

CULTURAL ISSUES

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY?

Culture and ethnicity are critical factors in many of today's civil wars. Examples include the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda in the spring of 1994; the fierce battles between Serbs and Muslims during the war in Bosnia and the long-standing persecution of Burma's ethnic groups by the Burmese military. While it would be wrong to imply that these wars are based solely on ethnic prejudice and hatreds – struggles over power and resources are usually central in any war – it would be equally incorrect to ignore this factor as one of the powers driving many of today's civil conflicts.

The terms culture and ethnicity are often used interchangeably. In fact, they have different meanings. Where culture is something you are born into, ethnicity is something that you are born with.

Culture is defined as a people's way of life created through their history, environment, language, and living patterns and represented by myths, folklore, arts, literature, songs, proverbs, and dances. Every culture has rituals to promote and perpetuate its traditions and heritage from one generation to the next. Cultural identity is an integral part of a person's sense of who she is and where she belongs. As such, it shapes the way she views the world and her customs and social behaviour with others.

A person's ethnic identity is acquired through birth as part of his or her genetic inheritance. An ethnic group is bound together by common ties of race, language and nationality.

In the CAP Project we have discussed the impact that war has on our cultures and the development of our cultural identity. In the war in Burma the effect is obvious and dramatic. In fact, it is one of the core reasons for the war. In conflicts where ethnic divisions are not a central part of the struggle the effect on our cultures is less evident. However, the impact is still felt as the foundations on which our cultures are built are ripped away.

In the 1980s and 1990s many believed that the forces of globalization would eliminate cultural difference. In practise, the opposite seems to be the case. People desperate for a sense of belonging are holding tight to their cultural roots as an important source of identity. This is at odds with a world that promotes the idea of the global village and can criticize those who cling to their traditions as being backward and behind the times.

We recognize that all cultures must evolve and change. We also understand that some traditions can restrict young people's role in society, particularly girls. These factors must be taken into account. But our cultural identities are fundamental to our sense of who we are in the world. Without this we have few reference points for understanding our societies or developing a code of behaviour in our relationships with others.

CULTURAL IDENTITY ISSUES

KAREN, KARENNI & SHAN YOUTH



Q. What does your cultural identity mean to you?

A. First I should say that it is just who you are – like your name or the fact that you are male or female. When somebody asks me who I am the first thing that I say is that I am Karen. I feel very proud about this. I am proud because that is why am, that is who I am. I have my history. And when my grandmother and grandfather talk about our history it is so nice for me.

It is like we're dreaming the reality of who we are – the most beautiful dream. We're dreaming being Karen. And we have to keep that – our last generation kept that, so we have to do it. I don't know if the meaning of being Karen has changed, I do know that we have to keep it.



Q. What do you mean by “cultural identity issues” ?

A. Two things are important. First you need to have a deep understanding and confidence in your own culture. But there also needs to be an awareness of the cultural identity of others as well – to understand their reality and view of the world. It is not enough to simply recognize that they are suffering as well. You have to also understand their reality, to have respect and awareness of other cultures, other ways of being.

Our ethnic identity has been abused for many years. We have had no rights. For example when we wanted to go to school if you wrote your name in your ethnic language you would get in trouble. You had to write your name in Burmese. So we had identity problems. But as well our basic human rights were also violated. We know we have to work on our understanding and cooperation with other ethnic groups in order to ensure a good future. But we also have to keep our identity as a people. We do not want our identity to be lost – it would be like losing ourselves, who we are.