Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 23 Nations, 2nd Edition


Globalization has emerged as a ubiquitous term to encompass many aspects of the process leading toward a more interdependent world; the implications span the gamut of humanity’s consciousness, from economics to entertainment. Yet even this dynamic movement has not been able to breach the divide presented by the inherent differences in beliefs, behaviors, and social forms that exist between population sets, generally defined by national boundaries. International business professionals and academics are aware of some of the dramatic failures that have taken place because of the lack of understanding of a given market’s culture. Relatively minor changes in the approach to a market can ultimately yield enormous dividends. Thus, cultural implications are particularly significant to business decisions (especially for strategists and marketing professionals) because of these implications’ potential impact on the eventual outcomes. Utilizing imagery-rich metaphors, this book serves as a bridge between fact and percep-

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tion on the journey toward understanding the nuances of some specific national cultures.

**Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 23 Nations, Second Edition**, is organized into 24 chapters divided into nine parts. This organization is based on the integration of different cultural frameworks previously defined by Triandis and Gelfand (1998), Fiske (1991a, 1991b), and Huntington (1996). The first part provides an introduction explaining the rationale of the four-stage model of cross-cultural understanding employed in the book, which is the primary enhancement in the revised edition. Each of the remaining parts is a compilation of national metaphors grouped by the established framework.

The introduction does an excellent job of explaining the use of metaphor as a way to symbolize an object or idea that embodies a unique characteristic or ritual in a society; that is, metaphors are the means of describing an entire national culture. The author also provides an overview of the extant literature upon which cultural analysis is based and rationalizes the construction of the cultural metaphors. The model used to analyze each nation is elucidated in each of the four stages, as it pertains to the literature from which it is derived. Stage 1 utilizes a four-cell typology of process/goal orientation by degree of emotional responsiveness. Stage 2 centers on the relationship between business and culture, and applies a unification of the models independently developed by Harry Triandis (in press) and Alan Fiske (1991b). Stage 3 is based on other etic (culture-general) dimensions, thus providing other means to compare seemingly unrelated cultures; Osland, Bird, Delano, and Jacob (2000) are referenced because they provide good summary of these other dimensions. Finally, in the fourth stage, the metaphors are engaged. The entire model and ultimate format appears to draw from Hofstede (1980). The author notes that some countries fit into more than one category, but through extensive review he has determined the metaphor that most closely reflects the majority of the people in the society.

Part II, the largest section of the book, explores “Authority Ranking Cultures,” which are dominated by a high degree of both collectivism and power distance, where ordinal rankings are most applicable to relationships. The national metaphors considered in this group include the Thai Kingdom; the Japanese Garden; India: the Dance of Shiva;
Bedouin Jewelry and Saudi Arabia; the Turkish Coffee House; the Brazilian Samba; the Polish Village Church; and Kimchi and Korea. What these cultures have in common is their grounding in hierarchies with strong leadership positions.

Part III covers the “Equality Matching Cultures” through the national metaphors of the German Symphony, the Swedish Stuga, and Irish Conversations. These European cultures are grouped together because they exemplify a high degree of individualism but a low degree of power distance. Relationships can be compared on an interval scale. Community well-being is considered to be very important yet dependent on the contributions of the individual.

The “Market Pricing Cultures,” illustrated by American Football and the Traditional British House, are explored in Part IV. These nations compare individuals and relationships multidimensionally with a ratio scale. The true zero point, it is argued, is the point of zero money. Football is used to describe American culture, since the entire process from tailgate to end zone is essentially a collective ritual celebrating competition while each person in attendance participates their own way. The British house is employed to exemplify the strength of the stoic nature of the British nation. Both metaphors, however, represent the underlying stratification associated with the competitive and individualistic nature of these cultures.

“Cleft National Cultures,” grouped in Part V, are present in countries with explicit regional, racial, or ethnic differences. Yet, the author argues that there must be a commonality in at least one activity, phenomenon, or institution that is expressive of the values and beliefs of the nation as a whole. The metaphors included in this group are the Malaysian Balik Kampung, the Nigerian Marketplace, and Belgian Lace. The Italian Opera is also included in this section because of the geographical distances in the value orientations of individualism and collectivism. Further, the Israeli Kibbutzim and Moshavim, is included because of the diversity in both ethnic group and ideological views.

Part VI allegorizes “Torn National Cultures” by using the Mexican Fiesta and the Russian Ballet. At some point, both Mexico and Russia have experienced one or more significant events that caused abrupt transitions between civilizations that tore apart their underlying cultural base. The argument is that these cultural upheavals in and of themselves create a different type of culture.
In Part VII, titled “Same Metaphor, Different Meanings,” the distinctions between cultures that exhibit similarities are explored. The metaphors chosen for this section are the Spanish Bullfight versus the Portuguese Bullfight. Although someone from outside these cultures may believe that the fundamental events are the same, deeper analysis quickly shows how the two are contrast starkly in their underlying meanings.

The final chapter, Part VIII—“Beyond National Borders,” presents the metaphor of the Chinese Family Altar to illustrate cultures that endure the migrations of ethnic groups who transfer yet retain many of the traditional cultural values and norms from their native lands. Where other ethnic groups tend to lose the tightness of the association to their culture when they become expatriates, the Chinese are likely to maintain many of their native cultural characteristics. This appears to be due to the relational nature within and the long-term orientation of the group.

Adding an entire section for the concept of culture that goes beyond national borders is essentially acknowledging the influence of history and religion on cultural affiliations. This type of cultural application may be particularly relevant in light of increased international mobility, the establishment of regional trading blocs, and the relaxation of regulations in emerging markets. The author notes that more metaphors are being constructed for future publications; the reader must wonder, with great anticipation, which other transnational cultural affiliations are being considered for inclusion in the next edition!

In summary, this is a significant book that should prove to be interesting reading for a multitude of audiences, including scholars, practitioners, students, expatriates, travelers, and those who are simply interested in culture as a fascinating aspect of the world we live in. There are two accompanying books, Working Across Cultures: Applications and Exercises and Cultural Metaphors: Readings, Research Translations, and Commentary which may be useful for educators and consultants, although not reviewed here. This book is also an ideal reference tool, since the metaphors are easy to remember yet rich in contextual value, and are presented in a logical structure for quick consultation. Overall, the book is enormously appealing, genuinely useful, and a worthy addition to any collection.

REFERENCES