Cultural Interactions

Conflict and Cooperation

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Part 2   Cultural Selves

Acknowledgments

This book was conceived in the years 2016-2021 and written in the course of the years 2020-2021. It is a COVID-19 book in the sense that it is based on the podcasts that I started to make when all teaching had to go online for a second year BA course in the Leiden University Department of International Studies in The Hague. Podcasts cannot be too long, so there were two of them for each session. The very genre of podcasting provoked me to think of music, and the music in turn provoked me to think about why I would choose to relate a specific session, and its content, with this or that piece. The COVID-19 years certainly had their effects on content, but equally strongly provoked a host of questions on form(s). It is hard to say 'thank you' to the circumstances that formally changed the format of this book, but at least it needs to be acknowledged.

I was helped in writing this book by comments by or conversations with especially young colleagues working on similar issues, all with their own expertise. I am grateful to Gerlov van Engelenhoven (especially), Aida Gholami, Zeynep Gültekin, Andries Hiskes, Yasco Horsman, Bram Ieven, Looi van Kessel, Adam Marcus Patterson, Sara Polak, Miriam Retter, Renee Turner, and Tessa de Zeeuw. The Department of International Studies in The Hague was helpful and generous in giving me the chance and the time to develop this course, as well as by providing me with input into the process. Here, I want to thank Joost Augusteijn, Paula Esteves dos Santos Jordão, Jaap Kamphuis, and Tim de Zeeuw.

Then there is the more general intellectual climate where issues dealt with in this book would pass or be considered within a variety of meetings, where we were thinking and talking or, perhaps more importantly, I was listening. In this context I would like to thank the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society and its director, Sybille Lammes. Other colleagues who were of importance in making this book, in the present or the past, are Nuno Atalaia, Maria Boletsi, Thomas Bragdon, Cui Chen, Kai-wen Chiu, Maghiel van Crevel, Esther Edelmann, Kornee van der Haven, Gert Jan Hofstede, Isabel Hoving, Yasco Horsman, Nancy Jouwe, Çağlar Köseoğlu, Inger Leemans, Liesbeth Minnaard, Greta Olson, Sara Polak, Shailoh Philips, Aafje de Roest, Dorine Schellens, Mineke Schipper, Nanne Timmer, Berrie Vugts, Astrid van Weyenberg, and Kitty Zijlmans. I thank Oscar Man, Lucy McGourty, Margo de Koning and the AUP editor for their editing. Mistakes remain mine.

Unlike my previously published monographs, this book was prepared in only a very small part by lectures delivered at conferences or seminars, or articles published in journals. It was developed fully in the context of teaching. The number of students to acknowledge is too big, but I thank all those who approached me with questions of clarification, issues of interest, suggestions, straightforward provocations (during the break of a lecture: 'Why is culture important?'), requests for expansion, and all other forms of either negative or positive criticism. Luckily, the latter substantially outweighed the former. I can say this differently: I thank the majority of students for their commitments.

Preamble: On a Musical Note

Australian magpie[1]

Let us start this introduction with listening – to a bird: the Australian magpie. Considering its sounds as 'singing' or 'music' is an anthropomorphism, with 'anthropomorphism' indicating that people give names to things so as to place them in their own lifeworld, or to 'morph' them according to a human logic. Scholarly speaking – so not spiritually, an issue to which we will come back – the bird, in making its organized sounds, is not communicating with humans. It is sending out something, and listening to what comes back, from its own kind. Biologically speaking, this is clear. Culturally speaking, it is more complicated, for the study of culture implies the study of expression.

1   Wild Ambience, 'Australian Magpie: Song & Calls'.

With regard to this, and in terms of interaction, the question is twofold: do magpies have culture as a result of which they express things that can be understood and learned, also through generations, by members of their own species? And can this exchange of expressions then also be meaningful to others, like other magpie species, or a host of other ones, including the human species?

In what follows, when focusing on cultural interactions, we will start with humans and their cultural interactions. Yet at the end of the explorations, we will also come to consider animal cultures, and technological ones. We do so to counter a too self-evident domination of anthropomorphism. If people define a bird's sounds as 'singing' or as 'music', this is an anthropomorphism. When people describe such 'singing' as a matter of 'competition' or as the marking of a territory, this is an anthropomorphism as well, since the very definition of 'territory' is a human one. Or, to give a third example: the mirror test is yet one other anthropomorphic way of defining whether other beings have a sense of self. Only a small number of species appear to be capable of recognizing themselves in a mirror: chimpanzees, orang-utans, bonobos, Asian elephants, dolphins – and magpies. Yet why would the human mirror be the universal marker of self-recognition or of a sense of self? Suppose that octopuses were the self-proclaimed rulers of the planet. Consequently, they might turn the world into an 'octopomorphic' one. Studying human beings, octopus scholars would ask whether human arms, hands, legs, or feet have their own independent forms of intelligence and agency, for this would be analogous to the intelligence of an octopus. In the perception of octopuses, humans would be limited, if not handicapped, animals: they appear to have a centre of intelligence only in their heads! Recent octopus research even suggests that human beings need a mirror to recognize themselves as a self. Human beings also cannot change the colours and structures of their skin, by the way. They appear to make up for this incapacity by constructing artificial, colourful things with which they cover their skin.

If we come to consider cultural interactions in relation to humans first, and then to animal cultures and the technological ones, this can only be done systematically on the basis of a definition of culture that makes the transition between the three possible. And as the scholarly history of the study of culture proves, it is notoriously difficult to formulate an adequate definition of such a common thing as culture. For instance, a popular study on cultural differences, especially in the world of business – Erin Meyer's *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business* (2014) – marks cross-cultural interaction on the basis of eight dominant aspects of cultural habits. These concern, for instance, how people

communicate (explicitly vs. implicitly) or evaluate (direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback), how they lead (egalitarian vs. hierarchical), or how they disagree (confrontational vs. avoiding confrontation). Yet Meyer's study does not *define* what is meant by culture.

Another example: in *Understanding Culture: A Handbook for Students in the Humanities*, Babette Hellemans defines culture as 'the sum of the collective **representations** associated with a particular society'.[2] This is a definition, for sure, but one problem here is that culture appears to be something that 'is associated with'. This implies that it can only be assessed from some sort of outside, namely by actors who do the associating. Secondly, culture appears to mark a society. Of course, we should ask what is meant by 'society', then, but the equation of culture with society is in any case a controversial one. In what follows, we will not consider culture to be equivalent to a society. On the contrary, a society may host many cultures (cf. Chapter 4). Finally, we will argue that culture is more than the total sum of collective representations. We will surely deal with the force in representations, but also move beyond them in an attempt to come up with a concise definition of culture as something that people do not only have or use, or associate themselves with, but that they embody and *live* (cf. Chapter 1).

One of the reasons for the difficulty to define culture may be that culture is generally dealt with on the basis of two different manifestations. On the one hand, culture indicates the entire set of practices, expressions, and artefacts by which people organize their lifeworlds. This mode of culture is involved, for example, when people speak of 'Japanese culture', or 'Tapirapé culture' – the culture of one of the indigenous peoples living in Brazil. As the two examples illustrate, scale is not decisive for culture, for we just compared a culture of approximately 126.5 million people with one that currently consists of about two hundred. On the other hand, culture is often used to indicate the entire set of artistic expressions produced by people in fields such as architecture, sculpture, music, literature, cinema, games, and so forth. The two are often distinguished by means of the use of the word 'culture' with a small 'c' and a capital 'C'.

The distinction between culture and Culture connotes a hierarchy that has come to be questioned more and more over the past six decades. One of the issues with this distinction was why, for instance, classical European music would be assigned a capital 'C' and pop music would not; why art house movies would, but by no means television series. Also, why would the

2   Hellemans, *Understanding Culture*, 18. Emphasis in original.

Ghanaian artist and ethnomusicologist Mustafa Tettey Addy be considered as a performer, whereas the French composer and bird watcher Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) would be blessed with the aura of the capital C, precisely due to his being regarded as a composer. Likewise, why would medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen's (1098-1179) construction of a secret language for her company of women be a matter of linguistics only, whereas her songs were art? We will return to the issue of cultural hierarchies in Chapters 5 and 8. For now the important point is that the relation between the two, culture and Culture, is pivotal in the field of the humanities for the *forms* that they may use, what these forms express, what such expressive forms can, or may mean; and how such expressions embody a mode of living.

With the heading of this study being 'conflict and cooperation', these two terms need to be defined as well. First of all, in many instances, c/Culture is considered to be a positive matter that brings people together. This is, for instance, what UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, tells us about culture:

> In today's interconnected world, culture's power to transform societies is clear. Its diverse manifestations – from our cherished historic monuments and museums to traditional practices and contemporary art forms – enrich our everyday lives in countless ways. Heritage constitutes a source of identity and cohesion for communities disrupted by bewildering change and economic instability. Creativity contributes to building open, inclusive and pluralistic societies. Both heritage and creativity lay the foundations for vibrant, innovative and prosperous knowledge societies.[3]

The quote not only entails a contradiction – culture is, on the one hand, a defence against 'bewildering change and economic instability', whereas, on the other hand, it lays the 'foundations for vibrant, innovative and prosperous knowledge societies' – but it also sketches a pretty rosy picture of what culture produces, especially when it is equated with creativity. If the creativity in culture is at the basis of 'open, inclusive, and pluralistic societies', there are as many examples where people have rather creatively produced societies that are, culturally speaking, closed, exclusive, and uniform. Many of the devastating conflicts that people were engaged in, or wilfully have engaged in, were propelled by culture.

We preserve the notion of conflict, in accordance with its etymological origin, for violent confrontations between people. Conflict goes back to

3   UNESCO, 'Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity'.

Latin *confligere*: 'to fight/strike with'. Conflict is different from friction here. Even open, inclusive, and pluralistic societies will brim with frictions. Such frictions can be productive, positive even. They can also be annoying. They may lead to conflict, but not necessarily so.

As for cooperation, historically speaking, there has been much more inter-cultural cooperation than conflict. The reason is simple: people may wage war at times, but they always trade and exchange things, even in times of war. War is temporary, that is; trade and exchange are continuous. Sometimes trade even takes place between warring parties. Cooperation etymologically means 'to work together'. This can be, but need not be work as in modern labour. There are so many ways, also economically, in which people may work together. For instance, the cultural forms of knowledge and practices that women developed with regard to giving birth – also indicated by 'labour' – were developed within cultures but also developed through the help of cultural interactions.[4] One example: currently in Peru healthcare workers who were used to Western ways of giving birth managed to work together with indigenous pregnant women who wanted to give birth according to their customs: sitting upright, with a trusted or loved relative behind them and with a rope in front of them with knots to support themselves.[5] As may be clear, people have tendencies throughout history to mark other cultures as 'other' or 'less'. Nonetheless they have time and again also shown great interest in, or attention for others and other cultures. The human animal may be a pretty brutal one at times, but it is also an attentive and curious creature – or at least it can be.

The book was developed for a second year BA course in international studies. However, it can be useful for other courses, due to its systemic build-up. The book is divided into two blocks. In the first block, culture is studied respectively in terms of larger-scale forms of organization, or realms, such as culture itself, nation-state, world, society, civilization, and community (Chapters 1-6). In this block, culture is defined as such, and cultural interactions are studied for how they relate to politics, to the political, to economies, to affective economies, and to religion. In the second block, forms of self and selfhood are central. There, cultural interactions will be studied respectively in relation to notions of individuality, affiliation, comparability, disability, animality, and technology (Chapters 7-12).

4   See, for instance, Davis-Floyd and Sargent, *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge*. As for conflict, next to cooperation, one editor of this volume also worked on a volume in which the effects of economic or military violence on giving birth are central: Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*.
5   Gomez, 'Giving Birth Upright, with Maté'.

Developing the course and writing this book was a learning process in itself. Originally, I was trained in the domain of arts and culture – comparative literature and theory, specifically. My position at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society and at the Department of Film and Literary Studies was the result of this training. At the start of my teaching in The Hague, I tried to translate the knowledge developed in my fields of expertise to a body of students that by and large missed training in the arts and culture and were interested much more in the relevance of cultural dynamics and tensions in the force fields of international, sociopolitical, economic, or religious developments. As will become clear, works of art, literature, films, and music proved to be excellent guides in exploring these international dynamics. Still, I had to recalibrate, reorient, and explore new fields of research, also in response to rapidly developing, planetary developments that involved both human interactions and transhuman ones.

Nothing in what follows is decisive, or conclusive. Almost everything is a matter of scholarly debate, agreement, conversation, or rejection. This does not mean that anything goes. In fact, scholarly speaking, nothing goes. In a scholarly sense, matters only 'go' depending on substantive sensing, analyzing, reasoning, motivating, underpinning, choosing, agreeing, or disagreeing. With regard to the material offered in this text, many of the readers may agree with this or that, others with yet other points; few will agree with nothing. In the field of culture, it is impossible to have a neutral or objective position. Even if this text is an introduction, it is also political in the sense that time and again the question is not just what individuals choose for but also what collectives choose for. In a sense, this introduction is a provocation. It asks readers: what do you choose *for*? Choosing against something is also possible. In my assessment and politically speaking, choosing against something is, in the end, less forceful.

Every chapter consists of two parts that each start with a piece of music as a musical epigraph. The pieces can be either songs with text, or pieces without text. Readers are asked to listen to these before reading the chapter. The reason I wanted to involve music is that it may be the best way to avoid thinking about culture only in terms of 'meaning'. Cultures are as much a matter of rhythms, of choreographies, of movement, of sounds, of all the senses, of which there are more than five.[6] Studying culture is not only

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6   The Dutch psychiatrist Iris Sommer could easily get to eleven. To test her awareness, she decided to live for a year in Mumbai and the book on this experiment was called *De zeven zintuigen: Over waarnemen en onwaarnemen,* or *The Seven Senses: About Perception and Non Perception.*

something of the scholarly mind, that is. It is as much about sensuous and sensitive perceptiveness since culture is always embodied. Consequently, cultural scholarship that wants to make sense cannot be a matter of the mind only. Cultural knowledge is embodied and positioned knowledge by definition.