

. 9 .

Hidden Culture

Edward T. Hall

Edward T. Hall is an anthropologist best known for his work on intercultural communication. Hall maintains that humanity's survival depends, in large part, on people's ability to communicate across cultures. Standing in the way of successful communication, he suggests, is a lack of understanding of how our culture conditions us.

... I can think of few countries Americans are likely to visit and work in in significant numbers where it is more difficult to control one's inputs and where life is more filled with surprises than Japan. Clearly, the above observation does not apply to short visits and the like, because all over the world suitable environments have been created for tourists that shield them from the reality of the life of the people. Tourists seldom stick around for long, and they are happier insulated from the full impact of the foreign culture. Businessmen, educators, government officials, and Foreign Service personnel are something else again. It is to this group that my thoughts are directed, because they stand to gain the most from understanding cultural processes in living contexts. Understanding the reality of covert culture and accepting it on a gut level comes neither quickly nor easily, and it must be lived rather than read or reasoned. However, there are times when examples of what is experienced most intimately can illustrate certain basic patterns that are widely shared. The events described below are taken from my own experiences in Japan and with the Japanese in other countries, and are designed not only to illustrate differences between cultures but to provide a natural history of insights into the contexting process. For no matter how well prepared one is intellectually for immersion in

another culture, there is the inevitability of surprises.

A few years ago, I became involved in a sequence of events in Japan that completely mystified me, and only later did I learn how an overt act seen from the vantage point of one's own culture can have an entirely different meaning when looked at in the context of the foreign culture. I had been staying at a hotel in downtown Tokyo that had European as well as Japanese-type rooms. The clientele included a few Europeans but was predominantly Japanese. I had been a guest for about ten days and was returning to my room in the middle of an afternoon. Asking for my key at the desk, I took the elevator to my floor. Entering the room, I immediately sensed that something was wrong. Out of place. Different. I was in the wrong room! Someone else's things were distributed around the head of the bed and the table. Somebody else's toilet articles (those of a Japanese male) were in the bathroom. My first thoughts were, "What if I am discovered here? How do I explain my presence to a Japanese who may not even speak English?"

I was close to panic as I realized how incredibly territorial we in the West are. I checked my key again. Yes, it really was mine. Clearly they had moved somebody else into my room. But where was my room now? And where were my belongings? Baffled and mystified, I took

the elevator to the lobby. Why hadn't they told me at the desk, instead of letting me risk embarrassment and loss of face by being caught in somebody else's room? Why had they moved me in the first place? It was a nice room and, being sensitive to spaces and how they work, I was loath to give it up. After all, I had told them I would be in the hotel for almost a month. Why this business of moving me around like someone who has been squeezed in without a reservation? Nothing made sense.

At the desk I was told by the clerk, as he sucked in his breath in deference (and embarrassment?) that indeed they had moved me. My particular room had been reserved in advance by somebody else. I was given the key to my new room and discovered that all my personal effects were distributed around the new room almost as though I had done it myself. This produced a fleeting and strange feeling that maybe I wasn't myself. How could somebody else do all those hundred and one little things just the way I did?

Three days later, I was moved again, but this time I was prepared. There was no shock, just the simple realization that I had been moved and that it would now be doubly difficult for friends who had my old room number to reach me. *Tant pis*,¹ I was in Japan. One thing did puzzle me. Earlier, when I had stayed at Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel for several weeks, nothing like this had ever happened. What was different? What had changed? Eventually I got used to being moved and would even ask on my return each day whether I was still in the same room. . . .

[Later] we visited Kyoto, site of many famous temples and palaces, and the ancient capital of Japan. There we were fortunate enough to stay in a wonderful little country inn on the side of a hill overlooking the town. Kyoto is much more traditional and less indus-

trialized than Tokyo. After we had been there about a week and had thoroughly settled into our new Japanese surroundings, we returned one night to be met at the door by an apologetic manager who was stammering something. I knew immediately that we had been moved, so I said, "You had to move us. Please don't let this bother you, because we understand. Just show us to our new rooms and it will be all right." Our interpreter explained as we started to go through the door that we weren't in that hotel any longer but had been moved to *another* hotel. What a blow! Again, without warning. We wondered what the new hotel would be like, and with our descent into the town our hearts sank further. Finally, when we could descend no more, the taxi took off into a part of the city we hadn't seen before. No Europeans here! The streets got narrower and narrower until we turned into a side street that could barely accommodate the tiny Japanese taxi into which we were squeezed. Clearly this was a hotel of another class. I found that, by then, I was getting a little paranoid, which is easy enough to do in a foreign land, and said to myself, "They must think we are very low-status people indeed to treat us this way."

As it turned out, the neighborhood, in fact the whole district, showed us an entirely different side of life from what we had seen before, much more interesting and authentic. True, we did have some communication problems, because no one was used to dealing with foreigners, but few of them were serious.

Yet, the whole matter of being moved like a piece of derelict luggage puzzled me. In the United States, the person who gets moved is often the lowest-ranking individual. This principle applies to all organizations, including the Army. Whether you can be moved or not is a function of your status, your performance, and your value to the organization. To move someone without telling him is almost worse than an insult, because it means he is below the point at which feelings matter. In these circumstances,

¹*Tant pis* is a French expression meaning "so much the worse."
—Ed.

moves can be unsettling and damaging to the ego. In addition, moves themselves are often accompanied by great anxiety, whether an entire organization or a small part of an organization moves. What makes people anxious is that the move usually presages organizational changes that have been co-ordinated with the move. Naturally, everyone wants to see how he comes out vis-à-vis everyone else. I have seen important men refuse to move into an office that was six inches smaller than someone else's of the same rank. While I have heard some American executives say they wouldn't employ such a person, the fact is that in actual practice, unless there is some compensating feature, the significance of space as a communication is so powerful that no employee in his right mind would allow his boss to give him a spatial demotion—unless of course he had already reached his crest and was on the way down.

These spatial messages are not simply conventions in the United States—unless you consider the size of your salary check a mere convention, or where your name appears on the masthead of a journal. Ranking is seldom a matter that people take lightly, particularly in a highly mobile society like that in the United States. Each culture and each country has its own language of space, which is just as unique as the spoken language, frequently more so. In England, for example, there are no offices for the members of Parliament. In the United States, our congressmen and senators proliferate their offices and their office buildings and simply would not tolerate a no-office situation. Constituents, associates, colleagues, and lobbyists would not respond properly. In England, status is internalized; it has its manifestations and markers—the upper-class English accent, for example. We in the United States, a relatively new country, externalize status. The American in England has some trouble placing people in the social system, while the English can place each other quite accurately by reading ranking cues, but in gen-

eral tend to look down on the importance that Americans attach to space. It is very easy and very natural to look at things from one's own point of view and to read an event as though it were the same all over the world.

I knew that my emotions on being moved out of my room in Tokyo were of the gut type and quite strong. There was nothing intellectual about my initial response. Although I am a professional observer of cultural patterns, I had no notion of the meaning attached to being moved from hotel to hotel in Kyoto. I was well aware of the strong significance of moving in my own culture, going back to the time when the new baby displaces older children, right up to the world of business, where a complex dance is performed every time the organization moves to new quarters.

... In Japan as I rode up and down in the elevators with various keys gripped in my hand, ... I did have to put up a strong fight with myself to keep from interpreting what was going on as though the Japanese were the same as I. This is the conventional and most common response and one that is often found even among anthropologists. Any time you hear someone say, "Why, *they* are no different than the folks back home—they are just like I am," even though you may understand the reasons behind these remarks you also know that the speaker is living in a single-context world (his own) and is incapable of describing either his world or the foreign one.

The "they are just like the folks back home" syndrome is one of the most persistent and widely held misconceptions of the Western world, if not the whole world. There is very little any outsider can do about this, because it expresses views that are very close to the core of the personality. Simply talking about "cultural differences" and how we must respect them is a hollow cliché. And in fact, intellectualizing isn't much more helpful either, at least at first. The logic of the man who won't move into an office that is six inches smaller than his

rival's is *cultural* logic; it works at a lower, more basic level in the brain, a part of the brain that synthesizes but does not verbalize. The response is a total response that is difficult to explain to someone who doesn't already understand, because it is so dependent on context for a correct interpretation. To do so, one must explain the entire system; otherwise, the man's behavior makes little sense. He may even appear to be acting childishly—which he most definitely is not.

It was my preoccupation with my own cultural mold that explained why I was puzzled for years about the significance of being moved around in Japanese hotels. The answer finally came after further experiences in Japan and many discussions with Japanese friends. In Japan, one has to "belong" or he has no identity. When a man joins a company, he does just that—joins himself to the corporate body—and there is even a ceremony marking the occasion. Normally, he is hired for life, and the company plays a much more paternalistic role than in the United States. There are company songs, and the whole company meets frequently (usually at least once a week) for purposes of maintaining corporate identity and morale. . . .

. . . The answer to my puzzle was revealed when a Japanese friend explained what it means to be a guest in a hotel. As soon as you register at the desk, you are no longer an outsider; instead, for the duration of your stay you are a member of a large, mobile family. *You belong*. The fact that I was moved was tangible evidence that I was being treated as a family member—a relationship in which one can afford to be "relaxed and informal and not stand on ceremony." This is a very highly prized state in Japan, which offsets the official properness that is so common in public. Instead of putting me down, they were treating me as a member of the family. Needless to say, the large, luxury hotels that cater to Americans, like Wright's Imperial Hotel, have discovered that Ameri-

cans do tenaciously stand on ceremony and want to be treated as they are at home in the States. Americans don't like to be moved around; it makes them anxious. Therefore, the Japanese in these establishments have learned not to treat them as family members.

While there are a few rare individuals who move along in the current of life looking around with innocent wonder regardless of what happens to them, most of mankind are not that relaxed. The majority are like men on a raft tossed about in a turbulent sea, who get only an occasional orienting glimpse of surrounding landmarks.

In the United States, the concern of the large middle class is to move ahead in the system, whichever part of it we happen to be in. With perhaps the exception of the younger generation just now entering the job market, we are very tied to our jobs. In fact, the more successful a man or a woman is, the more likely his or her life will revolve around a job to which home and personal relations assume secondary importance. We are only peripherally tied to the lives of others. It takes a long, long time for us to become deeply involved with others, and for some this never happens.

In Japan, life is a very different story, one that is puzzling in the extreme to Americans who interact regularly with the Japanese. Their culture seems to be full of paradoxes. When they communicate, particularly about important things, it is often in a roundabout way (indirection is a word that one hears often in the foreign colony). All of this points to a very high-context approach to life; yet, on the other hand, there are times when they swing in the opposite direction and move to the lower end of the context scale, where nothing can be taken for granted—"Be sure to put *brown* polish on the shoes." This was discovered by American GIs during the occupation. Years later, I had occasion to send some film to Japan for processing and was told to be *sure* to tell them everything I wanted done, because if

I let
late
was
by
was
cept
ther
or to
mail
scra
wor
of Ja
[I
prac
wou
dem
port
othe
spec
orific
if th
drop
a me
drop
wron
tion,
of Ja
Th
The
volve
home
the h
it is
comf
one c
occasi
every
great
hiding
behav
are de
of the

¹Honorio
sor Jones

I left anything out it would be my fault. Weeks later, after having provided what I thought was a set of instructions that could be followed by a computer, I got the film back. Everything was as I had requested—exquisite work—except that I had forgotten one thing. I didn't tell them to roll the film up and put it in a little can or to protect it in some way. In the process of mailing, the negatives had been folded and scratched, in fact were useless for any further work. I had run afoul of the low-context side of Japanese life.

[Imagine the diplomat] who refused to practice the Foreign Service language drill and wouldn't learn the honorifics²—they were undemocratic! Well, the honorifics perform important functions that go far beyond telling the other person that you acknowledge and respect his position. In many offices, the honorifics are used at the beginning of the day and if things are going well they are gradually dropped, so that at the end of the day one is on a more intimate basis with others. Failure to drop the honorifics is a cue that something is wrong. This, along with a lot of other information, enables us to sketch out some dynamics of Japanese life.

The Japanese are pulled in two directions. The first is a very high-context, deeply involved, enveloping intimacy that begins at home in childhood but is extended far beyond the home. There is a deep need to be close, and it is only when they are close that they are comfortable. The other pole is as far away as one can get. In public and during ceremonial occasions (and there are ceremonies of a sort every day, even when people meet), there is great emphasis on self-control, distance, and hiding inner feelings. Like most of Japanese behavior, attitudes toward showing emotion are deeply rooted in a long past. At the time of the samurai knights and nobles, there was

survival value in being able to control one's demeanor, because a samurai could legally execute anyone who displeased him or who wasn't properly respectful. This standing on ceremony extended to all levels; not only was the servant expected to be respectful, but the samurai's wife was to show no emotion when she received the news that her husband or son had been killed in battle. Until very recently, there was no public showing of intimacy or touching in Japan.

Still, on the formal, ceremonial side it is very important for the Japanese to be able to place people in a social system. In fact, it is impossible to interact with someone else if this placing has not occurred, hence the requirement that you state who you are on your calling card—first, the organization you work for, second, your position in that organization, your degrees, honors you have received, followed by the family name, the given name, and address, in that order. . . .

. . . I was eventually able to discern the common thread that connected everything, which began to put Japanese behavior in context. The pattern is one that it is important to understand: In Japan there are the two sides to everyone—his warm, close, friendly, involved, high-context side that does not stand on ceremony, and the public, official, status-conscious, ceremonial side, which is what most foreigners see. From what I understand of Japanese culture, most Japanese feel quite uncomfortable (deep down inside) about the ceremonial, low-context, institutionalized side of life. Their principal drive is to move from the "stand on ceremony" side toward the homey, comfortable, warm, intimate, friendly side. One sees this even at the office and the laboratory, where the honorifics are dropped as the day progresses. By this, I do not mean to imply that the Japanese are not tough businessmen or that they aren't well organized, etc. Anyone who has had anything to do with them can only admire their capacity to get things done. The point is

²Honorifics are titles—for example, madam president, Professor Jones, and Ms. Smith. —Ed.

that their drive to be close and get to know other people is very strong—in some cases, more than the detached European is either used to or can stand. The record is very clear on this. Consider their practice of men and women sleeping side by side crowded together on the floor in a single room, and the camaraderie of communal bathing.

The American provides a real contrast. He is inclined to be more oriented toward achieving set goals and less toward developing close human relations. It is difficult for him to understand and act on the basis that once a customer in Japan "has been sold," that is just the

beginning. He must be "massaged" regularly; otherwise he goes somewhere else. There are of course many other sides to the Japanese, such as their great dependence on tradition—as well as their group, rather than individual, orientation.

The message [here] is simple on the surface but does depend somewhat on the reader's being already contexted in cross-cultural communication. Two things get in the way of understanding: the linearity of language and the deep biases and built-in blinders that every culture provides. Transcending either is a formidable task. . . .

Questions

1. Why does Hall argue that it is naive (and possibly even dangerous) to believe that "people are just the same all over the world"?
2. Hall contrasts the processes of externalizing and internalizing status. How do the two processes differ? Can you think of any situations in which people in the United States show signs of having internalized status?
3. In the introduction to his book, Hall calls for a massive cultural literacy movement. "We can all benefit from a deeper knowledge of what an incredible organism we are. We can grow, swell with pride, and breathe better for having so many remarkable talents. To do so, however, we must accept that there are many roads to truth and no culture has a corner on the path or is better equipped than others to search for it. Furthermore, no man can tell another how to conduct that search." Do you agree with Hall? Why or why not?

The
with
peop
not a
cust
com
some
that
scrib
pres
Mur
belie
such
desc
whic
Pr
the N
[sixty
this p
are a
tory l
Taraf
Araw
origi
from
ogy,
hero,
two {
piece