

Culture Clubs

By Sean McCormick

My biggest takeaway from this class regarding culture is that cultures are dynamic. No matter how remote the village, so long as humans are involved, societies are going to inevitably change. Also, no one person can possess their own *individual* culture. It's a *group* effort. In the late 1990's, during the height of the tech boom, I regularly attended the South by Southwest Interactive conference in Austin, Texas. The keynote speaker in 2000 was the now-defunct company Macromedia's CEO Rob Burgess. He began by showing a clever music video (that utilized their Shockwave animation technology)—a parody of the Buggles song, *Video Killed the Radio Star*. It was called, appropriately enough, [Internet Killed the Video Star](#).

It was a reminder that our culture was being shaped right in front of us, almost in real-time. During his speech, he used the concept of a *culture wheel* to describe the rate of social change in different countries. A country like Afghanistan has a wheel that moves so slowly as to be almost imperceptible, while in the good ol' USA, ours is rotating so rapidly it has become a blur. That analogy has always stuck with me. The evolution of women's rights in Iran, shown in *A Separation*, is a good example of a traditionally slow culture wheel being sped up. 50 years prior, a woman like Simin would not have dared to make such assertions regarding the family.

Dictionary definitions tend to allude that culture is a man-made concept, but I began to consider our animal friends. I think it could be argued that they also have their own social cliques and traditions, instinct or not. I recall working in Costa Rica a few years ago and having a howler monkey as an alarm clock every morning. I was told there was a good chance he was an ostracized former alpha-male of his troop. I've been that guy before.



Figure – Surreal, impromptu town hall meeting

I am fortunate to come from a family who considers travel an investment. Leaving one's community to visit others is truly the best inoculation for ignorance and exceptionalism. My parents, who are in their late 70's and falling apart, are still dragging themselves to exotic locales.

My brother is the Executive Vice-President for Academic Affairs at EF (Education First), a global language training company. He and his husband, who is a high-level British diplomat, are constantly all over the globe.

While I don't have their frequent flyer miles, I have been lucky enough to participate in a few documentaries that have taken me to rural Rwanda, Europe, and to islands and villages along West Papua. Getting to experience unvarnished local cultures is vastly different from stepping off a cruise ship to the sound of steel drums and panhandlers. I'll never forget landing in several remote Indonesian villages by speedboat and clumsily trying to shed my hiking boots (no one wears shoes indoors as a Muslim custom) while laden with audio recording equipment that is running so I can respectfully slide into a teeny dwelling.

Some village elders once convened an ad hoc town hall meeting

(that we had to attend) to decide if we were welcome or not, (we were trying to locate escaped fishing industry slaves) and it was awkwardly fascinating. They were protecting their culture as they saw fit. We were always very careful to have the blessing of the powers that be at every destination. [John Allen Chau](#) should have done the same.

In 2003, when the supergroup boy-band of Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld embarked on their Shock and Awe tour of Iraq, we got a firsthand look into what it looks like when one culture attempts to impose its mores upon another without doing its homework first. It was a cultural train wreck. The equivalent of treating a hornet's nest like a piñata, then complaining about getting stung. There was zero pre-production effort done to examine the cultural balance between Sunni and Shia, and what the fallout might be once the Iraqi military was furloughed.

As a cultural anthropologist knows, you should study a culture's customs and languages as much as possible prior to strolling into town. When I convinced Dell Computer to hire me as a tech support rep in 1996, it was like being on another planet culture-wise. Thankfully, I had six weeks of training that helped me acclimate to the different lingo and customs before they threw me to the wolves.

Power can be both a culture's brake pedal *and* its accelerator. As the U.S. is capitalism-obsessed, the money-changers—enabled by technology—have essentially cut the cultural brake lines. Thanks to the tech advances of the Internet Age, our cultural norms change so rapidly that it has led to the creation of what some call the *Slow Movement*. A cultural plea to downshift the gears and reconnect to family, food, and life itself.

It has become difficult to quantify exactly what our culture is anymore, much less defend it. Even a country like China, whose culture is carefully guarded and maintained, won't be able to stop the relentless march of progress. One analogy I

came across was that culture is an object on a blacksmith's anvil. Seemingly solid and intact. Power is the use of the blacksmith's hammer on that object.

Culture and power are inseparable. Every film we watched during the class showcases some form of a cultural power struggle. Some thoughts I had on power and culture in a few of the films include:

- *Spotlight* – the Catholic church leveraged its considerable organizational power to attempt to maintain its status quo. They and those aligned with them claimed their good deeds far outweighed the rogue actions of a 'few bad apples'. Unfortunately for them, the Boston Globe was able to apply its own organizational power to bring those transgressions to light.
- *Reel Injun* – American movie culture celebrating the conquering and extinction of another culture. Watching those school children view people that looked like them being massacred was rough.
- *Kitchen Stories* – A nice little example that no man is an island, that there is a hard-wired need for interpersonal connection. When they finally blew off the formality of the study, I enjoyed their discussion about nuclear technology and boiling potatoes.
- *Do you Speak American* – I loved the game-based empowering tactic that the schoolteacher utilized to engage his students while they learned to code-switch without shame.
- *The Split Horn* – Paja's Laotian culture empowered him, it was as much a part of him as his hearing or eyesight. His children finally acknowledging that which mattered so much to him was a nice turning point in the film.
- *I am not your Negro* – In 1948, James Baldwin chose to shut out the racist and abusive American culture by relocating to France. Early on in *I am not your Negro* he realized others back home were doing their part to

change the dysfunctional American culture and it was time for him to do his. It must have taken a great deal of individual power to return to the U.S.

The late, great comedian Bill Hicks [had a bit about our evolution](#) not ending with humans growing thumbs—that ideas need to evolve as well. That many of our institutions and customs are no longer relevant. The U.S. could use a little cultural evolution booster-shot right about now.