The influence of culture, power and politics on the concepts and principles of SEA

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Abstract

Critiques of Strategic Environmental Assessment have noted it is not just a technical process, but has political and cultural dimensions. This paper argues the cultural dimension in these critiques needs to be more fully explored. While the broad field of Environmental Assessment began with various environmental crises, its causes were societal or cultural. SEA is itself a cultural artifact. Each country and region is distinguished by particularities of history, beliefs, values, attitudes, political and legal traditions, and different socio-economic patterns. Therefore, SEA has to be understood and practiced differently depending on institutional settings and cultural contexts.

When creating a new generation of SEA for a specific region, we need to describe the specific cultural contexts and concepts with which SEA will be embedded and operated. Using Islamic states as an example, this paper outlines the case for developing a culturising model to be applied to a culture-specific form of SEA.

1. Introduction

The disappointing environmental outcomes in Islamic countries demonstrates the need for an appropriate form of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) as a contribution to the creation of environmental assessment policies, plans and programs (PPP)[4]. As an example, the Islamic Republic of Iran is ranked 110th out of 133 countries for the degraded state of its environment by United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2013, p. 76). The Iranian Department of the Environment acknowledges Iran is one of the 10 most environmentally destructive countries in the world (Rooyan, 2012). Consequentially, there are numerous reports on its environmental problems[5]. Some need a long time to be remedied while others are irretrievable, such as the destruction of forests, desert expansion, the extinction of animal species, and recently the death of people because of air, water and soil pollution.

In spite of examples of SEA and its companion Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) being carried out in Islamic countries such as Iran, reports still emerge outlining the continuing decline in their environmental conditions[6]. This raises questions as to the efficacy of SEA practice and whether there are Islamic-centred factors which influence this state of affairs. Additionally, should Western developed models of SEA pay greater attention to the principles of Islam, particularly in theocratic countries? While some Islamic countries present themselves as secular (e.g. Turkey), Iran provides an example of an Islamic State giving pre-eminence to the Qur'an, thereby establishing a culture which brings religion and politics together.

Alongside the question of religion, there is the issue of the part that politics alone plays in an environmental crisis (Steck, 2008). Cashmore and Richardson (2013) note that power cannot be removed from consideration of SEA policy and practices. There is no possibility of creating a power-free SEA process, where issues of power are handled in formal political processes. In the case of Iranian culture, religion and politics are enmeshed. It is a pluralist country with different political cultures of nationalism, nativism and Islamism, but it is Islamism which has power, politically and culturally. Conducting SEA in such particular situations and contexts is challenging because of institutional barriers to both the acceptance of SEA itself as well as the types of policies SEA might create (Bina, 2008; Partidário, 1996; The World Bank, 2010; Verheem & Tonk, 2000).

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[4] These 'strategic' decision making tiers are broadly defines as follows : program- a set of proposed activities or projects in a particular sector or area; plan- a set of coordinated actions with time priorities and measures to implement policy; and policy- a general course which inspires and guides actions and ongoing decision making (see for example João (2005); Patridario and Fischer (2004))

[5] These cover urban air pollution, deforestation, desertification, oil pollution in the Persian Gulf, pollution, biodiversity, threats to the Caspian Sea, wetland loss, soil degradation, water supply issues, and water pollution from raw sewage and industrial waste. See for example Atash (2002); BakhtiariNature (2012); Darvish (2010); Fardanews (2009); FarsNewsAgency (2012a, 2012b); Hamshahri (2010); ILNA (2011a, 2011b); ISNA (2012a, 2012b); MehrNews (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c); Mohseni (2010); Rezaie (2009); Rezazadeh (2011); Sajadi (2011); Salamatestan (2012); Salimi (2009); Sharifi (2012); TheWorldBank (2012); Yusefian (2012)

[6] See for example IRNA (2014)

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Yet there is a limited critique of SEA as a culturally determined process involving the interaction of decision-makers and the meaning they assign to the assessment they use. The role of religion, cultural traditions, values, habits, and, semantics are neglected; and there are few studies (particularly comparative studies) about the influence of culture on the concept and approach of SEA. Therefore, this paper examines critically the relationship between SEA and culture, religion, power and politics, and then conceptualise a new perspective for SEA, termed culturisation[7].

2. Culture, power, politics and SEA

While there are several approaches to critiquing SEA as a technical process[8], relatively unexamined is whether SEA can be separated from politics, power and culture, or whether SEA is inherently political in nature and is being affected by culture and power.

SEA, as a knowledge-producing tool, is trying to assess the policies, plans and programmes as outcomes of a decision-making and planning system. This requires understanding the nature and relations of signifiers[9] - where what is signified changes with context- which has an effect on decision-making. SEA itself is affected by these signifiers. We therefore ask what is the role of religion in terms of the relationship between culture, power and politics on SEA.

A starting point is the lack of attention paid to the role of culture in the process and practice of SEA. Part of the answer lies in the ambiguous definitions of culture and, consequently, its complex relationship with power and politics. Part of its complexity and multifaceted nature (Walsh, 1999) is because "human beings use culture and make contributions to culture" (Bohannan & Ward, 1992, p. 16). Here, culture is defined as the totality of shared and learned behaviours, customs, beliefs, and attitudes characteristic of a particular society or population; in other words, a people's way of life. It is dynamic, and in the discipline of sociology, psychology, anthropology and philosophy culture was recognised as shaping our thought, our imagination and our behaviour. "[Culture] is a product of behaviour and is not behaviour itself ; it rather emerges and is adapted in interactive situations" (Othengrafen, 2012, p. 68). Williams (1958 cited in Sedgwick & Edgar (2001) op cit) knows culture as a 'whole way of life', or a 'mode of interpreting all our common experiences'. Culture is not the culture of the elite but is embedded in everyday experience and activity (Sedgwick & Edgar, 2001).

With this context in mind, we favour Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of culture that includes space, time and society, forming a "trialectics of being". This includes an all-encompassing framework of culture and supports categories of culture ('geography and the environment', 'history and intangible heritage' and 'society and ways-of-life') which can be used in forming the strategy for culturisation.

Further, as can be seen from work by (Hall, 1989) and Schein (2004), culture is like an iceberg with most of it under the water (Fig. 1). Using this analogy, what we can't see are the beliefs and values and thought patterns which underpin cultural principles.
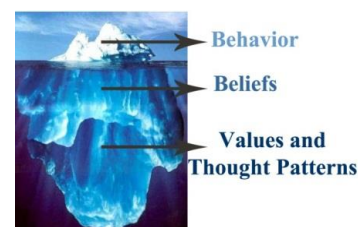
Figure 1: The iceberg[10]

Following Schein (2004, p. 8), "the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to the phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious." It is important to take into account these invisible layers of culture such as values and thought patterns, not just the visible ones, and incorporate them into attempts to understand the SEA process. It is impossible to separate culture from SEA processes or treat it in an apolitical way within SEA. Value is a very controversial issue for SEA theory, requiring a clear acknowledgment of the inescapable relationship between power and culture. Söderbaum (1999) observed that scholars and actors in society are guided by their 'ideological orientation' with respect to values and argues the ideological orientation plays a role in all

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[7] The term "culturisation" is derived from Young (2008a)

[8] For example see: Cashmore and Richardson (2013); Cashmore, et al.(2010); Richardson and Cashmore (2011)

[9] Ferdinand de Saussure's 'theory of the sign' defined a sign as being made up of the matched pair of signifier (the form which the sign takes) and signified (the concept it represents) (Saussure, 1983, p. 67) and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification'. Saussure (2006) observed that any connection between the signifier and what it signifies is largely arbitrary (Gunder & Hillier, 2009, p. 3). Here signifiers are politics, power, culture and religion whereby what is signified changes with context.

[10] Figure 1 is based on Hall (1989) retrieved from http://www.bothell.washington.edu/globalinitiatives/resources/intercultural-competence-tool-kit

spheres of human life. We have assumed this would include the SEA process. So, the policies, plans and programmes which should be assessed by SEA are all products of a pattern of decision making, ideological orientation and values which reflect power structures within a particular society.

Power relations play a dominant role in shaping culture and these cultural patterns are reproduced as they are used[11]. Culture operates as a bridge between the social structure and the acting self (Giddens, 1984). The outcomes of culture can be strictly political as well as socioeconomic. Among the political outcomes, we include both institutional outcomes, such as the protection of human rights and the environment, and electoral outcomes, such as the support for religious or ethnic parties. Analysis of cultural effects also includes political decision-making or policy-making.

Religion and politics are both embedded in culture. Culture is a human product, and religion is both a producer and a product of culture. Culture changes in response to social, economic, and political forces; and politics can reshape religion even as religion conditions political life (Lee, 2010).

Religion is a part, a central part, of the cultural conditions of knowledge. In this sense it is very difficult to separate religion and culture (Foucault, 1999); they are interconnected parts of each other and religion as a political power can play a dominant role in decision-making. SEA has to recognize that "religious or magical behaviour or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct, particularly since even the ends of the religious and magical actions are predominantly economic" (Weber, 1978, p. 400).

Strictly speaking, there is no independent political theory in Islam. Everything related to governance falls within the domain of religion (Payne & Nassar, 2008). Through the interface with power, Islam was always regarded as a political religion or as religio-political, as made manifest in a broad variety of forms. Additionally, as a religio-political phenomenon it is argued that Islam affects, shapes or is responsive to any number of contemporary political issues. These include gender, the environment, economy, conflict, the search for peace, local politics, human rights, anti-globalization and so on (Milton-Edwards, 2004). And SEA can be included here. Therefore, the integral relation in Islam between religion and politics has meant that almost any social or political event becomes a 'religious issue' and refers to the normative ideal of Islam (Esposito, 1984). As Lee (2010) states, religion is part of the political culture everywhere, in regard to pluralism in Iran, but Islamism has more power in comparision with other political cultures because Islam was the ideology of the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

After the establishment of the new state, there was a strong move to Islamicise everything from cultural norms to the approach to the natural environment in accordance with Islamic culture, and injunctions such as Islamisation of knowledge[12]. Recognition of this debate within the Islamisation of knowledge is important to this paper because it provides a framework for alternative models of Islamic decision making, which suggests an Islamic approach to SEA (ISEA). Foucault states that the systems of knowledge and power plays a dominant role in shaping our culture (Bernauer, 2004) and one of his core concerns was the relationship between knowledge and power: his work reveals how the ways we come to understand the world is shaped by power relations. He points out that knowledge cannot be considered in isolation from power and "that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge" (Foucault, 1979, p. 27).

This requires a fundamental rethinking of the tools that generate 'knowledge', such as SEA (Richardson, 2005). Based on work by Foucault (1979) , Dirks et al. (1994) and Richardson (2005) we observe that power produces knowledge while itself is a knowledge construct, and power produces culture while itself is a cultural construct. Such circularity needs to inform the critique of SEA, as power produces tools such as SEA for assessing the policies, plans and programs which in turn produces a particular type of knowledge. Introducing an external process such as SEA can challenge the existing power structure. This can result in the need to control SEA. This could also result in producing a dominant ideology for using SEA as can be seen in the process of Islamisation of knowledge.

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[11] See for example Giddens (1984)

[12] See for example ai'Alwãríi (1995); Fazeli (2006)

The above discussion forms the basis for considering an alternative model of SEA, an ISEA that addresses the relationship of power, religion, knowledge and culture in the Islamic State. This is explored further in the following sections.
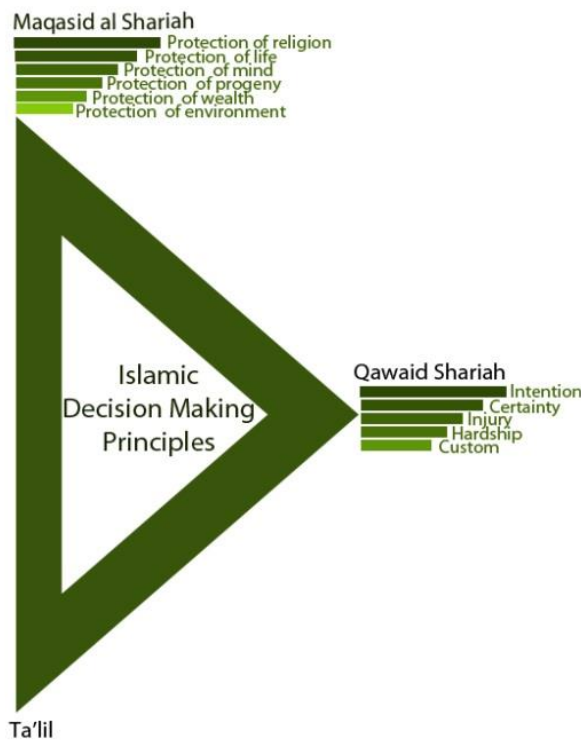
3. Islamic decision-making and Islamisation of knowledge

There are three parts to Islamic decision-making These are Maqasid al Shariah, Qawaid Shariah, and Ta'lil (Ali Akhmad & Rosita, 2012). Maqasid al Shariah means the purpose of the Rule in Islam; that is, the Rule is to protect morality and religious spirituality (ad-din) in relation to The Creator. Qawaid Shariah means the enacted rules in Islam. Ta'lil is a Qiyas method and constitutes the fourth major source of Islamic law. While the Qur'an, Sunnah and, to an extent, consensus (Ijma) of the scholarly community represent a fixed body of textual material providing the fundamental rules of the Shariah, Qiyas is indispensable for extending the basic rules and logic of the Shariah to unprecedented cases and, also includes reasoning based on an analogous situation as a starting point, based on 'Illat law.

This structure can be represented as a triangular framework (Fig. 2). The components of each are shown in the diagram. They are in their order of priority as expressed in the Qur'an.

Figure 2: Islamic decision-making[13]

As can be seen in the triangular framework, protection of environment and custom which are the main principles of SEA are the lowest priorities in Maqasid al Shariah and Qawaid Shariah respectively. Therefore the construction of culturally sensitive SEA methodology may become a vexed issue owing to this conflict between religious and environmental interests. Furthermore, not only does the SEA methodology need to be culturally sensitive, but it must mediate the clash of interests between developmental, religious and environmental interests.

This is where Althusser's (1971 cited in Smith & Riley(2009) op cit) theory of subjectivity and the Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs may be pertinent. This suggests that ideology works through state institutions to interpellate (locate, construct) people in subject positions. Along with these come the illusion of freedom and misrecognition of the true, objective nature of self and society. People, including the actors involved in SEA, are unaware of the structuring power of Islam in Theocratic countries. Therefore, this process, including efforts to Islamicise everything, even knowledge, enables this power system to be entrenched by preventing awareness and critical thinking. Arguably this approach of Islamisation protects and reproduces power by using hegemonies of thought.

An outcome could be the protection of Islam but the continuing loss of environmental values, and by association, human health and well-being. As an example, there is strong evidence of human health impacts resulting from pollution. One senior government researcher notes confidentially there will be a 'tsunami of children's cancer' because of pollution in Tehran, and one news site claims the government is aware of the situation but does not want to paint a black picture (Ramezanzadeh, 2014). The desire to minimise such

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[13] Source: Author's image based on Ahmad (1975); Al-Faruqi (1995); Ali Akhmad and Rosita (2012); Delcambre (2005); Derrida, Cherif, Fagan, and Borradori (2008); El-Tobgui (2000); Farah (1994); Guessoum (2011); Marranci (2008); Milton-Edwards (2004); Muhammad Maroof and Shah (2007); Murata and Chittick (1996); Nasr (1978, 2012); Qutb (1997); Ridgeon (2003); Shabbir and Akhtar (2008); Souryal (1987); Tabatabae (2002); Tamney (1980); Umar (1999); Wikipedia (2012a, 2012b)

negative messages is hardly unique to Iran, but a formalised hierarchy minimising environmental and customary values seemingly creates a burden that undermines the purpose of SEA.

4. A new perspective/posture for SEA

An emerging perspective for SEA promotes a greater recognition of the need to study the complex relations between SEA and cultural contexts. The complexity arises because while SEA can be perceived as an objective, generic, non-place and time specific, supra-cultural process, it is in fact a product of a set of cultural values applied at a particular place and time. That SEA evolves and adapts to particular circumstances is not news to practitioners. However, the process takes on new dimensions in an Islamic state.

The SEA process can challenge accepted cultural norms. This is why we argue for the *culturisation* approach of Young (2008) which aims for a "reflexive, critical, and ethical use and interrogation of culture" (Young, 2008b, p. 9). It is in contrast to the trend to "culturalisation"[14]. Culturisation of SEA does not mean adapting SEA to the cultural context, but rather identifying the principles and goals of SEA and finding ways to improve implementation when there is a discrepancy with the Western version of SEA.

Of course, this privileges Western concepts of SEA, and raises associated accusations of post-colonial hegemony. However, the concept of culturisation describes "a more positive positioning for governance" (Young, 2013, p. 394). Young's work concerns urban and strategic planning but he suggests the concept has applications elsewhere. SEA is one field which, *prima facie*, fits within the frame articulated by Young.

The culturisation of SEA takes up three key points from Young's application of culturisation to spatial and strategic planning (Young, 2008b, p. 166). The proposed model would focus on (a) significant principles for culture in regard to SEA; (b) five key literacies (strategic literacy, ethical literacy, cultural literacy, SEA relic literacy and holistic dimension of SEA literacy) ; and (c) an integrated approach to culture and research. The model integrates "Lefebvre's formal ontology of culture" with "Williams's anthropological approach to a way of life" (Young, 2013, p. 397). The aim is to explore whether and how this model might contribute to reforming and optimising SEA practice in an Islamic state. This will be the subject of on-going research.

5. Conclusion

Debate over the shortcomings in strategic environmental assessment theory and practice will be better informed by developing a more robust model of the influence of culture in forming and applying SEA. A culturisation model is proposed. The significant characteristics of this culturisation method, previously applied to urban planning by Young (2005, 2008) are: a) its flexibility; b) its *prima facie* relevance to SEA at all levels; and c) its applicability to the policy, planning and decision making setting of countries with a distinctive cultural character not allied to Western traditions, such as Islam. For the optimal utilization of this method it should be facilitated by an awareness of cultural principles relevant to SEA, and five key literacies including strategic literacy, ethical literacy, cultural literacy, SEA relic literacy and holistic dimension of SEA literacy.

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[14] Scott (2000) defines culturalisation as a double process in which culture becomes more of a commodity at the same time as commodities themselves acquire greater cultural and symbolic content. The trend also affects organisational life (Castells, 2009; Lash & Urry, 1994; Leadbeater, 2000) and technical processes such as SEA which can reflect higher levels of culturalisation.

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