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RECONSIDERING COMPETITION IN BUILDING IDENTITY

Theoretical
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Abstract

According to many linguists, a culture can exist only in comparison with the ‘other’ culture. In other words, a culture’s or a people’s identity may be created only by competing with the ‘other’ culture or people. The discrepancy and competition between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ is the main purpose of our research. In our opinion, this competition may be resolved by building a bridge across cultures. In our paper, we intend to highlight the identity of the Romanian culture in contrast to other cultures and attempt to resolve the discrepancies between them.

The Tangibility of the 'Self'

Along the centuries questions have been raised by many anthropologists, culturalists and psychoanalysts: Who am I? How is the 'self' constructed? How can we define the 'self'?

We have also been tortured by additional questions: Who is the 'other'? Shall we perceive the 'other' as the 'alien'? Is alterity created in presence or absence? Is the 'other' the competing side? Can we discover our true 'selves' when alone, or can we find out who we are only in the reflecting mirror of those who surround us?

For us to answer these questions we suggest to start from the following points of discussion:

1. the tangibility of the 'self'
2. the self of the 'other'

Being in quest for the 'self', the question raised by Nasrudin (qtd. in Idries, 1972) "Who am I?" is a question that is asked worldwide, where vast cultural diversity appears to deconstruct any shared sense of personal being.

First of all, all people have their personal 'self' acknowledged by others, who remember them, and call them by name. In other words, these 'others' form a world where a person (the 'self'), and not an individual, has a place in an ongoing network of human relationships.

According to the Norwegian anthropologist Wikan (1995), the 'self' is not a noun in her language, and, in the usage of the term, it reminds of Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism. Additionally, the linguist Wierzbicka (1993, p. 87) argued that the concept of the 'self' is a "highly culture-specific creation" found as a noun perhaps only in English. In her opinion, a far less culture-bound term is "person," labelled as a living, thinking, knowing, feeling, desiring, speaking and hearing active being.

Mention should be made that until the thirteenth century, in English and other

Germanic languages, the term 'self' was mainly employed as a reflexive pronoun, as in "I myself". The word was gradually broadened into a noun in English only relatively recently. The most widespread example was that of the philosopher Locke (1959, pp. 458-459) who defined the 'self' as "that conscious thinking thing, . . . concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends." As many have agreed, this Lockean personal 'self' is singular; it transcends the barriers of time, space, and physical changes. Moreover, it can be empirically investigated and comprehended.

On this line of thinking, according to the Christian tradition, all human beings have unique souls that will be saved or damned when the body returns to what it was created from. From the theological and Christian point of view, flashes of conscience and moments of communion with God reveal our true spiritual essence. Finally, all these aforementioned-conscience, social placement and the sense of spirituality give the 'self' an immediate reality that would seem hard to deny.

Starting with Locke (1959), Western thinkers have attempted to define the 'self'. As an example, in the field of psychology, Shafer (1978) has delimited the 'person' as agent, whereas the 'self' is reflective. In addition, object-relations theorists classified the 'self' into true and false aspects, the first one as being authentic and instinctive, the second one as being a mask put to fit into the society. From Gergen's (1988) perspective, the 'self' is just an illusion forced upon us by language.

Another definition that is worth taking into account is that of Neisser (1988), who has argued that there are five different selves that should be experienced by everyone: the ecological 'self' perceived through bodily experience; the interpersonal 'self' of emotional rapport and communication; the remembered 'self' who exists in time; the private inner 'self' we discover through the recognition that our

conscious experiences are internal; and, eventually, the conceptual 'self' learned through cultural models. Neisser's (1988) five selves can be condensed as follows:

- Ecological—bodily experience.
- Interpersonal—communication.
- Remembered—memory.
- Private—internal consciousness.
- Conceptual—cultural models.

Furthermore, guided by the discipline of anthropology, we shall attempt to explicate the limits and potentials of the human condition through the study of the beliefs and experiences of individuals in cultures other than one's own. Viewed from this perspective, the individual exists only within a social and cultural environment. To put it differently, we can really know ourselves only if we know 'others', and we can really know 'others' only if we know the *cultures* in which *they* (and *we*) exist. Therefore, the cultural element is of utmost important in defining both the 'self' and the 'other'.

Additionally, Sapir (1949) views the 'self' in another light. In his opinion, culture equals personality. He gave his first seminar on culture and personality in 1930. In his attempt to develop an interdisciplinary study that would include psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and anthropology, he appreciated the genuine integrated traditional cultures that could foster artistic personalities.

Sapir considered that culture should never be viewed as a super organic entity existing over and above individuals, but could be comprehended only through the perceptions and responses of the multiple personality types. Moreover, he argued that an adequate anthropology should take into consideration the originality of individuals.

From his perspective, culture itself might best be grasped as being synonymous to a personality, which he labelled as a multileveled, integrated system of symbolically interconnected patterns. In his opinion, both the individual and culture are systems of ideas carrying

meaning and thus, there is not necessarily any clash between them. To put it differently, each individual, like any cultural personality, is unique and cannot resemble another one.

The 'Self' of the 'Other'

After some attempts to answer the questions regarding the true essence of the 'self', many anthropologists, culturalists and psychoanalysts attract attention to the selves of the 'others'. They attempt to find how do they vary from our own or in what way do the identities of those raised in a different culture or in a different time, diverge from ours?

In this respect, we thought of analysing some cultures and put them in antithesis so that we may find out some resemblances and discrepancies between them.

For instance, in India, people are said to be not individuals, but 'dividuals'. This means that they are constituted not by self-actualisation and personal initiative, but by exchanges of substances, especially foods. In this environment and culture, persons are permeable, assimilating the moral qualities of their families, their castes, and even their homes and villages. For instance, people who had the same *ur*, or home village, are believed to manifest the same essential behaviour, since a person eats the food grown in village fields and drinks the water that springs from the soil into village wells.

Going further, we found out that the Japanese and the Americans have antithetical family lives, attitudes, and ideals. As a rule, Americans are self-assertive, controversial and individualistic. By contrast, the Japanese are supposed to be group-oriented. In the Japanese culture, the community is at the centre. This means that they do not want to be excluded from the community they belong. Their wish is to occupy their proper place in a well-organised social unit. From this assertion, we may easily draw the conclusion that

they readily subordinate themselves to the demands of 'others' endeavouring to avoid any possibilities of confrontation.

These discrepancies have been revealed by psychological tests, which have demonstrated that the Japanese self-reported emotions are less intense than those of the Americans. Moreover, they proved that the Japanese are more modest than the Americans. Besides, they are more intuitive of the needs of others, less aggressive, more obedient, more concerned with reciprocity, and more attentive to fitting in than to demonstrating personal achievement.

From these considerations, one question may arise: Do these discrepancies mean that the Japanese and the Americans are basically different in terms of their inner experiences of the 'self'?

In fact, both the East Asian and the American culture have much in common in terms of the values they aspire to. Neither culture, in any case, wishes to disrupt the social surface with emotional outbursts or angry confrontations. Whereas interdependent individuals must continually interact with one another in their households and communities that cannot be disregarded, the Americans have the utmost capacity to retreat from interaction. This does not obligatory mean they have opponent selves, only that present historical and cultural circumstances allow them a degree of physical and psychological detaching from others that is less possible for their East Asian counterparts, who must take into account the formal etiquette to preserve the boundaries of potentially antithetical social worlds.

We may easily observe that the differences in the way people present themselves thus may correlate with the discrepancies in cultural values, particularly in the values implanted by indigenous patterns of authority and subordination. Let us consider the meaning of two characteristic aphorisms as

illustrations of the distinctions between the Japanese and the Americans: The American maxim is "The squeaky wheel gets the grease"; the Japanese, "The nail that stands out gets pounded down."

From the linguistic point of view, these quotes may mean that the Japanese socio-centric 'self' avoids distinction, while the American egocentric 'self' requires attention. Besides, these sayings may be better understood by putting them in a more political light. The Western people who are "squeaky wheels" make noise with the view of improving their situations. From the cultural perspective, the political and social world will react positively to those who make demands upon it. Conversely, the Japanese proverb voices a fear of the punishment that will inevitably materialise if one dares to be visible. In fact, for fear of acting in a manner that is seen as egotistical, Japanese subordinate themselves to the community. It is not because they have basically different selves.

As a conclusion, the Japanese and the Chinese selves do not necessarily deviate from those of Westerners. The discrepancies lie in the ideals of proper ways of being and in the assumptions about how to shape their lives.

Moreover, we would like to put forward another cultural model that is the Romanian culture. In the Romanian culture, the identity of the people is shaped by their cultural representations: their Orthodox Christian religion and tradition, their Christian values and language. Like the Japanese, the Romanians manifest belonging to the Orthodox Christian community. They have a strong feeling of community membership. In the Romanian culture, there are certain values which can be defined as the 'selves' of the Romanians: openness, loving and religious. In the Romanian culture, family represents an important Romanian value. In fact, Romania is a family-focused society. The family cult has also at its

basis the Christian religion, that of the Holy Family: baby Jesus, Joseph and Mother of God.

As for the Christian language, the 'other' is labelled as 'brother' or 'sister' since they both have the same soul in Christ. The Romanian identity is also shaped by their respect for the past, by the respect for their saints.

In reality, human beings all over the world are connected by the shared awareness of death, the intricate issue of finding meaning in life, and, especially, by the needs and constraints set by every person. In other words, every society comes across both self-loss and autonomy.

In conclusion, the 'other' may be different from our 'self' if we want him/her to be. The 'other' should not be viewed as the competing side. In other words, the identity of any culture should be shaped by the values it reveals and not by the values the 'other' culture display. In our opinion, as we mentioned above, every culture has its own way of acting and living, its own identity, but there is also a common core. We all have a soul, we all fight the same realities and we all struggle to come to terms with concepts like 'life' and 'death'. We consider that the competition between the 'self' and the 'other' may be resolved by building a bridge across cultures. The ideal bridge is built by the values which, for instance, the Romanians and the Japanese display: submissiveness, openness and respect, and by the Christian belief that all human

beings have unique souls that will be saved or damned when the body returns to what it was created from.

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