

Prompt 21: What is the relationship between knowledge and culture?

This exhibition explores the relationship between knowledge and culture, how culture enables new knowledge, how culture restricts knowledge and different interpretations of knowledge depending on the knower's culture.

1)



My fairytale book of Grimm fairytales

This is a picture of my fairytale book, originally written by the German Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. It was a gift to me by my mother shortly after I moved to Germany from India. The Grimm fairytales are significant in preserving German cultural traditions and convey societal values and norms and were an important source of cultural knowledge at a time where I did not possess any knowledge about Germany.

Given this example, one can see that culture in the form of the Grimm fairytales can allow the acquisition of new knowledge. Accordingly, this cultural object of the German culture aided me to gain new knowledge about German norms and values through fairytales. Since the stories are also portrayed in images with great detail, despite the language barrier existing to that time as I was not able to speak the German language, it was possible for me to comprehend the context. Thus, images can be a universal tool for communicating with the globe, to share knowledge that might be linked to a particular community. Ultimately, by interacting with the material world, in this example with the images and the stories of the Grimm fairytales that represent the German culture, knowers of other cultures are enabled to acquire knowledge that is normally exclusive to knowers of the German culture. Like this, I was able to learn more about Germany, its culture and acquire knowledge that I before lacked. This is applicable to knowers worldwide as the Grimm fairytales have a wide-reaching scope by translating the stories into multiple languages indirectly passing on German traditions and norms to different communities of the globe.

2)



My mother's bangles from India

This picture shows my mother's bangles brought from India. In my childhood I would frequently wear them as jewellery while playing which strongly influenced my perception of my birth country's culture. Originally churiyas (Hindi for bangles) display women's marital status, different regions wearing different colours, and reenforce traditional gender roles. Accordingly, women who wear bangles as a marital indicator, are expected to primarily prioritise at-home- and family-duties in Indian culture.

These societal pressures coming from cultural norms and values being internalised by women can cause self-imposed restrictions on personal growth or on the pursuit of a career and thus on their pursuit of new knowledge. Furthermore, often people sharing that culture carry prejudices and stereotypes towards women with bangles while not attempting to gain knowledge about the person. Here, it becomes clear that culture can restrict the pursuit of new knowledge of the bangle wearer themselves and other people as well. This proves that culture can not only enable the acquisition of knowledge but hinder it too.

However, nowadays these views are not necessarily prominent in the Indian culture anymore as globalisation lead to knowers of different cultures sharing their knowledge. As a result, the culture is able to evolve and develop norms and values that embrace the pursuit of knowledge as increasingly more Indian women prioritise their career and education than living by traditional practices.

3)



Tibetan prayer flags in my garden¹

This photograph was taken in the garden of my home and shows Tibetan prayer flags. As I am of Tibetan ethnicity prayer flags are common findings in my home. In my culture, the different coloured flags representing the five elements carry prayers for good will, compassion and positive energy. Tibetan prayer flags are thus a tool for spreading positivity and shared knowledge in Tibetan culture. People outside this culture, however, may consider them tools solely for the purpose of decorating our homes as an access to the specific ethical knowledge is unavailable.

Although both knowers in Tibetan culture as well as knowers outside this culture share knowledge of the common method of hanging up flags, the ethical knowledge of the tools differ due to their differences in cultural background. While in the Tibetan culture the flags are significant as carriers of positive energy, in other cultures prayer flags will be seen as a tool for decorating one's home. In other words, culture shapes our perspective differently when encountering the same object and defines the type of knowledge the knower has of the tool. Since these flags are also given to knowers outside the Tibetan culture as a gift, it is common to pass on the ethical knowledge behind this cultural object with the gift. Accordingly, language too is a tool that allows the communication of knowledge between knowers of different cultures despite differing interpretations.

In general, this exhibition makes evident that culture has an impact on knowledge in various aspects such as tools, methods and perspectives. In this example German culture in the shape of the Grimm fairytales enables the acquisition of new societal knowledge by also conveying knowledge through images. On the other hand, culture can restrict knowledge, like the Indian bangles or churiyas that reenforce gender roles and stereotypes, halting the pursuit of knowledge of Indian women and how sharing knowledge between different cultures can encourage the development of culture. Lastly, culture shapes the knowledge of tools and the ethical knowledge behind Tibetan prayer flags.

¹ Picture 3 (May 20, 2024)

Thus, this exhibition explores the prompt “What is the relationship between knowledge and culture?” by visualising different ways of how culture can affect knowledge.

References:

Picture 1: personal photograph of my fairytale book, June 2024

Picture 2: personal photograph of my mother’s bangles from India, June 2024

Picture 3: personal photograph of Tibetan prayer flags, May 2024

923 words