

Nevertheless, the social constructivist view culture, especially its character of change, in a slightly different manner, where agency is taken seriously. The constructivists admit that culture may change because social agents could become intentionally critical of them. However, being critical of culture does not imply jettisoning or abandonment of culture. Kwame Gyekye suggests this social constructivist idea of cultural change when he writes:

Cultural changes take place in the wake of internal criticisms (and often) originate from within the tradition itself. But it must be noted that the criticisms are not aimed at renouncing the entire complex of inherited tradition, only some features of it (Gyekye 1997: 223-224).

He also points out that cultural change may occur through encounters with other cultures but these changes, he posits, “must be on the basis of voluntary assimilation or adaptation by cultural practitioners” (Gyekye 1997: 222). Since culture is a human phenomenon and different people manifest culture in different ways, it is expected that the inter-subjective experience of human beings, from time to time, would determine cultural understanding.

A constructivist approach to the idea of culture, most times, has the objective of unveiling the evolving representations and significance of culture to the existential life of human beings in different societies. However, it is important to note that the constructivist view of culture should not be identified as a relativist view of culture where cultural symbols and representations can be shuffled like a deck of cards (Benhabib 7). A constructivist evaluation of culture aims to understand the totality of circumstances that have made such cultures a meaningful part of people’s lived experience rather than merely seeking for the preservation of these cultures. Fulfilling this aim requires that they mediate between the social observers’ and social agents’ reasoning about culture to understand better what culture is, instead of merely accepting what is deemed as culture.

The constructivist idea of culture, I think, coheres with the fundamental root idea of culture, that is, ‘caring’ and ‘cherishing’ in a socially embracing manner, in that, it allows the people to play an active role in determining, through reasoning and dialogue, the life ways that they cherish and care to regard as culture. This way of analysing culture is quite necessary in this age of environmental challenges, where people’s tangible and intangible cultures like cherished homelands, heritage sites, cultural identity, beliefs and norms have been affected in devastating ways. I will address these issues in detail in the next section.

The trouble with naturalising cultural change in this environmental age⁶

In this section, I will invoke the constructivist understanding of culture to demonstrate why the notion of a normal cultural change is complicated in this environmental age where environmental degradation as a result of human activities are experienced and theorised. Specifically, I apply social constructivism to issues related to harms to, or loss of, tangible and intangible cultural assets like identity, homelands, heritage sites, pastoral farming techniques in the event of climate change, to show the normative implications of seeing culture as having an essential nature of change.

6 I used the phrase “environmental age” to depict the age where human actions have been argued as responsible for causing environmental changes, and its consequence have been theorised.

Culture by its very nature is an invisible force that greatly shapes our thoughts and behaviours but it is difficult to “grasp” how climate change negatively affects culture (Zellentin 2015: 492). Scholars have established that climate change increases the vulnerability of not only cultural resources, but also the cultural values that are deeply embedded in cultural resources (Henderson and Seekamp 2018: 220–238). In the event of the cultural devastations caused by climate change, to see culture as a phenomenon that continually undergoes change, rather than something, the change of which implies denial, damage or displacement of significant cultural resources, portends grave normative implications for the way we think about culture and how climate justice should be furthered. I will subsequently analyse at least three important normative challenges springing from the perception that culture is always changing in this era of climate change.

One, to see culture as a phenomenon that continually changes presses us to question the ontological character of recognition and continuity that is involved in people’s claim to cultural identity. The tension here is whether we can just agree that cultural identity must undergo constant changes or transformation without examining the basis of such transformation and its detrimental effects on people’s perception of their identity. Cultural identity may be open to changes for different reasons. However, addressing the experience of changes to cultural identity in the event of environmental threats like climate change requires some nuances in our understanding of cultural identity. To describe cultural identity only by what culture does for people, that is, its social functions will be grossly insufficient in attenuating the significant normative character of culture. For instance, the farmers and pastoralists in Africa whose farmlands are destroyed by climate-induced drought and erosion are not just farmers because they go to farms or because they do the work of planting and cultivation.⁷ Their cultural identity as farmers should not be merely seen or described through these social roles, else not much is required to inhabit such an identity. These farmers have internalised and embodied farming as a way of life. To them, farming is now a way of being in the world. So, if climate change negatively affects their farm and the possibility of continuing their profession as farmers, the kind of identity that is at risk here, as Jonathan Lear argues is not “just a mere psychological matter of identifying oneself in a particular social way” (Lear 2006: 43). What is at risk of being lost is the possibility of constituting oneself as a certain sort of person who embodies a way of life that he or she might even decide to pass on to the next generation.

7 John Magrath provides a detailed report from some farmers and pastoralists in Africa who are suffering the effects of climate change and how the risk of the loss of their profession as farmers is affecting their cultural identity and self-perception. See Magrath 2010.

In addition, there is an invisible but important part of cultural identity that is neglected when we describe culture only in terms of the social functionality of culture. Culture must be seen beyond its functionality because such perception tends to look away from the structural roots of culture. To explain this better, there is the need to differentiate between the “character of culture” and the “structure of culture”. Will Kymlicka makes this distinction when he explains that while the “character of culture” refers to the different ways people manifest their culture, the “structure of culture” is described as what culture is, regardless of its social functions (Kymlicka 1995a: 102-105). The concrete properties of culture like myths, rituals, farming techniques and food preservation methods are the characters of culture. The structure of culture lies in the cohesion of the group because they share certain cultural norms. The people in a particular community are the possessors of culture and they, in turn, create the structure for such culture.

Climate change certainly affects both the character of culture and the structure of culture in many ways. For example, the effects of climate change in Africa, seen in rising sea levels, changing rainfall patterns and higher temperatures, have challenged the sustenance of cherished cultural resources like farming, and food preservation sources, as well as homelands which have caused the displacement of people from their dwellings (see Toulmin 2009). If there should be any permissible change that practitioners of culture may allow, it must be to its character (in sustainable proportions) but not its structure. The integrity of cultural structures must be guaranteed in any event that threatens the life of cultural resources in society.

The second normative implication of being neutral about cultural change is that neutralising or naturalising change as the character of culture in this climate change era obscures the nature of what is damaged and lost. This is quite different from the first normative challenge that I have explained. While the first normative issue suggests that seeing environmental threats to culture as normal change is an assault on the idea of cultural identity, the challenge here is that the idea of normal cultural change encourages perceptual blinders to what culture is in its holistic form, where culture encapsulates non-physical elements like moral norms and indigenous knowledge that contribute to subsistence living. Normalising the perceptual blinders to cultural values in the guise of cultural change does greater harm because it gives a fragmented picture of culture. This makes it easy for those who are accounting for the negative effects of climate change to overlook or misrepresent some cultural values in cases where they have been upended. For example, the traditional source of food, drinking water, and living of Inuit community dwellers in Canada have been affected due to increasing salinity from ocean acidification resulting from climate change, thereby prompting them to

reinvent their indigenous ways of life (Ford and Pearce 2012). Yet these kinds of harms are only mentioned but not considered as tangible in climate change risk analysis and policy discourse (Tschakert 2017: 3). If indigenous people are pushed to welcome cultural change despite these noticeable changes to their indigenous ways of living, then such understanding of cultural change is limiting. Accounting for the effects of climate change on culture must not disregard certain important properties of culture that seem invisible, but are very significant to people's well-being.

Culture is an important facet of every human being, but to those living in indigenous communities, culture is fundamental to their existence in significant ways (Kumar Dhir 2019: 2) and must be taken seriously in environmental ethics discourse. For instance, environmental threats like climate change challenge the knowledge and values associated with subsistence-based practices in indigenous societies as well as the utility they derive from their ecological space (Westra 2009: 118-119). The traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous peoples is generally transmitted orally and through cultural processes that include observation, demonstration, participation, ceremonies, and teachings at particular times of one's life or during special occasions, such as feasts and potlaches (Turner et al. 2008: 4). Collectively, the cascading effects of climate change have eroded traditional knowledge of environmental and economic survival in overwhelming circumstances. When externally imposed forces or decisions negatively impact or threaten the sustainability of these cultural values and prohibits a particular way of life and practices that go with it, this may threaten the viability of these people's socio-cultural existence, thereby resulting in a "sense of profound loss and alienation" (Turner et al. 2008: 3). Obscuring the loss of valuable cultural knowledge forms should not be overlooked or treated as mere cultural change.

The third normative implication that a mere acceptance of cultural change suggests in environmental ethical evaluation is that it tacitly ignores people's agency to react to the sort of injustice that is embedded in the actions causing these objectionable cultural changes. The idea lurking in this argument is that to be submissive to the idea of cultural change on the premise of its natural character undercuts the potency to speak about the negative effects of such change. It may be expected, or even desirable, for cultures to change but it must be because of the choice of cultural practitioners and not external forces. People should be able to decide, rather than being forced to decide, what is best from within their culture and integrate into their culture whatever they find admirable in other cultures. Kwame Gyekye explains the implication of forced cultural change when he argues that imposing cultural change denies agency to cultural practitioners for three important reasons. One, he says, forced cultural change has a damaging effect on people's self-perception and self-understanding. Two, the circumstances of acquiring cultural values when they are imposed makes it difficult to predict the enduring power of such culture in the new environment

because the people would neither fully appreciate it nor make any commitment to it. Three, Gyekye points out that there will be confusion in the pursuits of and practices as well as the institutions where imposed cultural traditions exist (Gyekye 1997: 225). The experience of climate change bears the element of forced cultural change because affected people have been forced to adapt to cultural change.

Furthermore, forceful cultural preservation or even cultural adaptation based on the acceptance of normal cultural change is unjust. For instance, climate change enforces on indigenous people the burden of preserving their culture, which was never envisaged by these people. Speaking of indigenous people's challenge of forced adaptation, Tom Goldtooth, Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, states, "We have certain knowledge that we're able to adapt, but we should not be put into a position of forced adaptation or forced change [...] Our forecast as indigenous people is that, yes, we will survive, but we shouldn't have to go through all these difficulties [...] we should not be put in that position."⁸ Serious moral questions, therefore, arise about how and whether the integrity of normal cultural change can be maintained by proponents in the case of mass displacement, relocation, or drastic loss of cultural heritage to environmental disasters like climate change.

Climate change affects indigenous people in a way that gives little or no choice to determine the prospects of their well-being thereby causing a crisis of "democratic self-determination" (Zellentin 2015: 494; Westra 2009: 91). Denying some people the choice of self-determination because of the actions of other people that is negatively affecting the sustainable use of their own cultural resources is an affront on their fundamental human rights and in this case "cultural rights" (Westra 2009; Wiessner 2011). Indigenous people have made little or no contribution to the harmful emissions that caused climate change "because they depend on local biological diversity and ecosystem services for their sustenance and wellbeing" (Rani and Oelz 2019: 121). Yet, if they are made to accept that cultural change is a necessary part of their lives, they would be expected to accept, as their fate, the gruelling experience of loss of cultural resources due to climate change. It is bad enough that developed countries like China and USA are mostly responsible for causing climate change, but it would be worse if developing countries in Africa are pushed to accept the destructive effects of climate change to their cultural assets on the guise that it is a manifestation of normal cultural change resulting from industrialisation. The fact that climate change affects culture in a way that choice is taken from these indigenous dwellers is highly unjust. Kymlicka's position on this kind of injustice is clear when he avows that:

8 For the full interview, see Tom Goodtooth, What does climate change mean for indigenous communities? YouTube video, 7:03, uploaded December 27, 2011, by *One World TV*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFRxJFUefw8>. [accessed September 2020].

While indigenous peoples do not want modernisation forced upon them, they demand the right to decide for themselves what aspects of the outside world they will incorporate into their cultures, and many indigenous peoples have moved toward a more urbanised and agricultural lifestyle. And they demand the right to use their traditional resources in the process (Kymlicka 1995a: 104).

The point I have been trying to make in this section is to caution against the notion of cultural change that erases the ground of change by overlooking the nuances of cultural identity thereby disregarding human well-being in the process. The displacement of people by climate change cannot be grouped in the ambits of mere cultural change because it uproots the ground of change with it. Not heeding this caution will imply that environmental ethicists are still holding on to a parochial idea of culture and cultural identity, one that naturalises cultural change. This idea of culture is what Kwame Appiah calls 'culture *simpliciter*' a view of culture that has no belonging attached to it. Appiah says, when we talk about culture in this sense, we talk of culture as something that just "provides a framework of concept and values" without any attachment to a group of people (Appiah 2005: 125). This idea of culture is unhelpful in addressing loss of cultural assets in the event of environmental disasters like climate change.

Therefore, in an age where environmental issues like climate change need to be taken seriously, merely accepting cultural change presents the normative challenges of disregarding cultural identity, obscuring what is lost, and more importantly ignoring people's agency to react to the kind of injustice meted out to them. The willingness to address these normative issues should push environmental ethicists to reject the simplistic understanding of cultural change. Perhaps, it may be necessary to admit that the *spirit* and *substance* of what is regarded as culture need enhancement in this environmental age. I think this is not only possible but also desirable.

Climate change and culture loss: seeing culture in a new light

From what I have discussed thus far, a constructivist approach to understanding culture, especially in the face of climate-induced losses to cultural resources, provides an impetus to view culture in a different light in order to understand how to address the risk of its harm or loss in environmental ethical analysis. This new way of seeing culture requires taking cognisance of the cultural ideals that were simplified or overlooked by environmental ethicists.

From a constructivist's perspective, culture is a product of people's lived experiences. This understanding of culture requires that environmental ethicists

and climate policy makers pay better attention to peoples' lived cultural experiences because the loss of culture is given meaning through these lived, "embodied" and "place-based" experiences (Tschakert 2017: 1). The range of cultural resources that people, in different societies, have may not be visible when viewed from a distance. The extra effort to engage and understand the lived experience of people is necessary to explore the cultural properties that are unknown but fundamental to their existence. For example, a river for the people in a community may serve, not only, the purpose of fishing or other domestic use but also holds significant ritual values that enriches their lived experience. By considering how environmental threats to cultural sites like this affect cultural experiences, one can see the necessity of considering a broad range of cultural values affected by environmental threats before taking a decision.

The connection between culture and human well-being has been overlooked in environmental ethics, but a constructivist view of culture has shown how the damage to cultural resources can negatively impact cultural identity, belonging, and human agency in significant ways that connects to people's well-being. These losses may seem invisible, but through the lens of social constructivism, they have been shown to be very substantial. The interconnectivity of cultural assets to human life suggests that environmental threats like climate change could have sequential effects on their well-being. For example, climate-induced loss of farmland may lead to income loss, negative health effects, erosion of identity, loss of place, and forced migration for people (Tschakert 2017: 10). The gradual loss of these cultural assets could have profound negative impacts on individuals and communities' well-being, sometimes over generations. This makes culture an intra-generational and intergenerational resource.

Furthermore, it is important to underscore that the significance of culture will never be the same in every society. There is a normative peculiarity in the cultural representations of each society. For some people, a particular culture is akin to their identity while for others, they are also attached to their long-term survival and sustenance. The herding culture, for instance is both an identity and a means of survival and sustenance for the northern people of Nigeria that is threatened by climate change (Eke 2020: 753). Environmental threats to culture must pay attention to this layer of cultural significance. A constructivist approach to culture emphasises the inter-subjective dimension of culture and how it can be articulated in the face of events that threaten its existence. Hence, when environmental ethicists analyse the effects of climate change on culture, changes to tangible and intangible cultural resources must not be accepted *simpliciter* as cultural change. Rather, the conditions that inform specific cultural changes and the implications of these changes must not be obscured because "what we call cultural narratives, cultural change and cultural innovation have their own internal logics" that must be evaluated (Benhabib 2002: 7).

Before concluding, it is important to point out that the primary objective of framing culture through the lens of social constructivism in this age of environmental crisis is not to use it as a marker of difference or to identify the historical and political events that undergird cultural diversity. Instead, it is to have a better understanding of the moral implications of cultural ideals and how these ideals influence our understanding of cultural assets that have been damaged or destroyed by environmental disasters, which are often overlooked in environmental ethical evaluations. By putting meaning, rather than mere acceptance, at the centre of our understanding of cultural change, a constructivist understanding of culture offers an alternative account of what might be wrong, when there is something wrong, with events assumed to cause cultural change rather than loss of culture.

Conclusion

I have argued that being neutral about the characterisation of culture as constantly undergoing change is inadequate and unsustainable at a time rife with environmental challenges and as such, environmental ethicists must see culture in a new light by showing that culture is connected to a significant facet of human lives and the risk of harms to, or loss of, cultural resources should be taken seriously. So how does this new perspective of culture affect environmental policy, particularly climate change policy? For want of space, I will suggest some recommendations, but it is a topic that warrants fuller treatment in further research and publications.

Seeing culture in the light of social constructivism requires that environmental ethicists and climate policy makers pay attention to how lived cultural experiences are foregrounded in the way people dwell in places including the history and affective connections to land, nonhuman species, as well as the weather and climate around them. This perspective on culture allows for more inclusive discussion about environmental issues, as it ensures that all groups are involved in understanding the impacts of environmental events and potential solutions.

The loss of culture, in the event of climate change, could be of many kinds. This loss may include loss of knowledge, sense of place and social cohesion. However, they are rarely considered in environmental decision making. This accounting bias to loss of cultural resources must be dealt with by adopting integrative methods and theories from many cultures for explaining and assessing loss to climate change. In response to this demand, O'Brien and Wolf suggest a "value-based approach" to climate change policy that considers what people perceive to be worth preserving and achieving (O'Brien and Wolf 2010: 236-242). How to adapt to climate change must not be divested from the values underlying people's perspectives on what the goals of adaptation should be.

Biophysical and financial assessment have been very common in the IPCC⁹ and UNFCCC¹⁰ environmental analysis and policies, but a constructivist understanding of culture might even suggest a relational approach to environmental impacts. In this case, what is lost, and to whom, is done considering and engaging people in a broad range of geographic cultural settings rather than determining it from the corner of an office or in a meeting that does not allow those who suffer the loss of culture to participate. Seeing culture from the perspective that I have provided will not only generate duties of mitigation and adaptation, but also duties of compensation that are sensitive to cultural injustice, but I admit that further research is needed to work this out.

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