Cross-Cultural Encounters: a holonic model of stability

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Abstract: When we move beyond the linear gaze of worldview, and explore our communications within cross-cultural contexts, we encounter both reality and actuality of interactions. In these inter-cultural encounters, it is not just how we see others but also how others see us. These encounters go beyond the logic of sameness, and encompass both the interdependence and in-between-ness of the self and the other, encapsulating the reality within the reality-actuality whole. When we envision these interactions as a dialogical process, we begin to visualise the relational impact of the multiplicity of social and cultural norms, rules and values which underlay these encounters, and how these interactions draw upon the vast pool of collective knowledge accumulated by societies and cultures in their long process of evolution. In this paper, we explore how the concept of the 'holon' enables understanding of cultural architectures of these interactions, and how Buber's concepts of 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' help to move beyond the gaze of sameness towards an interconnected vision of cross-cultural stability.

Keywords: cross-cultural encounters; I-It and I-Thou, cultural architecture; actuality-reality; holon; valorisation

1. A HOLONIC VISION BEYOND THE LINEAR GAZE

How do we move seeing cultural encounters from a linear gaze of worldview and towards a holonic vision? And how this vision encapsulates cultural encounters within a reality-actuality whole, drawing upon the interconnectedness of the self and the other. This vision is at the heart of the exploration of interconnected stability of cross cultural interactions and collaboration. Linear gaze here refers to a reductionist view of development, a view of utilitarian economy. The term 'reality' refers to the 'here and now' state of the world (the observed present), and the term 'actuality' refers to the interconnected state of the world (being experienced in unity drawing on the past, present, and future expectations). 'Holon' represents the interconnectedness of relationships between and among human systems, between the unit and whole – an interdependent model of the universe, where whole is not sum of parts but interconnectedness of parts. It is this holonic perspective, which drives the inclusive vision of sustainability, transcending the linear utilitarian view. In this paper, we explore how the concept of the 'holon' enables understanding of cultural architectures, and designing interfaces. It also explores how the concept of 'symbiosis' provides a tool for interdependence and mutuality of relationships of reality and actuality, and thus the core concept of interfacing and collaboration, how the concept of the 'culture of the artificial' enables the sharing and pooling of experiences, how the concept of 'valorisation' enables to find a coherence (commonality) between diverse interactions, and how the concept of 'cultural holon' can be used to conceptualise the network architecture for cross-cultural interactions. (Gill, 2009). The interaction process can be seen in terms of identifying communication gaps that hinder interconnectedness, and locating potential of interlocking interactions that facilitate it. To understand the dynamic nature of the interactive process, we need to explore cultural architectures, which facilitate them. Developing cross-cultural interfaces is then not just about coping with the interaction space of reality but also of the overarching spaces of reality and actuality, as well as, with the 'in-between' space of actuality-reality gaps. The discussion briefly discusses the limitations of the logic of sameness, the openness of linguistic hospitality as an alternative to the exclusion-inclusion nexus, provides glimpses of inter-cultural encounters, and explores cultural architecture as a model of an interconnected vision of multi-cultural world.

2. BEYOND THE BINARY GAZE OF SAMENESS

Jonas Gamborg Lillebø (2014) questions the binary logic of cultural sameness and difference, in the sense that sameness is defined by its opposite: difference. His argument is that "The problem with sameness is that it is oppositional, and hence closed, and that culture together with sameness here constitutes a kind of vicious circle: those who are included belong to the same culture, and those who are excluded belong to a different one". Cultural sameness that renders culture into a mechanism of exclusion and inclusion is thus situated within the binary logic of identity and difference. In order to be included into a society you have to be imagined to have the same cultural attachment. It is this binary Logic which is at the core of the exclusion and inclusion of culture, the logic of separation and opposition as if cultures were closed, static and untrainable or untransferable. This logic then leads to another assertion that: "cohabitation in a society depends on cultural sameness or shared cultural identity, then this must mean that there is an inside and an outside to this culture that make it possible to distinguish those who belong here and those who do not". To counter this binary logic, Lillebø (ibid.) refers to Ricoeur's understanding of translation, and asserts that: "the problem of understanding culture as static, pure and different is analogous to how languages are thought of as untranslatable (focusing on

difference) or translatable (focusing on sameness)." At the social level this logic of closure reproduces exclusion, whilst in the case of language this logic asserts itself as if the problem lies in the unbridgeable communication gap. Seen from the prospective of openness, translation through its practices articulates how equality and difference can be possible at the same time. In this practice of translation we find both the aspect of carrying something across and then of interpreting it. This practice could be described as the tension between two poles: source language and target language. The translation transmits both meaning and message from one place to another. The point of departure is thus something incomprehensible that requires that we carry it over to our side for interpretation. It could perhaps be illustrated by the image of two separate river banks. Transporting something from one side to the other is thus perturbed until something, for instance, a bridge, is constructed, which may be able to carry things across. The two banks are no longer separated. However, the river is still there and the bridge might be fragile: a bad translation might turn out to be ruinous, leading to new misunderstandings. Briefly put, a translation might potentially always be replaced by a better one. The practice of translation follows a logic that is not oppositional but rather one of balances between languages and degrees of openness between them. In order to translate one must be open to another language, but without abandoning his or her own starting language. Just as translation as a practice transgresses our imagination, we must look into transcultural and intercultural practices that also transgress our imagination. Kearney (2007) gives us an insight into Ricoeur's paradigm of the openness of linguistic hospitality, and how this openness of language translation stems from 'linguistic hospitality' which lies in the fact that to appropriate a foreign language we need to first welcome it to be our own. It is this welcoming of the 'other' aspect of translation which "questions our self-centered being by living in a language other than our own." Kearney further notes that in order for a translation to be good both languages must be open: otherwise it is not a translation. Openness renders account for the rules governing the practice of translation: in order to translate one it is necessary to listen and learn what is foreign. Otherwise we are not translating. In this openness of linguistic vision, we see a similarity of linguistic translation and cultural transmission. Jus as in the case of translation of languages, there ought to be acceptance of and hospitality to the other, so should cultural transmission encompass acceptance, accommodation and hospitality to the other.

Jean-François Staszak (2008) reflects on communication between cultures and says that transmission of cultural elements (e.g. values, norms, experiences, thoughts) very much depends on the communication facilities: "As the oral practice is total, the accumulation of knowledge is done on very small spaces; when writing was invented, the transmission conditions were changing the contrary gestures, attitudes and rules of the social game were easy to transcribe and send them off. The birth of modern media disrupts the transmission conditions gestures, knowledge and values. We have entered into the era of mass culture. The diversity of the world fades gradually, so that parallel affirms the right to difference. Items that are passed focus on three sets of

practices and knowledge: the physical techniques and practices to implement, social life techniques, values and preferences that affect the nature of the world, self and society." When reflecting on the transmission of culture, we face extraordinary diversity of cultures, and ponder on what they have in common, what ideas, values, moral precepts guide individual behaviour and collective interests, and wonder how we locate contradictions in their commitments to say the ideals of equality, social justice and individual freedom, and to assert the right to be different.

2.1 The Logic of the Linear Gaze

It is perhaps worth reflecting on what led to the dominance of the linear economic gaze as the guiding hand of development. Max-Neef in his incisive article on "The Forgotten Map" (2008) gives an insight into the historical roots of this gaze. The roots of the current permeation of a feeling of uneasiness and anxieties in our lives in the world today, are seen to lie in the 'Machiavellian path of competition and fear', which had shaped the construction of social, political and economic conceptions in Europe. Following this path, Descartes' conception of absolute truth and certainty witnessed the triumph of mechanism and reductionism. This mechanistic path, bypassing the 'Franciscan way of compassion and love' and 'Pico della Mirandola's way of multiple truths and reconciliation', followed to the age of reason. Galileo and Newton gave us mathematics as the language of nature and science as the supreme manifestation of reason, and reason as the supreme attribute of the human being. Max-Neef says that we are still under the spell of Galileo and Newton, and we have chosen not to navigate route of Goethean science, which seeks harmony between the spiritual and the physical worlds. Feeling, intuition, consciousness and spirituality are still banished from the realm of science. This reductionist view of science is well illustrated by the linear gaze view of economics, which in its "value free" conception has become an instrument of measurement and control, thereby becoming "totally divorced from reality". Our attention is further drawn to the historical evolution of the reductionist conception of knowledge, technology and economics. In our pursuit of the path of reason, the mechanistic conception of knowledge has become increasingly detached from the actuality of the world we live in. Max-Neef sends a timely message when he says "We are perhaps beginning to realise that knowledge without understanding is hollow, and that understanding without knowledge is incomplete. We therefore need to undertake, at last, the navigation we have so far postponed. But in order to do so we must face the great challenge of a language shift." This challenge of language shift from sameness to that of diversity requires deep understanding of the changing nature of cross-cultural communication and inter-cultural discourse, reflecting and interpreting the interconnected realm of the self and other.