

Working in a multicultural world

Barend ter Haar¹

Introduction

The purpose of this lecture² is to share some experiences with working with persons from all over the world, and to consider what lessons could be drawn from that. My presentation will therefore have a highly anecdotal character³.

I will start with a few general remarks on the basis of quotes from Rudyard Kipling, the writer of *Jungle Book*, and Sun Tzu, a Chinese philosopher. Then I will say something about the differences you will be confronted with when dealing with people of another culture.

East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

This is a confusing quote, as I will show in a moment, but it is sometimes used to express the idea that dealing with people of other cultures is impossible. That is not true, as Kipling knew.

About a year ago, when I was still ambassador to UNESCO in Paris, I gave a farewell dinner for my colleague from India, who moved from Paris to The Hague to become ambassador of India in the Netherlands. In my speech I quoted not only the first line, but also the following verses.

OH, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth
Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

My Indian colleague is a strong willed woman, who at UNESCO never shied away from expressing an outspoken view. But I never felt that difference in culture was standing between us. What is crucial is respect for the other and a willingness to listen and to learn.

There is a very important point to make here: do not confuse dealing with an other culture with changing that culture. Dealing with an other culture does not imply that you agree with it, but that you try to understand it and use it as point of departure for a common endeavour. This might not be easy, but it is doable if there is a willingness on both sides. In my presentation I will concentrate on this type of work.

Changing a culture is something completely different. Cultures cannot simply be changed by governmental decisions. The history of the last sixty years is full of examples of ignoring

¹ Barend ter Haar is a fellow of the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael. This lecture reflected only his personal opinion.

² This lecture was given on March 1 in Amsterdam as part of a series of lectures at the Amsterdam Graduate School of Law with the title "the acquiring by future lawyers of intercultural competences in a globalized yet heterogeneous world."

³ For a more systematic approach I refer to *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, revised and expanded 3rd edition, by Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede & Michael Minkov; 550 pages. New York: McGraw-Hill USA, 2010

differences in culture, ignoring the differences in the way people feel, think and act. Western countries in particular have tried to introduce Western concepts and institutions in non-Western countries, to turn non-Western governments into Western democracies and to develop traditional societies into Western economies. Usually these efforts have failed because the local culture had been ignored. But this is not the subject of my presentation.

Recommendation: Be aware of cultural differences

Recommendation: Do not confuse dealing with a different culture with changing it

Recommendation: Show respect and interest, and listen⁴.

My second quote is from the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu:

It is said that if you **know your enemies** and **know yourself**, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperilled in every single battle.⁵

Sun Tzu (around

500 BC)

There are two important lessons to be drawn from this. The first is obvious: get to know the other. The second *get to know yourself* might seem less obvious, but is just the mirror image of the first lesson. The other will try to understand who you are. What is the image you want to give? Are you only after a quick success or do you have a strategic goal? Do you always match your words with deeds? Are you sensitive to flattery?

Anecdote 1: about flattery

In my last job, as ambassador to UNESCO, I became convinced that the organisation needed fundamental reform. As a first step in that direction I proposed a comprehensive evaluation of the whole organisation. At first there was a lot of opposition against this idea, even among my European colleagues. Some of my colleagues were former ministers. They possibly felt that I as a relative newcomer was far too critical about UNESCO. Instead of arguing against them, I visited them to ask their personal advice on how to deal with UNESCO. After that they supported my proposal.

Recommendation: know yourself and know your own culture

I will now address some of the differences you will be confronted with when dealing with people of a different culture. I have divided these differences into four categories, but the differences between the categories are not sharp.

Different manners
Different values and
concepts
Different language

⁴ This is of course also true for dealing with people of your own culture. The pitfall of working with people of our own culture is that we expect that we understand each other well. However, often that is not the case.

⁵ Sun Tzu from *The Art of War* Ch. 3, last sentence

Different manners

The way people dress, eat, greet, drink etc. differs from place to place. So much so that it would lead to chaos when at meetings of the United Nations, with representatives of close to 200 different countries present, all these manners would be respected. To make things work, a kind of international etiquette has evolved, which is very close to the manners of Europeans and North-Americans:

When a diplomat accredited to the UN arrives at a dinner party, he or she will

- keep his shoes on
- shake hands with men and women
- look them (for a very short moment) in the eyes
- sit on a chair
- eat with fork and knife

None of this is self evident. In many cultures it is considered rude to walk inside a house with the shoes you used outside on the street. In some cultures it is considered inappropriate for women to shake hands with men. In others it is considered impolite to look into the eyes of somebody with a higher rank. Most people do not eat with fork and knife, but with chop sticks or with their hand(s), etc., etc.

What is considered acceptable behaviour at the UN is therefore often not considered acceptable in local circumstances. Be respectful might be a rule that is true all over the world, but how to show respect differs from place to place. The best way is to inquire beforehand what the local customs are, but it is almost impossible to prevent mistakes.

Recommendation: always inquire about local customs

Anecdote 2: about the unexpected consequences of sitting down

Long ago, in Thailand, I visited a refugee camp near the Mekong river. I was received in a big communal hall with the people sitting on benches. I was offered food and the chief delivered a welcome speech while I was standing. As almost everybody was sitting and as there were still a few free chairs, I decided to sit down. However, the moment I sat down something very peculiar happened. All the people that were sitting on benches got up and sat down on the floor. Why? Probably they considered me to be a high official and felt it would be impolite to sit at the same level as I did.

When you are clearly recognisable as a foreigner, people will usually not be surprised that you have some difficulty in observing the local habits. It might sometimes be more difficult when you are in a culture that looks like yours, but is different. Take the following:

Anecdote 3: about the difference between complimenting and harassing

A French woman starts working on Wall Street and receives a sexual harassment training⁶. She tells the following story:

“The trainer says to me, ‘Okay, you walk into the office one morning after you’ve just cut your hair, and I say, ‘Oh, Stephanie, you’re gorgeous this way!’ What do you tell me?’

⁶ From *La Seduction, How the French Play the Game of Life*, by Elaine Sciolino, New York 2011, p. 113

“ So I say, ‘Thank you!’ He says, ‘No! You report me to Human Resources. I just sexually harassed you.’

“ I say, I’m sorry. I just don’t get it.’ He gives up. He’s like, ‘You know what? Just get out of here.’”

Different values and concepts

Probably the most difficult part of dealing with a different culture is to understand its underlying values and concepts. People inside a culture might not be fully aware of these concepts, like a fish is not aware of the water it is swimming in. Manners are clearly visible, but concepts and values much less. The scope for miscommunication is therefore large.

A clear example are the treaties that King Leopold II of Belgium concluded with tribal chiefs in Congo. Around 1884 about four hundred of such treaties were concluded. These treaties were written in English or French, languages the chiefs did not understand. And even when they would have been able to read the texts, they would not have understood the meaning of European legal terms like “sovereignty”, “exclusivity” and “perpetuity”. They probably believed they were confirming their ties of friendship. But according to the text of the treaties they were handing over their land and the connected rights of trade, fishing, paths etc.⁷

This might seem an extreme example. But the concepts of ownership and property are much less clear than one might think. Consider the following questions:

Can I buy:

- Your house?
- Your wife?
- Your daughter?
- Your hair (for making wigs)?
- One of your kidneys (for transplantation)?
-
- The land you cultivate?
- The fruit growing on your land?
- The genome of that fruit?
- The right to walk on your lands?
- The minerals hidden in your soil?
- The water in your river?
- The sky above your fields?
-
- Your painting?
- Your ancestral song?
- Your traditional dance?

⁷ Based on *Congo*, David van Reybrouck, Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 2010 p.64

In our western world we have a tendency to put a price on almost everything, including the land we live on and the songs we sing, but we don't sell our children. In other cultures it can be the other way around. A man might be willing to sell his daughter, but might not understand what you are talking about when you propose to buy his land or his song, because they are considered to be common heritage and not for sale.

A clear example of a culture that it is different from our current Western culture is given in the tenth commandment in the Bible in Exodus 20:17.

“And God spoke all these words, saying, (...) You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

It is clear that money plays an important role in the world. And if you read the newspapers you might get the impression that money is the only thing people are interested in. But you should know better than that.

Anecdote 4: the value of respect

In many countries restaurants have different prices for locals and for tourists. When we visited a fishing port in Morocco, I asked the manager to serve us the cheap meal that he advertised on a black board. He answered that he would serve us a good meal, like the other tourists were having. However this would be about five times as expensive, because we had to pay for the paper napkins, the use of cutlery, a glass of water etc. I persisted, so we got the meal as advertised and, like the locals, we got water, paper napkins etc. for free. At the end of the meal I paid the manager. I tipped him, but nevertheless paid less than half the tourist price. I feared that he would hate me for that, but the opposite was true. We left as good friends because the argument had created a bond between us. He had enjoyed the fact that a tourist had taken him seriously as manager.

Recommendation: realize that most people value respect higher than money.

A typical Dutch value is to be clear and truthful when we speak or write, but that value is not shared widely. That does not mean that other cultures condone lying, it is rather that they believe that telling the truth often serves no other purpose than hurting somebody and spoiling the good atmosphere. In most Asian countries face saving and ensuring a “level of comfort” for all participants in international meetings are considered very important. This means that sensitive subjects are not explicitly mentioned until the time is ripe. This often presents a problem for us, because of our inclination to call things directly by their name.

Anecdote 5: Think twice before you become critical

In 2004 I travelled to Rangoon (Myanmar/Burma) to attend a meeting of the ARF, the ASEAN Regional Forum, as member of the EU-delegation. When I arrived I was told that the representative of the current EU chairmanship was unable to attend, so I became head of the delegation and had to speak for the EU. In Brussels our colleagues had written an instruction for the delegation. A large part of it was dedicated to a critical appraisal of the human rights situation in the Asian countries. As a loyal EU-official I followed the instruction and told my colleagues what we thought about the human rights situation in their countries. One of the points I made was a demand to Indonesia to allow observers in Atjeh to observe the elections. After the meeting my Indonesian colleague approached me and told me that my admonishment to accept observers in Atjeh was outdated, because Indonesia had already accepted observers. Because of the good relations between the

Netherlands and Indonesia he had not reproved me in public. Since then I always thought twice before criticizing a country in public.

There are good arguments for attaching so much importance to maintaining a good level of comfort in the ARF. Many of the participating countries had recently been at war and future wars were not excluded. An important objective of the ARF was to prevent new wars, by building confidence and cooperation among these nations. A very first step in that direction was convening all these countries around the same table, but that required a certain level of comfort for all. North Korea, for example, often threatened to stay away if we would become too critical of their nuclear policy. However, too much comfort is not good either, because some governments might start to think that nobody really cares about what they are doing.

Anecdote 6: Sometimes you have to seize the opportunity

Some time after the meeting in Rangoon, the ARF met again. This time in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Although they did say little about it in public, most of the other ASEAN countries were not happy about the situation in Myanmar. As an open discussion of the situation in that country would be too embarrassing, they decided to invite the heads of delegation to a private lunch to discuss this situation. When we were eating our soup, the representative of Myanmar explained the situation in his country and argued why the policy of the military regime was in the best interest of the country. When he finished his speech, it remained silent. The ASEAN countries expected one of the Western countries to seize this occasion to make clear to the representative of Myanmar that we did not buy his arguments. However, the representatives of the US, Canada and Australia remained silent. This luncheon was unforeseen, so I as representative of the EU had no clear instruction about what to do. I felt I had no choice, so I gave a detailed speech. I acknowledged the problems Myanmar was confronted with, but I made clear point by point why all the arguments of the military regime to continue its repressive policy were false. When we walked back the Burmese representative made clear to me that he agreed with what I had said, but that he had no other choice than to say what he had said.

Anecdote 7: a discomfoting approach can be necessary

During the Dutch EU-presidency in 2004, I had to represent the EU in Vienna at the General Conference of the IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency. An important subject was the unwillingness of Iran to dispel doubts about its nuclear ambitions. Its official policy was that it did not want nuclear weapons, but the secrecy about its nuclear facilities strengthened the suspicion that it was secretly preparing the production of nuclear weapons. It was therefore important that the international community made clear to Iran that it considered its behaviour unacceptable. The place to do so was the resolution about the inspection of civil nuclear facilities. Most of the non-aligned states felt that it would suffice to use the same words as last year. But since the last General Conference the situation had become worse and therefore business as usual would give the wrong signal to Teheran.

By sheer coincidence, the newspapers reported that morning the delivery by the United States of special bombs to Israel that would in particular be useful to bomb Iranian nuclear installations. The Viennese newspaper Der Standard had the news on its front-page. I asked for the floor and showed the newspaper to make clear that we could not pretend that the situation was business as usual. Half the room fell over me, accusing me of war mongering, but I had made my point. After that nobody insisted that we should use last

year's wordings and we were able to find a compromise text that put pressure on Iran. After the meeting the representative of Iran came to me and was very friendly⁸.

Recommendation: Do not tell lies, but tell the uncomfortable truth only when it serves your purpose

Another important concept is fairness. If you want to build a lasting relationship, it is important that the agreement you reach is not only legally correct, but also considered as fair by all the people involved. This can be particularly difficult when the party you have to deal with has the power to deliver, but lacks legitimacy.

Different language

Language is probably the most important part of a culture. The words and expressions of a language are a common heritage that binds together a group of people and at the same time excludes people that do not understand that language. Respect for a different culture includes respect for its language. Of course it is impossible to learn all languages, but is worthwhile to make a little effort.

Anecdote 8: on learning (a few words of) a language

As a student I followed a Spanish language course at the University of Salamanca and afterwards made a trip around Spain. After a long train ride I arrived in Barcelona. In my best Spanish I asked a few locals who were standing outside the station whether they knew a cheap hostel in the neighbourhood. They blamed me for speaking Spanish in Catalonia. Of course I should have known better. In Barcelona the locals speak Catalan. So when I returned in Catalonia, years later, I bought a small guide to the Catalan language and learned a few words. It had immediate effect. When I ordered a few drinks in a Catalan bar, using a few words in Catalan, I had to pay only half the official price.

Recommendation: make some effort to learn the local language

Different power

The relationship between power and culture is so complicated that I have hesitated whether I should mention it at all. But power is an important factor and power is linked with culture. So I will draw your attention to two aspects of power:

- the power of the other party to deliver;
- the distribution of power between you and the other party.

The power of your interlocutor within his own organisation

When you start negotiating with somebody, you assume that he has something to give to you. The easiest example is a lower price. That requires a bargaining power. It very much depends on the local culture whether bargaining is possible. Take the Netherlands as an example. When you want to buy a house over here, haggling is very common. But in a Dutch

⁸ The representatives of Burma and Iran mentioned in these two anecdotes were good diplomats. When they noted that I was their main opponent in the meeting they did not angrily ignore me, but approached me and tried to build a personal band. It is important to note that in both cases I represented the EU. If I had spoken in the name of the Netherlands, they might have ignored me.

supermarket it is uncommon to start negotiations over the price of a product. Most of the people working in a shop like Albert Heijn will not have the power to do so.

So before even starting a negotiation, you have to find out what the room of manoeuvre of the other party is. It does not make sense to start bargaining with somebody who does not have the power to do so.

You might also be confronted with the other extreme: a dictator who has all the necessary power to sell the minerals in his country to the highest bidder, but without any legitimacy because he has usurped the power in his country by use of arms and puts all the revenues in his own pocket and those of his gang. A contract with such a dictator might be legally correct, but do not expect the population of the country to consider it fair. Eventually a new government might ask you to explain what you did.

Recommendation: Check the power of your interlocutor within his own organisation

The distribution of power between you and the other party

In negotiations between countries it is customary to pretend that the negotiations are between equals. However, that is seldom the case. As a legacy of the predominant role the West played, the rules of the worldwide game are still largely the rules developed by the West.

The dominant culture in the world is still very much the Western culture. The most important languages for international communication are the languages of the former colonial powers England, France, Spain and Portugal. Most international payments are made in a western currency. The concepts that are in use for international transactions with regard to property, nature, education etc. are predominantly Western concepts. The same is true for the legal system used for international transactions.

We are so used to the fact that our culture is dominant, that we take it for granted. But as the economic, financial, scientific and political power shifts back to other parts of the world and in particularly to Asia, our cultural, philosophical and legal dominance might not remain untouched.

Recommendation: Do not take the dominance of the Western culture for granted

Concluding remarks

It is difficult to make meaningful *general* statements about cultural *differences*, but a few recommendations can be made:

- ✓ Be aware of cultural differences.
- ✓ Do not confuse dealing with a different culture with changing it.
- ✓ Show respect and interest, and listen.
- ✓ Know yourself and know your own culture.
- ✓ Always inquire about local customs.
- ✓ Realize that respect is usually higher valued than money.
- ✓ Do not lie, but tell the uncomfortable truth only when it serves a purpose.
- ✓ Make some effort to learn the local language.
- ✓ Check the power of your interlocutor within his own organisation.
- ✓ Do not take the dominance of the Western culture for granted.