

***The “Culture Concept” in the Writings of Edward T. Hall**

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Cross-cultural understanding, cultural anthropology, cultural differences, cultural diversity, Edward T. Hall, Japan, Japanese culture

——抄訳——

この小論文は、つぎの二つの要因：(1) 日本文化に関する一人のアメリカ人の見解として、著者が16年間におよび日本での生活と仕事を通しての経験と、(2) 文化人類学者エドワード・T・ホールの著書の中の幾つかの重要な概念の考察に基づき、「文化」について論じるものである。ホールの概念を説明するために、著者はホールの考えに基きながら次の4つの重要な概念について論じる：

- 1) 「文化はコミュニケーションである」、すなわち、ある特定の文化に存在するあらゆるものは“メッセージ”を持っていると見なされるが、ネイティブ（現地人、その地に生まれ育った人々）、すなわちその文化に精通している人達だけが、如何にそのメッセージを正しく読解したり、反応したらよ

* This paper is adapted from a speech originally given in Japanese by the author on July 8, 1998 to Members of the Aoi Club of I. T. C. (International Training in Communication).

いかを知っている。

- 2) 文化の 90 %は“無意識”に作用している。それは話し手が聞き手に近づき過ぎると、かえって聞き手を後退させてしまうように、人々は自分の行動、あるいは、その行動が他の人々に与えている影響について意図的に認識しようとしない。「なぜ」そのように行動するのか、人々にとって説明するのは難しいことである。
- 3) 文化は「学習された行動」であり、それだけで「根本的な人間性」の定義を信用するものではない。自分の行動と比較して、他の文化の人々の行動は一風変わっているとか、あるいは不自然であると考えより、“どんなことでもあり得る”と考えたほうが良いようである。
- 4) 「外国を旅行」すると「外国の文化」に出会う。その時、私達は「無意識」のうちに外国文化を体験している。そこで、私達は、無意識に「反射的」に急いで反応したりしないように、また、判断したりしないように注意しなければならない。要するに、旅行者は異文化に対してある程度の「客観性」を持つべきである。

In this paper I discuss some of the insights into cross-cultural understanding that I have gained from two sources: one source is my own personal experience of living and working in Japan for the past 16 years. The other source are the writings of the highly-respected cultural anthropologist, Edward T. Hall. I do not consider myself to be an expert on “culture”, Japanese, American or any other. For this reason, I must rely on the insights of someone who is an expert, namely, Edward T. Hall.

First, I will focus on some of the cultural differences I have noticed from my long experience of living in Japan. I often tell Americans who are newly come to Japan or those who are planning on visiting, to be careful not to assume, from first impressions, that Japan is like America. It is very easy to make this mistake, because,

on the surface, there is much about Japan that is very similar.

For example, when driving at night on a major Japanese highway, like the Tomei Expressway, except for the appearance of *kanji* (Chinese characters) on the highway signs and the fact that one drives on the left side of the road, one can easily imagine one is driving on an American highway, so similarly are they constructed.

When I first came to Japan, my strongest first impressions were of those things which I found to be highly similar, if not exactly the same as in America: styrofoam cups, boxes of "Kleenex tissue", vending machines, and all of the many other "conveniences" of modern technological societies. Little-by-little, my awareness began to focus on things that were different from what I had known in America--at first, these were things which affected my physical comfort or well-being in quite a direct way, such as the lack of central heating in Japanese homes, which requires people to make use of a large variety of heating devices, which were totally unfamiliar to me at that time. I can hardly begin to convey my surprise when, one chilly winter night, my Japanese hostess supplied me with a "bed-warmer" which contained burning charcoal! The very idea of putting something which was on fire into my bed struck me as fantastic and quite odd!

How does this relate to culture differences? Well, for one thing, I believe Japanese children are purposely conditioned to endure low temperatures. Although the Japanese language does have the phrase *samugari no hito* (i. e., a person who has low tolerance for cold), most Japanese people I know have a much higher tolerance for low temperatures than do most Americans, who are used to the comforts of central heating, electric blankets, etc. In fact, few American mothers would even think to allow their young child to go outside in short pants when the temperature drops below 5 degrees C (41 degrees F), but, here in Japan, young children are expected to wear shorts in such weather and to tolerate the cold. Thus, even when they are adults, they will not mind so much living in houses that lack central heating! There is much that, as an American, I find physically uncomfortable or frustrating about

living in Japan, but I have remained here for so long because I truly enjoy and admire Japanese people. They are very pleasant to work with, and I have many good Japanese friends.

I think I can safely say that most Americans are surprised by the degree of “conformity” and “uniformity” in Japanese culture. “The nail which sticks up gets hammered down!” does seem to refer to many aspects of Japanese culture, such as school uniforms, the preference for white cars, the choice of the same food for co-diners in restaurants, etc. Here I can relate a rather striking example from my own experience. Some years ago, I was the “guest teacher” at a company-sponsored “overnight English workshop” held in one of the company's facilities designed for this purpose. That night I was to share a large “tatami--mat” room with 5 of the students. Shortly before bedtime, I was surprised to notice that the maid had neatly laid out everyone's futon in such a way that the pillows were all placed at the same end. For some reason, perhaps quite unconsciously, I decided that I would be more comfortable if my pillow were to be placed on the opposite end of the futon, so this is what I casually did. When the students joined me in the room, they immediately noticed what I had done and earnestly asked me my reason for doing so. I told them there was no important reason other than that I simply thought I could sleep better that way, and then I left the room to go brush my teeth. When I returned, I saw, to my great surprise, that all the pillows were now aligned with mine in the new direction!!! This experience helped me to better understand how strong the Japanese preference for conformity is. Had this been an American “pajama party”, the bed-clothes would have been lying every-which-way with no order whatsoever and everyone blissfully asleep in their individually preferred direction! But while it is true that Japanese people put great stock and value in conformity and placing the group needs above those of the individual, nevertheless, every Japanese person I have ever met is still a highly unique individual, with a unique personality, manner, interests, etc.

One of the greatest differences I find between Japanese people and Americans has to do with their approach to problem solving in groups. Most Americans feel that it is very important for a person to have and to publicly express strong opinions on any given issue. Japanese people, while having such strong opinions, appear to be quite reluctant to express them publicly, perhaps for fear of hurting other people's feelings, or of appearing to be aggressive, headstrong, or simply, too individualistic. Thus, while Americans think it only natural that people should "agree to disagree" with one another, Japanese people try very hard to avoid direct confrontation and to maintain a sense of harmonious "agreement", even when the truth of their thoughts and feelings may be otherwise. This inevitably leads to the manifestations of *tatemae* (the way things "appear to be" according to consensus) and *honne* (the way things really are, "beyond appearances" or "official stories"), concepts which are very important to understanding Japanese social relations. Americans, while capable of understanding the difference between *tatemae* and *honne*, try hard, in most cases, to avoid such a dichotomy and to state their true opinions as clearly as possible. Thus arises the stereotype of Americans as being quite "frank" and "open", but also, possibly, a bit "shallow".

In a public discussion regarding how to solve a particular problem, Americans get "straight to the point", and after a brief round of discussion in which everyone has expressed their individual opinions, a polling by "vote of hands" or the voicing of "yea or nay" for or against a proposed solution is taken, with the understanding that "the majority rules". How different this is from the Japanese way! Here one finds a very different approach, one which Americans might sarcastically call "beating around the bush". Rather than focus their attention on the main point, in order to come to a quick resolution, Japanese people will take as long as necessary to discuss everything they can think of which might have some bearing on the problem, however slight and tangential, and in a non-linear fashion, skipping back and forth between topics. Many minutes or hours later, the discussion leader, often a person of

some authority, will summarize the discussion, including what he believes to be the general consensus regarding the solution to the problem. In a formal meeting, where an official decision must be made, the leader will, after his summary, ask for approval of the solution as he has summarized it, and if there is a moment of prolonged silence, without anyone venturing to add anything further, the decision is regarded as approved! Needless-to-say, as an American, I find it quite difficult to be patient with this approach.

Once, I attended a meeting in which, surprisingly, a decision about a certain matter was reached rather quickly. But, as not everyone who was concerned had been present when the preliminary discussion took place, we were required to remain until they arrived, and then to repeat everything that was said in their absence, allowing them a chance to voice their opinions and ideas. Nothing new, to my awareness, was added by the newcomers, but now that we were altogether as a group and the discussion leader was reluctant to bring the meeting to a close, the meeting continued with no particular purpose, the main business of the meeting having been concluded. It was growing quite late in the afternoon, and my heart sank when one of the members left the room, and returned shortly with a plate of snacks. Another hour passed, and it seemed as if the meeting would never end! I found myself becoming quite angry and frustrated, although I tried hard not to show it. What I did, instead, was to decide that, if the meeting continued until 7 PM., (fully 4 hours after it had begun!) I would stand up, politely excuse myself to the leader and other members, and simply leave the room. And, when the second hand on my watch indicated 7 o' clock, this is exactly what I did. But what happened next came as a complete surprise to me : as I was making my way to the door, eager to get on the other side of it, all of the other members quickly stood up and followed me out of the room, leaving the leader hastily making some obligatory remarks about the meeting being officially over!

What had I done! I was afraid that I had committed a grave social error! How-

ever, the next day, when I apologized in private to several of the other members, again to my surprise, they thanked me for taking the first move! Because of their respect for the authority of the leader and for proper social decorum, they had literally been "stuck" in the situation, and were not able, as individuals, to take action. My sudden leaving had served as a "catalyst", and they simply followed my lead!

As part of my work at the university, it is my job to bring small groups of students to America for homestays and English language training. This gives me a unique opportunity to observe their reactions to American culture. One day I returned from a walk to find three young women in my group sitting on the grass in front of the college dormitory where we were staying. I asked them: "So, what do you think about America?" One of them replied: "It's great! I truly feel free here". I was puzzled, so I said: "What do you mean? Please give me an example". She said: "Well, like this, just sitting here on the grass." I replied: "You could easily sit on the grass in Japan, couldn't you". Her answer to this question was most significant: "Yes, but in Japan, everyone would stare at us and think we were doing something strange. Here, in America, nobody looks at us! Nobody seems to care about it!" Most Americans believe and act as if, as is written in the "Declaration of Independence" they have the "god-given rights" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", so sitting on the grass, unless expressly forbidden, is hardly going to cause anyone to get excited or upset!

Another amusing incident occurred when, just after a brief rainstorm, I pointed up to the sky and pointed out a rainbow to one of my students. "Oh, a rainbow!", she said. Her next question surprised me: "How many colors do American rainbows have? Japanese rainbows have 7 colors!" I said that I thought all rainbows had the same number of colors, 7 to be exact! And she replied: "No, rainbows in some countries only have 5 or even fewer colors". This remark led me to wonder about the quality of basic science education at the schools she had attended, but also to

detect a hint of “cultural chauvinism”, i. e., the belief that “one's own culture is superior to every other!”.

Perhaps one of the funniest remarks I have ever heard came from an adult who had just returned to Japan from his first visit to a foreign country. I asked him to tell me what his very first impression was when he stepped off the airplane onto “foreign soil”. He said his first impression was : *Koko dewa gaijin-san ga oi, naa!* (“There certainly are a lot of ‘foreigners’, i. e., non-Japanese, here!”). When he said this, we both laughed out loud! I think Edward T. Hall would also have found this remark to be quite funny, but readily understandable!

Formerly a professor of anthropology at various universities in America, Hall now works as a consultant to both government and industry, and his services are in high demand precisely because of his expertise and his deep insight into what culture is and how it operates. Hall deserves credit for having been one of the first people to give an objective definition of the word “culture”, or as he puts it, “the culture concept” and by doing so, to have laid the scientific foundation for the important field of study known as “cultural anthropology”. Most fortunately, Hall has written a number of very important books on the subject of “culture”, so for those who are interested in gaining an insight into the true meaning and complexity of “culture”, I highly recommend Hall's writings--they have been translated into many different languages, including Japanese (see 文献目録 at the end of paper).

While I regret that time does not permit me to go into Hall's ideas as deeply as they and the subject matter of “culture” deserve, I will try to illustrate some of his basic ideas, which I find to be extremely helpful in understanding the subject of “culture”.

Perhaps the most fundamental of Hall's insights into culture is that “culture is communication”.¹⁾ Hall points out, however, that this “... single world of communication (is divided) into two parts: words and behavior (verbal and nonverbal), (with) (words), representing perhaps 10 percent of the total... (and) behavior...

(representing) the other 90 percent" ²⁾ It is helpful here to employ the metaphor of the "iceberg", of which only 10 percent is said to be "visible above the waterline", with the great bulk of it "invisible" below the waterline. In the title of one of his earlier books, Hall refers to this "invisible" 90 percent of culture as *The Silent Language*. It is "silent" not only because it is "nonverbal", but because it operates in and on our lives mostly on an "unconscious" level, that is to say, beyond our normal awareness or our ability to notice and to "verbalize" it.

More specifically, Hall deals at great length with the extremely varied ways people of different cultures relate to and use "time" and "space" as aspects of the "silent language" or "hidden dimension" of culture. Hall gives the example of an American attache who paid a courtesy call to the minister of agriculture of a Latin country :

... Arriving a little before the hour (the American respect pattern), he waited. The hour came and passed, five minutes--ten minutes--fifteen minutes. At this point he suggested to the secretary that perhaps the minister did not know he was waiting in the outer office. This gave him the feeling he had done something concrete and also helped him to overcome the great anxiety that was stirring inside him. Twenty minutes--twenty-five minutes--thirty minutes--forty-five minutes (the insult period) !

He jumped up and told the secretary that he had been 'cooling his heels' in an outer office for forty-five minutes and he was 'damned sick and tired' of this type of treatment. This message was relayed to the minister, who said, in effect, 'Let him cool his heels'. The attache's stay in the country was not a happy one. ³⁾

As Hall explains,

The principal source of misunderstanding lay in the fact that in the country in question, the five-minute-delay interval was not significant. Forty-five minutes, on the other hand, instead of being at

the tail end of the waiting scale, was just barely at the beginning.

Hall continues :

Throughout this unfortunate episode the attache was acting according to the way he had been brought up. At home in the United States his responses would have been normal ones and his behavior legitimate. Yet, even if he had been told before he left home that this sort of thing would happen, he would have had difficulty not feeling insulted after he had been kept waiting forty-five minutes. If, on the other hand, he had been taught the details of the local time system just as he should have been taught the local spoken language, it would have been possible for him to adjust himself accordingly. ⁴⁾

But, if there is truth in the idea that "Experience is the best teacher!", then the paradox arises that, in order to learn "the details of the local time system", as Hall suggests, it would be necessary to do so by actually living in the country, and it is just in such a situation that a person is likely to experience such inappropriate and uncomfortable reactions as those exhibited by the American attache. Nevertheless, those whose jobs involve encounters with a foreign culture may not be able to afford the cost of "ignorance" of the local customs and cultural ways!

As I mentioned previously, Hall also looks closely at the different ways people use "space" in various cultures. The study of space as it influences human behavior is called "proxemics", and Hall is given credit for inventing this word in the Random House Unabridged Dictionary of English. "Proxemics" is defined as: "... the study of the symbolic and communicative role in a culture of spatial arrangements and variations in distance, as in how far apart individuals engaged in conversation stand depending on the degree of intimacy between them." ⁵⁾

Hall writes :

Spatial changes give a tone to a communication, accent it, and at times even override the spoken word.

The flow and shift of distance between people as they interact with each other is part and parcel of the communication process. The normal conversation distance between strangers illustrates how important are the dynamics of space interaction. If a person gets too close, the reaction is instantaneous and automatic--the other person backs up. And if they get too close again, back we go again. I have observed an American backing up the entire length of a long corridor while a foreigner whom he considers pushy tries to catch up with him. This scene has been enacted endlessly--one person trying to increase the distance in order to be at ease, while the other tries to decrease it for the same reason, *neither being aware of what was going on*. We have here an example of the tremendous depth to which culture can condition behavior. ⁶⁾ (Italics mine).

I am sure you can imagine similar examples of how people of different cultures handle time and space in ways very different from your own. The point here is that we must be not only be aware of these differences, but that we should refrain from judging them as being in some way "primitive" or "inferior" to our own ways, i. e., to recognize that they are simply "different", but equally as valid as our own, and that they play just as fundamental a role in those cultures as our ways do in our own culture.

Unfortunately, simply knowing that "things are done differently" in a different culture may not be enough to protect us from reacting inappropriately when we are actually faced with the reality. The reason for this is that when we visit a foreign country and are forced by circumstances to interact with the native people there, our reactions to them and to their treatment of us will depend, in large part, Hall insists, on just those aspects of our own culture of which we are "unaware", and of which we are largely "unconscious".

Finally, with regard to Hall's ideas, allow me to quote one more example, having

to do not with “time” and “space”, but with the another basic aspect of human culture, namely, “bisexuality”. Hall writes :

In Iran, once encounters (a) variation... of bisexuality. Men are expected to show their emotions.... If they don't, Iranians suspect they are lacking a vital human trait and are not dependable. Iranian men read poetry ; they are sensitive and have well-developed intuition and in many cases are not expected to be too logical. They are often seen embracing and holding hands. Women, on the other hand, are considered to be coldly practical. They exhibit many of the characteristics associated with men in the United States. A very perceptive Foreign Service officer who had spent a number of years in Iran once observed, ‘If you will think of the emotional and intellectual sex roles as reversed from ours, you will do much better out here.’ ”⁷

As with the previous examples about “time” and “space”, it is easy to imagine other, similar examples of great cultural diversity with regards to “bisexuality”. With regard to the men of Iran, Hall continues :

Remarks like this come as a shock to many people, because almost everyone has difficulty believing that behavior they have always associated with “human nature” is not human nature at all but *learned behavior* of a particularly complex variety. Possibly one of the many reasons why the culture concept has been resisted is that it throws doubts on many established beliefs. Fundamental beliefs like our concepts of masculinity and femininity are shown to vary widely from one culture to the next. It is easier to avoid the idea of the culture concept than to face up to it. ⁸ (Italics mine).

The “culture concept” which Hall refers to here implies the realization that everything which we take for granted as being “normal”, based on our limited experience of our own culture, everything we have been taught to believe is “fundamental human

nature" or "fundamental human behavior" is not to be trusted when we are faced with a culture different from our own! While this realization may, at first, cause us great anxiety, if we are able to embrace it fully, both intellectually and emotionally, or, in Hall's words, if we can "face up to the culture concept", we will begin to have a vision of the fantastic variety, complexity and richness of human behavior as exhibited in different cultures. If we are to make any progress in settling conflicts between peoples of different cultures and in achieving a more peaceful world, we must, I believe, begin here, by recognizing and celebrating the diversity of human culture.

To summarize the "lessons" gained from Edward T. Hall's study of culture, the following points are important to remember :

- 1) "Culture is communication" --that is to say, everything one finds in a particular culture can be viewed as having a "message", but only those people intimately familiar with the culture, primarily the so-called "natives", will know how to correctly read and appropriately react to the message!
- 2) 90% of culture operates on an "unconscious" level. It is very difficult for people to explain "why" they behave as they do ; they may not even be consciously aware of their behavior or of it's effects on others, as in the example of the speaker who comes too close to the listener, thereby causing the listener to "back up".
- 3) Culture is "learned behavior", and, as such, there is no trustworthy definition of "fundamental human nature" ! It is better to think that "anything is possible", rather than to think that the behavior of people in other cultures is strange and/or unnatural when compared with that of people like oneself.
- 4) When we encounter a "foreign culture" in our travels in "foreign countries", we should be aware that our experience of that culture will be largely based on our own, "unconscious" cultural conditioning, so we should be careful not to react hastily or judgementally on the basis of an unconscious "reflex"! Doing so might get us into trouble, as in the case of the attache who got angry when kept

waiting in the outer office. In short, the traveller should adopt a certain degree of non-judgemental “objectivity” towards the different culture.

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