

Cultural Ambiguity in a Foreign Land

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This article presents both a theoretical examination and a personal narrative on the author's experiences of cultural belonging, cultural ambiguity and developing cultural sensitivity through the lens of someone who has resided long term outside their home country.

Cultural Ambiguity: A definition

To open this paper an examination of 'cultural ambiguity' is important as its meanings are often open to interpretation. The author argues that cultural ambiguity goes beyond simply an influence of other cultures (ICI global, 2021) or a list of cultural differences encountered from descriptive cultural norms (such as: in Korea it's polite to take your shoes off before entering a home) to a far deeper sense of a forging identity. Bauer's (2021) understanding of cultural ambiguity takes both a broader and more nuanced viewpoint encompassing cultural sociology, cultural history and anthropology. He argues that "any cultural activity includes ambiguity" (p. 3), and as cultural activities comprise of *everything* we do, experience and believe, from our gestures to our values, constant cultural ambiguity and negotiating meaning is simply part of being human. Pope Benedict's visit to Turkey in 2006, is an example given by Bauer, of a classic culturally ambiguous moment as the world reflected on the *meaning* of the photo below, showing the Pope either meditating or praying in a mosque. Cultural ambiguity is evidenced here as the world *interpreted* this photo and individuals gave it *meaning*.



Figure 1: Pope Benedict visits mosque in Istanbul (Hertzog, 2006)

Ambiguity and Belonging

My personal dalliance with cultural ambiguity comes from a mixed British/New Zealand/Iraqi heritage without any especially strong cultural driving force/center/north. I'm not fazed if the All Blacks lose the rugby, I'm not moved by the plight of Iraqis as my own people (I am moved, however, as a humanitarian), and I don't feel a compulsion to 'buy British' given the chance. I appreciate that this cultural ambiguity plays in my favour; I can wear a number of hats, present a number of personas, and I understand that I am a 'positioned subject' (Rosaldo, 1993) with the privilege of a variety of positions to choose from. There is an easiness in *negotiating meaning* in my culturally ambiguous world. For those straddling the divide of cultures their experience of cultural ambiguity may come with a tension as they shift between tolerance and avoidance, grappling with a dual identity, forever in search of one whole person. This is often encapsulated in the stories of those who have emigrated, such as Asian Americans who may describe their life experiences with more charged emotions and describe feeling trapped and caught between two opposing cultures (Akiyama, 2008). For me, I enjoy the vagueness of identity, the possibilities of being anyone, and living in the murky world of being a long-term expatriate. The image below shows a rare piece of graffiti in a squeaky-clean Dubai, United Arab Emirates, it was captured on a construction site on an early morning walk and struck me as a poetically fitting description of the cultural ambiguity we experience as expatriates living

outside our home countries.



Figure 2: Dubai Graffiti, author's personal photo

This image suggests that traditional notions of cultural belonging, and the concept of a lifelong tethering to a nation or a 'group of similar others', no longer defines belonging, but perhaps instead, a series of pockets of cultural attachments and understandings. My country of 22 years has been the United Arab Emirates, and my students Emirati women; when I traverse this wildly cosmopolitan landscape of Dubai and see or meet an Emirati woman, my cultural radar subconsciously alerts me with a warmth, a familiarity, that *she is with me*. I belong. In a very loose sense, it is my cultural cameo, earned after 22 years of teaching and loving this particular demographic of person. I will never be an insider. I will never 'hang out'. But when we meet, usually in government departments, and she is in her 30s or 40s, the conversation is natural, the bond is instant, the sisterhood is undeniable. It is my pocket of cultural belonging.

For others, such as the large number of long-term Indian expatriates living in the United Arab Emirates, their pocket of cultural belonging comes from the agency and permanence born from pursuing an education and developing a business in this country (Sancho, 2020). These are multi-generational UAE resident families carrying both Indian citizenship and sense of identity who can tunnel their way through a minefield of life events and experiences to find their cultural belonging in a country that is not their own.

Therefore, in many ways, cultural ambiguity and a more nuanced experience of cultural belonging may not rob us of one whole person identity, but perhaps gifts us multiple identities.

A Cultural Outsider

However, this is not always the case, and with hindsight and reflection, I can see how this perspective *may* be marred by privilege, awoken by experiencing the flip side of cultural ambiguity. The story of how this came about relates to my children. My sons attended a mostly British school in Dubai and I was acutely aware of how British they were becoming. When we went to the beach (in Dubai) and I told them to pick up their rubbish, their response was ‘yes mum, so the hedgehogs don’t eat it’ (FYI Hedgehogs don’t exist in Dubai). My children have never even seen a hedgehog. It is not that I didn’t want them to become culturally British, it is more that I didn’t want them to have a single story about life which I felt was the only story they were getting. Yes, I have been significantly impacted by Chimamanda Adichie’s insightful Ted Talk on the dangers of a single story (Adichie, 2009). My sons’ pockets of cultural belonging were coming primarily from attending a British school.

To this end I moved my sons to a more multicultural school, and it is here, as a parent, I felt the gap and where negotiating meaning became thorny. I felt uncomfortable on play dates with kids who brought two phones and ordered takeaway without asking permission. I wasn’t sure how to handle the lack of responses to my son’s birthday party invitation; one of the British mums tells me privately, almost secretly, ‘rsvping is a cultural thing’, and it irks me when our Whatsapp shared-school-class-mums groups breaks into another language as I feel excluded. Everything’s different and I feel unsettled, my ‘position’ has been inextricably and imperceptibly altered and I am lost. At the Dubai interschool rugby tournament one of the ‘fellow’ mums from my sons’ school is fully covered head to toe, I experience it as a barrier, and I am not sure how to reach out and make sports tournament banter, our sons are, after all, in the same team. We share a bond, sport is the perfect social equalizer, yet I am horribly aware of the lack of effort I make. Meanwhile across the pitch it’s all legs and shoulders as the European mums are in shorts and strappy tops. While I’m not exactly one of them, I can comfortably maneuver in their world. The image below in Figure 3 is much used in seminars and workshops in the United Arab Emirates to illustrate the collision of these two worlds: European/Arab; Christian/Muslim; Conservative/Western. It visually illustrates the conundrum described above of navigating the two circles in ‘my Dubai’.



Figure 3: Emirati Women view European Woman (Arabian Gazette, 2014)

Cultural Ambiguity in the Arabian Gulf

Yet this stereotype of Gulf Arab conservatism is also susceptible to cultural ambiguity, as it should be, and demonstrates that ‘fixity’ (Nyongesa, 2018) in culture is always open to critique and discussion. This is a particularly stark and relevant example as Arab culture is often portrayed in western media as singular and unmoving: “Today, Islam is widely seen as a threat, and this feeling has almost eclipsed the formed attitude of fascination” (Bauer, 2021, p. 4). However, there are multiple discourses running through the Arab world and the contribution Arab women have made to business, education, arts, culture the sciences and social change is significant (Allam, 2008; Olimat, 2013; Al-Rawi, 2020), but *not* the remit of this article.

It is in this all-important space, where narratives in society run side by side; where cultural ambiguity occurs, meanings are negotiated and new norms emerge (Bauer, 2021). Indeed, it is part of society’s natural evolution and development.

Below is an image of a Dubai number plate where English and Arabic are intertwined, visually exemplifying how “different discourses exist side by side” (Bauer, 2021, p. 20) and how new norms may arise from this.



Figure 4: Dubai number plate, author's personal photo

Reflection

My personal wake up call, alerted me to my low tolerance for cultural ambiguity, when I am the one who is uncertain and when I am the one who needs to interpret meaning. It is this narrative disclosure which is *the point* here. Notions of cultural belonging and uncertainty around cultural ambiguity, impact us all both collectively and individually as we can never fully escape our learned ideologies (Brookfield, 2014). This is a massively complex field, where it is easy to trip and fall foul of our natural instincts; I was reminded here that my natural impulse is to believe my way is *the best* way, it is also, coincidentally, the dominant voice which further bolsters a sense of righteousness. It is, however, a perspective I want to challenge, a discussion I wish to engage in, and a paper I want to write about.

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