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Structural
Analysis of
Cultural
Systems

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Contributory paper

Some briefings on …

Indigenous Peoples and the Deletion of Traditional Knowledge

The problem ...

Indigenous cultures are endangered worldwide. The process of globalisation is determined predominantly by one side: The transfer of industrial culture leads to the deletion of specific knowledge of other cultures and thus, of context-relevant behaviour patterns of those concerned. Depending on the criteria, it is estimated that there are still between 5.000 and 6.500[1] cultures on this planet, out of which 2.000[2] are presently prone to be extinct by globalisation. It is the contact with modern civilization which is triggering processes threatening their survival. With every traditional group that vanishes, valuable knowledge is being lost.

Dangers ...

The dangers resulting from that loss are far-reaching. Cultural "software", i.e. cognitive patterns and the respective behaviour, can be incompatible with a new context to where they have been transferred. If existing cultural elements are being exchanged against imported ones, social systems, which had been stable up to then, can be destabilised. Giving up the traditional use of the environment leads to the loss of species and to erosion, thus worsening the supply and contributing to the global

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[1] Taking language as a criterion, 90 % of the presently existing cultures are expected to vanish during the 21st century.
[2] According to the Worldwatch Insititute, Washington.

climate change. Some UN organisations have pointed to these interdependencies. E.g. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, said in an urgent appeal regarding the dangers of globalisation:

> "The freeing up of markets around the world may well be the key to economic growth in rich and poor countries alike. But this must not happen at the expense of the thousands of indigenous cultures and their traditions."
>
> "Indigenous peoples not only have a right to preserve their way of life. But they also hold vital knowledge on the animals and plants with which they live. Enshrined in their cultures and customs are also secrets of how to manage habitats and the land in environmentally friendly, sustainable, ways (…) If these cultures disappear they and their intimate relationship with nature will be lost forever. We must do all we can to protect these people. If they disappear the world will be a poorer place"[3].

Indigenous cultures have existed for thousands of years. But once they have been destabilised, pauperisation is used as a legitimation to continue the deletion of the traditional cultures even more effectively, to induce cognitive patterns, behaviour and symbol systems from the First World. While striving for improvement, destabilisation is often even accelerated. Global consent with regard to behaviour patterns and cognitive styles does not only lead to the obliteration of traditional knowledge, but also results in the change of identity. This behaviour modification among indigenous people and the loss of traditional identity in favour of a global society brings about a large number of follow-up problems.

Loss of identity …

By defining their identity, individuals make statements about their affiliation to a social context. Many of these memberships have become uncertain, since the future of whole cultural groups has become uncertain through globalisation.The industrial culture itself is not so much affected by this as are those who are exposed to the bias of dominance. Especially for indigenous peoples, changes are extreme. Cultures that have been stable for millennia are destabilised by the inclusion into the global culture and often disintegrate. Families break up. Men are being lured away as cheap workers, but the wages are so low that they even cannot return. Women line the streets as prostitutes – those new streets, which open up the countries and ever-new infrastructure, those streets, which are the precondition for embracing the people into globalisation. If the children are not exploited as labour, they can be happy if missionaries pick them up as "street children". Unfortunately, these are no exaggerations. Nor are these some rare, extreme situations. Rather, those fates can be found by the millions in the Third World.

Deletion …

But the few indigenous cultures left on this globe are far too precious to be exposed to disintegration. Cultural variety is decreasing, and the number of cultures is shrinking. This is also reflected in the death of dialects and languages. Instability becomes problematic as the discarding of cultural knowledge is just as irreversible as the loss of species and their genetic information. In a changing world where even the climate is destabilised, strategies for coping with future situations are being erased at

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[3] UNEP news release, Nairobi, 8. Feb. 2001

the same time - a serious loss for mankind. Though cultural loss, due to globalisation, now occurs world-wide, it is especially present in the sociocide of indigenous ethnic societies. Societies confronted with a dominant system are attached to it as subsystems before being disintegrated. The dominated try to bridge the gap between themselves and the culture of dominance, yet deleting traditional elements of their own. Radical changes of identity are caused by the social pressure leading to the use of clothes. Women and the loss of female attributes play a catalyst role in the process of cultural change. "Knowledge" also and especially exists in the way of thinking, in ways of perceiving the world, perceiving oneself, perceiving others.

Legal protection plus …

The mere installation of legal measures to protect indigenous peoples' traditonal knowledge cannot be expected to fundamentally change the situation´s fatality. Certainly, responsibilities would be shifted, but the processed would go on: deletion of cultural knowledge, loss of languages, destruction of the eco-system, decay of families and entire societies, humiliation of men, women, and children. In order to stabilize culture, to preserve tradition, to maintain identity, to prevent the social system from destruction, the borders of autonomous indigenous land must also be cultural boundaries, within which respecting the local culture is compulsary; the people concerned must have the right to control this.[4]

Destabilisation …

What destabilises a traditional syciety? Elements of the dominant civilisation might cause irreversible damage. Primarily, the presentation of the human body is concerned as this is the locus of defining identity. Indigenous cultures have lived for thousands of years in a stable relation to their environment without, e.g., wearing a shirt. Yet, for the first one out of such a group doing so, this is a communicative act of appreciating the dominant industrial culture and of devaluating the own traditional culture. Even if a visitor, like a "role model", is wearing a watch, this might create needs which, sooner or later, are a factor of cultural deterioration. If a visitor wears glasses, he or she should try to replace them by contact lenses during the visit. The positive effect of such an integrative behaviour has been proved in various field studies.[5]

Communicating respect …

It is taken for granted that people from other cultures integrate when coming to the industrial culture. An integrative identity is created by signs worn on the body: jeans, shirts, jackets, even if the climate does not require to do so. In turn, people from the industrial culture, when visiting traditional cultures, do not show those signs of respect at all. For them, *not* to integrate is taken for granted. It is not a relation of equal partners; A respects B, but B does not respect A. The dominant say, "you are

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[4] This refers especially to the use of clothing since every individual makes a cultural definition through his or her appearance.

[5] Cf. Groh (1997)

to be developed, you have to live our ways". Integration, however, would not only be a sign of respect for indigenous cultures, but it would be a contribution to prevent destabilisation. By classifying cultural elements, we can avoid the problematic and conflict-prone dilemma of a supposed forced choice between isolation and integrative incorporation. With the restriction on the relevant signs the intellectual exchange is left untouched, be it of conceptual, scientific, or religious kind. This is not only in concord with the international convention on the *Freedom of Information*,[6] but it also gives the individual the chance of conscious decision.

Minimising destabilisation …

Beyond cultural boundaries - how to integrate? - Visitors from outside should be asked to make sure to only cover those parts of the body which are traditionally covered, i.e. to restrict themselves to covering the loin.[7] Because of some central psychological mechanisms, women are urgently asked not to cover their breast during the visit as the import of the breast taboo is a crucial factor in the destabilization of indigenous cultures.[8] With regard to gifts, visitors should avoid everything that could lead to dependencies. The more they integrate, the less they are "alien objects". Even if external influences have already reached the indigenous culture, visitors should not use this as an excuse, but rather take the chance for "rescue work" by practically showing respect for the indigenous traditions.

Obstacles …

It is evident that, in order to reach stabilization through counter-measures, intervention is to be projected in respect to the original cultural storage, as far as it still exists or as it can be reconstructed. Problems of translating this into action mostly originate from taboos within the dominant culture. Unfortunately, most visitors from a dominant cultural context rather risk to damage an indigenous culture than adapt to it. This can only be overcome by decree. - It has to be taken into consideration that infrastructural linking-up bears perils as long as effects of dominance are not eliminated. Some fields of practical work are especially problematic, like tourism and policies towards and within so-called developing countries.[9] Here, it has to be pointed out that carrying on the destructive practices leads to irreversibly damaging effects. Culture, social processes, environment, and even climate all depend on each other. So, any contribution to the protection of cultures is a most important service to the entire mankind.

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[6] Cf. *United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information (1948).*

[7] Of course, there is not always a loincloth at hand to replace the shorts when encountering an indigenous culture. But what matters here in the first place is *which* parts of the body are covered or uncovered, because this is a communicative act yielding psychological effects.

[8] When everybody obeys these traditional rules, shame becomes redundant.

[9] The concept of "development" is an ideological one. If left alone, indigenous cultures have proved to be stable, without destroying their environment or themselves. Cultural change (as originating from Europe) is the result of (*de*stabilizing) cultural synthesis.

And now, some academic aspects …

1. Perspectives on culture

In recent cultural theory, there is emphasis both on the information and the sign aspects. Cultures are data storages. The approach by Maurice Halbwachs who worked on the collective memory in the 1920s, was extended by Jan Assmann in 1992 to the concept of cultural memory, which also considers the extra-corporal storage of knowledge in objects. Thus, cultures are sign inventories at the same time. A sign is a sign if there is an attribution of meaning. Any use of a sign is an act of communication towards those who perceive that.

It was G. H. Mead (1934) who pointed out that the individual perceives a social group as a prototypical mass. According to Mead, *the generalized other* exerts a controlling and conforming function on the individual. When people from different cultures encounter each other, they realise the respective other's patterns of action and symbol systems. These culturally specific elements define the individuals' memberships. Quite different things such as language, artifacts or the design of the body all have a common function of defining membership. The perception then triggers cognitive processes, which can either remain without effect on future behaviour or bring about radical changes of the behaviour.

2. Diversity at stake

The need to focus on the factors which determine the cultural specificity in transcultural communication becomes very evident when we look at the increasing interdependence of cultures and the resulting increase of intercultural contacts. Stabilizing the world as an intercultural system requires insight into culture and its mechanisms. Information policies on the diversity of culture could contribute to sustaining indigenous cultures. Local authorities and NGOs are to be supported in their efforts to maintain cultural identity and to enhance local characteristics.

Cultural identity is one of the key issues of the future worldwide. Its presence, linked with the acceptance of each other, is essential for peace, welfare, and partnership. Refusal of acceptance, on the other hand, has a destabilising effect. Within cultural interactions, processes of comparison and conceptualisation take place. For those who take part in these communications (i.e. meeting of cultures), it is necessary to realise themselves as partners in communicative processes and to reflect on the occuring mechanisms. Relationship between social groups of different cultural backgrounds can be measured on a scale ranging from acceptance to rejection. These attitudes towards each other can be named as the crucial factors of social and political stability vs. instability.

A recent approach of cognitive social psychology, which is relevant for the self-definition by means of cultural elements, is the Theory of Symbolic Self Completion by Wicklund & Gollwitzer. People feel obliged to identity goals, but at the same time, they realise that they reach those goals only partially. They try to bridge the gap between claim and reality with the help of symbols. Clothing and other elements of body design, rhetoric and behaviour patterns can be used for compensating the perceived incompleteness. Exactly this mechanism can be found in the superimposition of different social systems, be it in the bias between North and South or between West and East. The cultural contrast is most severe between the industrial culture and indigenous cultures. Those concerned are being confronted with an extreme

supposed incompleteness of themselves, which they try to compensate by adaptation to the behaviour of the superior by the use of clothing, objects, nutrition, and language.

3. Cultural systhesis

Now let us ask retrospectively how our industrial culture has obtained its sign inventory with its respective information. We can find that historically, this accumulation results from the syntheses of many predecessor cultures. First, there are archaic cultures, and the successive interconnection yields cultures with higher degrees of synthesis. Interconnection generally results from superimposition caused by migration or mobility. Single cultural elements can often be traced back along their historical way to one of the original cultures. The number of cultures decreases exponentially during the syntheses´ processes. Starting with n cultures at time t_1, which go into synthesis two by two, their number will, after passing through synthesis, at time t_2 be only half as great, etc. However, these interconnections do not lead to a mere accumulation of cultural elements or of cultural information; rather, they lead to discarding processes. In the storage of the resulting world's standard culture there are only those cultural elements that have "survived" the various steps of synthesis. In other words: the progressive cultural change leads to a global culture that has just a fraction of the information originally available within the system "humanity".

Cultures with a higher degree of synthesis are quite different from cultures with a lower degree of synthesis. In the Psychoanalysis of Culture[10] as well as in Structural Anthropology[11], societies are positioned within a continuum from "cold" to "hot" whereby archaic culture represents the cold, and the elaborated, "progressive" culture the hot aggregate state. Cold, archaic cultures can be very stable, as long as there are no interferences from outside. They use their environment in a sustainable way, they are characterised by rigid, unquestioned standards, whereas in advanced states of culture, there is pluralistic uncertainty, which needs conventions in order to clarify the norms for the situations concerned.

Cultures, which have been heated up by synthesis, are characterised by progress and functioning, they strive for expansion and for incorporating others. In the course of syntheses, a striking feature is the loss of information, which does not only concern culturally specific knowledge, but also, with regard to animal and plant species, genetic information.

4. Dominance

Cultural dominance that one culture exerts towards another is a function of the relation of both overall efficiencies. It has to be pointed out that the efficiency both of single cultural elements and of the generalised overall attribution is not an objective measure, but a cognitive entity. Evaluations are made by individuals with reference to the actual situation. Principally, the mechanisms are the same in different constellations, be it with regard to European regional cultures or to the West-to-East bias; yet, in the extreme situations of the North-to-South bias, the mechanism become especially evident. Within the bias, there is a semi-permeability of cultural borders: A flood of cultural elements pours from the dominant culture on the dominated. Behaviour patters, which originate from Europe, have been established in Africa, Asia, the Pacific region – but not the other way round. Only very few cultural elements are transferred against the main flow direction, they are taken over by the culture of

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[10] cf. Erdheim, 1988

[11] cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1973; 1967, 1975

dominance only singularly, if an advantage can be expected. These very different transfer processes can be labelled as "automatic" vs. "controlled" with reference to a concept proposed in perception research.

As a result from these mechnisms, a culture resulting from manifold syntheses, which is dominant (relative to other cultures) has very effective strategies at hand for most spheres of life. Due to such superiorities, the dominant culture is overestimated in a generalised way, so even unadvantageous elements of it are accepted uncritically by inferior cultures. Because of this generalisation, hardly any cognitive and behaviour patterns of those cultures that are superimposed by the dominant culture are accepted during the synthesis process. The choice of the elements is influenced by the additional dimension of "prestige" in the sense of a Gestalt effect. As the individual tries to reduce the dissonant feeling of being inferior by means of Symbolic Self Completion, the processes are accelerated even more.

In the course of synthesis, the effects of dominance lead to further heating-up. The culture, which had the greater overall efficiency when entering into synthesis, can now increase it even further. A striking effect of dominance is the asymmetrical induction of norms. The spreading of the world's standard culture, originating from Europe, is especially manifest in clothing: in the capitals of the world, there is the industrial culture's ideal of designing the body. Tribal people, who don't respect the rules of the *modern times*, run the risk of being arrested even in the towns of their "own" country for causing public offence; if they get off lightly, they are derided for being "backward".

Any guest student from the Third World adapts to the First World with his or her entire visual design of the body. But when people from the industrial culture come to non-industrialised societies, they instantly introduce clothing and money, thus smoothing the way for the final colonisation. Whereas the adaptation of those who, in the bias of dominance, are inferior, is taken for granted, the non-adaptation of the superior to the host culture is perceived as just a normal matter of course, although the dominant person is, so to speak, an alien element, who, as a representative of the dominance, communicates valuations with his or her behaviour. As we have found out in our field studies, the inferior often adapt to the dominant culture with regard to the presentation of themselves immediately *before* an encounter – as soon as they notice that strangers are approaching. The dominant individuals, in turn, due to personal problems, seize every opportunity - consciously or not - and use various excuses in order *not to* adapt their appearance to the culturally specific appearance, i.e. *not to* deviate from their habitual behaviour pattern. The influence of one's own presence on the visited people is ignored, and it is not even taken into consideration to adapt to the host culture in terms of body design, although that would be a useful contribution to its re-stabilisation.

5. Changing identities

This refusal of adaptation is the central momentum of destabilisation. Now, the individual exposed to dominance consequently exchanges his or her previous identity against the questionable membership in the global culture.

When people define their membership through the use of signs, they do so before themselves, as well as before others. Those signs of membership establish the individual's identity, and a change of cultural identity is always also a take-over of signs. However, cultural elements have quite different functions in that respect.

Some of the externally induced cultural elements can exert a strong influence on the stability of a social system, while others hardly have any influence. The various sign types can be rank-scaled according to their relevance for identity. By replacing traditional cultural elements by external ones, the individual turns away from his or her previous culture, turning to the other culture. This is the more definitely so, the more definite the statement of membership is mediated by the respective signs. The closer the signs are connected with the human being, the more relevant they are for this person's membership. This is most clearly the case with regard to the design of the body. Therefore, the taking over of clothing is not only an individual's statement about how he or she wants to be seen; rather, the decision for the take-over even implies a comparative valuation of the respective cultures.

6. Cultural respect

Impacts take place wherever encounters take place. As long as one culture is only being absorbed by another, dominant one, this leads to some long-term disadvantages to the dominated. Indigenous cultural identity needs to be strengthened - guidelines for adaptive and accepting behaviour, delivered along with culture-specific informations, given to those inducing contact would help to prevent cultural destruction and thus to maintain cultural diversity. This is especially necessary in areas of indigenous culture.

Tourism, as a paradigm, is a fast growing industry and culture is one of its major resources. On one hand, travellers want to consume culture; on the other hand, tourism is being increasingly criticised for being destructive towards culture. Travellers want to have information on cultural characteristics of the destination. But more than this, directions on how to behave in a culture-sustaining way are necessary. At the locations, local authorities and NGOs need information on how to implement cultural identity in settings of intercultural contact.

By naming cultural elements which define membership, the question of isolation vs. cultural adoption can be avoided. The restriction to relevant signs leaves intellectual exchanges untouched, be it in conceptual, scientific, or religious terms. This is in concord with international conventions concerning the *Freedom of Information*[12], enabling the individual to choose freely and to decide consciously.

Differenciating "inward" and "outward" culture is not only the precondition for representing the mechanisms in functional models, but also for the definition of interventive strategies. "Inwardness" is principally bare of signs; its mediation by signs is restricted just by customs; "inwardness" is only being represented by "outwardness", by signs. Cognitive content is not identical with defining, perceivable symbols. Differenciating "inwardness" from "outwardness" points out the importance of identity-relevant signs in cultural interactions, especially with regard to the gradient of dominance; at the same time, the freedom of the mind is to be respected.

7. No time to waste

These considerations can be translated into action by relatively simple, local measures. Anybody entering indigenous territory is to be instructed - verbally, by leaflets, or by other means - as how to avoid semiotic destabilization i.e. to avoid carrying in elements which would be destructive in the sense that they delete corresponding traditional elements, or lead

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[12] Cf. *United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information (1948).*

to identification with the industrial culture. The use of signs is very important as it concerns the definition of cultural membership. A deletion or replacements of traditional elements means that the members of the corresponding cultural group by the use of the new elements (instead of the traditional ones) then cease from defining themselves as members of this traditional culture; instead, through the communicative act of using the imported signs, the individuals then tend towards defining themselves as part of the industrial culture. Leaving the incompatible cultural elements outside the indigenous territory can be managed concretely by placing guarded lockers at the entrance. Needless to say that nobody is forced to come to such an area. But those who do should comply with the semiotics of traditional local culture - and not counteract and corrupt it.

Covering, veiling, hiding the human body is characteristic for modern or dominant societies. When intervening, one should be cautious not to be part of the destructive system. Minimally invasive encounters would yield the preservation of culture. Of course, strategies are to be improved step by step, especially with regard to compliance of the (dominant) visitors.

The costs of such interventions are relatively small compared to the results that can be achieved. The diversity of traditional cultures would profit, gaining an increase of identity by means of those measures. The few traditional societies that are left on this planet are far to precious to be deleted.

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