

Experience Day International Studies



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Cultural Interaction: Conflict and Cooperation.

Cultural Interaction is part of a second-year course of International Studies, in which we take real-life case studies of international social, economic, and political conflict and cooperation, and interpret them from the perspective of cultural studies. This Experience Day is an excerpt of this course, in which we look at culture in terms of representation and as form-of-life. In what sense is culture a matter of life and death? And what is the definition of culture?

To prepare for the Experience Day, please complete the reading, page 3-18, and answer the questions below, we will discuss the homework during the lecture and the work group.

Homework questions to prepare (5)

- How would you define culture?
- How is it different from politics?
- How does/can religion play a role in the definition of culture?
- What is a cultural identity? (Can you name a few examples?)
- (Why) is it important to have a cultural identity?

Cultural Interactions Conflict and Cooperation



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Preamble



Australian Magpie singing¹

Let us start this introduction with listening – to a bird: the Australian magpie. Considering its sounds as ‘singing’ or ‘music’ is an anthropomorphism, with ‘anthropomorphism’ indicating that people give names to things so as to place them in their own lifeworld, or to ‘morph’ them according to a human logic. Scholarly speaking – so not spiritually, an issue to which we will come back – the bird, in making its organised sounds, is not communicating with human beings. It is sending out something, and listening to what comes back, from its own kind. Biologically speaking this is clear. Culturally speaking it is more complicated, though, for the study of culture implies the study of expression. With regard to this, and in terms of interaction, the question is twofold: Do magpies have culture as a result of which they express things that can be understood and learned, also through generations, by members of their own species? And can this exchange of expressions then also be meaningful to others, like other magpie species, or a host of other species, including that of human beings?

In what follows, when focusing on cultural interactions, we will start with human beings and their cultural interactions. Yet at the end of the explorations, we will also come to consider animal cultures, and technological ones. We do so to counter a too self-evident domination of anthropomorphism. If people define a bird’s sounds as ‘singing’ or as ‘music’, this is an anthropomorphism. When people describe such ‘singing’ as a matter of ‘competition’ or as the marking of a territory this is an anthropomorphism as well since the very definition of ‘territory’ is a human one. Or, to give a third example: an anthropomorph way of defining whether other beings have a sense of self is the mirror-test. Only a small number of species appears to be capable of recognising itself in a mirror: chimpanzees, orang-utans, bonobos, Asian elephants, dolphins – and magpies. Yet why would the human mirror be the universal marker of self-recognition or a sense of self? Suppose that octopuses would be the self-proclaimed rulers of the planet. They might turn the world into an ‘octopomorph’ one, consequently. Studying human beings, octopus scholars would ask whether human arms, hands, legs, feet, noses and sexual organs have their own independent forms of intelligence and agency, for this would be analogous to the intelligence of an octopus. In the perception of octopuses, people would be limited, if not handicapped animals: they appear to have a centre of intelligence only in their heads! Recent octopus research even suggests that human beings need a mirror to recognize themselves as a self. Human beings also cannot

¹ See <https://wildambience.com/wildlife-sounds/australian-magpie/>

change the colours and structures of their skin. They appear to make up for this incapacity by constructing artificial, colourful things with which they cover their skin.

If we come to consider cultural interactions in relation to human beings first, and then to animal cultures and technological ones, this can only be done systematically on the basis of a definition of culture that makes the transition between the three possible. And as the scholarly history of the study of culture proves, it has proven to be notoriously difficult to formulate an adequate definition of such a common thing as culture. For instance, a popular study on cultural differences, especially in the world of business – Erin Meyer’s *The Culture Map: Decoding How People Think, Lead, and Get Things Done Across Cultures* (2014) – marks cross-cultural interaction on the basis of eight dominant aspects of cultural habits. These concern, for instance, how people communicate (explicitly vs. implicitly) or evaluate (direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback), how they lead (egalitarian vs. hierarchical) or how they disagree (confrontational vs. avoiding confrontation). Yet Meyer’s study does not *define* what is meant by culture.

Other example: in *Understanding Culture: A Handbook for Students in the Humanities* (2017) Babette Hellemans defines culture as: ‘the sum of the collective **representations** associated with a particular society’ (18; emphasis in text). This is a definition, for sure, but here one problem is that culture appears to be something that ‘is associated with’. This implies that it can only be assessed from some sort of outside, namely by actors who do the associating. Secondly, culture appears to mark a society. Of course, we should ask what is meant with ‘society’, then, but the equation of culture with society is in any case a controversial one. In what follows, we will not consider culture to be equivalent with a society. On the contrary, a society may host many cultures (cf. chapter 4). Finally, we will argue that culture is more than the sum total of collective representations. We will surely deal with the force in representations, but also move beyond them in an attempt to come up with a concise definition of culture, in chapter 1, as something that people do not only have or use, or associate themselves with, but that they embody and *live*.

One of the reasons for the difficulty to define culture may be that culture is generally dealt with on the basis of two different manifestations. On the one hand, culture indicates the entire set of practices, expressions and artefacts by which people organise their life-worlds. This mode of culture is involved, for example, when people speak of ‘Japanese culture’, or ‘Tapirapé culture’ – the culture of one of the indigenous peoples living in Brazil. As the two examples illustrate, scale is not decisive for culture, for we just compared a culture of approximately 126.5 million people with one that currently consists of about two hundred. On the other hand, culture is often used to indicate the entire set of artistic expressions produced by people in fields such as architecture, sculpture, music, literature, cinema, games, and so forth. The two are often distinguished by means of the use of the word ‘culture’ with a small ‘c’ and a capital C.

The distinction between culture and Culture connotes a hierarchy that has come to be questioned more and more over the past six decades. One of the issues with this distinction was why, for instance, classical European music would be assigned a capital C and pop music would not; why art house movies would, but by no means television series. Also, why would the Ghanaian artist and

ethnomusicologist Mustafa Tettey Addy (1942-) be considered a performer, whereas the French composer and bird watcher Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) would be blessed with the aura of the capital C, precisely due to his being regarded as a composer. Likewise, why would the construction of a secret language for her company of women by medieval mystic Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) be a matter of linguistics only, whereas her songs were art? We will return to the issue of cultural hierarchies in Chapters 5 and 8. For now the important point is that the relation between the two, culture and Culture, is pivotal in the field of the humanities for the *forms* that they may use and what these forms *express*. Anthropologists study culture in terms of how culture is a matter of the human organization of a lifeworld. In the humanities the question is what culture expresses through the many forms that it consists of, or that it uses; what such expressive forms can, or may mean; and how such expressions embody a mode of living.

With the heading of this study being ‘conflict and cooperation’, these two need to be defined as well. First of all, in many instances, c/Culture is considered to be a positive matter that brings people together. This is for instance what the website on culture of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO tells us:

In today’s interconnected world, culture’s power to transform societies is clear. Its diverse manifestations – from our cherished historic monuments and museums to traditional practices and contemporary art forms – enrich our everyday lives in countless ways. Heritage constitutes a source of identity and cohesion for communities disrupted by bewildering change and economic instability. Creativity contributes to building open, inclusive and pluralistic societies. Both heritage and creativity lay the foundations for vibrant, innovative and prosperous knowledge societies.²

The quote not only entails a contradiction – culture is on the one hand a defence against ‘bewildering change and economic instability’ whereas on the other it lays the ‘foundations for vibrant, innovative and prosperous societies’ – but also sketches a pretty rosy picture of what culture produces, especially when it is equated with creativity. If the creativity in culture is at the basis of ‘open, inclusive, and pluralistic societies’ there are as much examples where people have rather creatively produced societies that are culturally speaking closed, exclusive and uniform. Many of the devastating conflicts that people were engaged in, or wilfully have engaged in, were propelled by culture. We preserve the notion of conflict, in accordance with its etymological origin, for violent confrontations between people. Conflict goes back to Latin *con-fligere*: ‘to fight/strike with’. Conflict is different from friction here. Even open, inclusive and pluralistic societies will brim with frictions. Such frictions can be productive, positive even. They can also be annoying. They may lead to conflict, but not necessarily so.

As for cooperation, historically speaking, there has been much more intercultural cooperation than conflict. The reason is simple: people may wage war at times, but they always trade and exchange things, even in times of war. War is temporary, that is; trade and exchange are continuous. Sometimes trade is even

² “Protecting Our Heritage and Fostering Creativity,” UNESCO, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/protecting-our-heritage-and-fostering-creativity>.

going on between warring parties. Cooperation etymologically means: 'to work together'. This can be, but need not be work as in modern labour. There are so many ways, also economically, in which people may work together. For instance, the cultural forms of knowledge and practices that women developed with regard to giving birth – also indicated by 'labour' – were developed within cultures but also much helped by cultural interactions.³ One example: currently in Peru health care workers who were used to western ways of giving birth managed to work together with indigenous pregnant women who wanted to give birth according to their customs: sitting upright, with a trusted or loved relative behind them and with a rope in front of them with knots to support themselves.⁴ No mistake: people have tendencies throughout history to mark other cultures as 'other' or 'less'. Yet they have time and again also shown great interest in, or attention for others and other cultures. The human animal may be a pretty brutal one at times, it is also an attentive and curious creature. Or it can be.

The book was developed for a second year Ba-course in the Leiden University department of International Studies in The Hague. Yet it can be useful for several studies elsewhere, due to its systemic build-up. The book is divided in two blocks. In the first block, culture is studied respectively in terms of larger-scale forms of organization, or realms, such as culture itself, nation-state, world, society, civilization, and community (chapters 1-6). In this block, culture is defined as such, and cultural interactions are studied for how they relate to politics, to the political, to economies, to affective economies, and to religion. In the second block, forms of self and selfhood are central. There, cultural interactions will be studied respectively in relation to notions of individuality, affiliation, comparability, dis-ability, animality, and technology (chapters 7-12).

Developing the course and writing this book was a learning process in itself. Originally, I was trained in the domain of arts and culture – comparative literature and theory specifically. My position at the Leiden University Centre for the Arts in Society and at the department of Film- and Literary Studies was the result of this training. At the start of my teaching in The Hague I tried to translate the knowledge developed in my fields of expertise to a body of students that by and large missed training in the arts and culture and was interested much more in the relevance of cultural dynamics and tensions in the forcefields of international, socio-political, economic and religious histories and developments. As will become clear, works of art, literature, films, and music proved to be excellent guides in exploring these international dynamics, histories and developments. Still, I had to recalibrate, reorient, explore new fields of research, also in response to rapidly developing, planetary developments that involved both human interactions and trans-human ones.

³ See, for instance, Robbie E. Davis-Floyd and Carolyn Fishel Sargent, *Childbirth and Authoritative Knowledge: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, foreword Rayna Rapp (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

One editor of this volume also worked on another one in which the effects of economic or military violence on giving birth are central: Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Fishel Sargent, *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ Carlos Gomez, "Giving birth upright, with maté – Peru clinics open arms to indigenous women," United Nations Population Fund, September 29, 2016, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/giving-birth-upright-maté---peru-clinics-open-arms-indigenous-women>.

Nothing in what follows is decisive, or conclusive. Almost everything is a matter of scholarly debate, agreement, conversation, or rejection. This does not mean that anything goes. In fact, scholarly speaking, nothing goes. Scholarly speaking, matters only 'go' depending on substantive sensing, reasoning, motivating, underpinning, choosing, agreeing, or disagreeing. With regard to the material offered in this text, many of the readers may agree with this or that, others with yet other points; few will agree with nothing. In the field of culture, it is impossible to have a neutral or objective position. Even if this text is an introduction, it is also political in the sense that time and again the question is what not just individuals but collectives choose for. In a sense this introduction is a provocation. It asks readers: 'What do you choose *for*?' Choosing against something is also possible. In my assessment and politically speaking, choosing against something is, in the end, less forceful.

Every chapter consists of two parts that each start with a piece of music, as a musical motto. The pieces can be either songs with text, or pieces without text. Readers are asked to listen to these before reading the chapter. The reason I wanted to involve music is that it may be the best way to avoid thinking about culture only in terms of 'meaning'. Cultures are as much a matter of rhythms, of choreographies, of movement, of sounds, of all the senses, of which there are more than five.⁵ Studying culture is not only something of the scholarly mind, that is. It is as much about sensuous and sensitive perceptiveness, since culture is always embodied. Consequently, cultural scholarship that wants to make sense cannot be a matter of the mind only as well. Cultural knowledge is embodied knowledge by definition.

⁵ The Dutch psychiatrist Iris Sommer could easily get to 11. To test her awareness, she decided to live for a year in Mumbai and the book on this experiment was called *De zeven zintuigen: Over waarnemen en onwaarnemen*, or: *The Seven Senses: About Perception and Non Perception*.

Culture in Terms of Representation and as Form-of-life

- 1.1. In what senses is culture a matter of life and death?**
- 1.2. What is the definition of culture?**

1.1. In what senses is culture a matter of life and death?

Señoras y señores
Buenas tardes, buenas noches
Buenas tardes, buenas noches
Señoritas y señores
To be here with you tonight brings me joy, que alegría
For this music is my language, and the world es mi familia
For this music is my language, and the world es mi familia
For this music is my language
And the world es mi familia
For this music is my language...

“The World Es Mi Familia,” from *Coco* (2016)⁶

In terms of why culture matters and why cultural interactions matter, perhaps the most pronounced and basic question is: in what senses is culture a matter of life and death? Giving an answer to this question forces us to come up with an answer to a second question: what is the definition of culture? To answer both questions, this chapter explores two pivotal concepts: ‘representation’ and ‘form-of-life’. The two will be dealt with by taking seriously that culture is a matter of life and death and a matter of representation, or perhaps more than this: a form-of-life.

Human beings are not the only animals to have culture (cf. chapter 11 and 12). Yet for centuries the fact that human beings had or used culture was the dominant marker of difference between them and animals. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) stated that only people have a sense of their own mortality because they can think about their inevitable death and express their feelings, anxieties and desires about it. For sure, animals also die, but according to Heidegger they have no sense beforehand, or no sense of anticipation, that their life is restricted, for this is a culturally determined issue. Leaving aside the issue whether or not animals sense that their life is limited, it is certain that all cultures make people aware that life is confined within the limits of birth and death.

In general, or fundamentally, human life depends on culture, since it contains the entire set of practices, attitudes, technologies, and artefacts by means of which human beings are able to organise themselves in conflict and cooperation with the living environment. For instance, how to find, prepare and eat food is a matter of culture. The French philosopher Roland Barthes noted that food is a “system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour.”⁷ With respect to food, its production and consumption, culture is a fundamental issue for the transfer of knowledge between people, collectively and across generations. Here we already have two pivotal elements of a definition of culture. Human beings are not only a cultivating species but also a speaking, communicating and teaching

⁶ Adrian Molina, “The World Es Mi Familia,” music by Germaine Franco, first release November 10, 2017, from the Disney/Pixar film “Coco”, Walt Disney Music Company and Pixar Talking Pictures, 2017.

⁷ Ronald Barthes, ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,’ in Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik and Alice Julier, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

species. Human beings would die if they were not able to culturally transmit their knowledge to one another and across generations.

The wisdoms people teach one another with regard to birth, life, and death vary considerably across cultures. The conceptualisation of death, the rituals surrounding birth and death, and the practices of dealing with death and the dead differ substantially between, say, Mexican and Maori cultures. More so, even within a particular culture, there will be great difference between individual communities. For instance, in Dutch culture the differences between Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and secular communities are substantial in their dealing with life and death. Another example: death has come to be dealt with differently with the arrival of consumer culture; or it has been dealt with differently in the current phase of global capitalism.

In the context of global capitalism and the flows it has produced, some speak of a 'necropolitics', as Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe did in an article from 2003. Mbembe used the term 'necropolitics' to indicate that the organisation of life and death is not only a cultural concern, but a governmental and legal issue as well – and we will return to the relation between culture and politics in the next two chapters. In most cases and most cultures, life will be valued more than death, although some cultures encounter situations in which death is valued more than life, whether for spiritual reasons or out of shame. In terms of politics and legality, the question is who is allowed to live, or for whom will authorities take responsibility. As we will see in the next chapter, politics is distinguishable from culture, here, but also closely connected to it.

The value that people attach to their culture is not fixed. They assimilate into another culture, or they combine elements from different cultures to design a new mixture that feels like their own. The Dutch, for instance, are famous for their tulips nowadays. Yet the cultivation of tulips came from Turkey – 'tulipa' originally means 'flower resembling a turban'. When in the 17th century some tulips that were given by the sultan as a precious gift to a Flemish diplomat were stolen from a Leiden professor, named Carolus Clusius, an entire new industry started that redefined the Dutch self-image. The same scientist, under whose supervision the *hortus botanicus* was made in Leiden, also introduced potato, tobacco, tomatoes, beans and maize in the Low Countries. For centuries the potato would be another Dutch icon. Other example: Russians can be proud to be Russian, yet that very name is adopted from the Vikings, who were called 'Rus', and who in the 8th century had settled in the region stretching from the Baltic sea to the Black Sea. And as for Vikings, these were originally much opposed to Christianity, yet assimilated into Christian culture over the course of four centuries, which is why all Nordic countries in Europe are now by and large protestant. All this is ample evidence, then that on the one hand people can be irreverent and flexible and innovative in their dealing with culture.

On the other hand, there is also ample evidence of how culture may be so quintessential to human beings that they cling to it as if it were life itself. People have been willing to give their lives for a culture, or a religion, either because they refused to give in to a suppressive power or because they were willing to give their life for the greater good, which is coined as 'altruistic suicide'. All martyrs can be considered as an example, here. The explanation may be that life without culture is not possible for human beings. One of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade was not just that human beings were enslaved, but that they were robbed of their culture and

meaningful lifeworld. Yet despite this depravation, they started to reshape their lives culturally, in the new, enforced circumstances. The reason was that life without culture is not possible, or not bearable. At the same time, for enslaved people the culture of origin held a palpable attraction for decades, and even centuries.

In this context, the African-American philosopher bell hooks (1952-) – whose refusal to spell her name with capitals is intentional – was interested in pedagogy and didactics in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) or *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2004). She feels herself to be a part of a long tradition of people who had to teach themselves how to organise their own culture against oppressive forces in such a way that they felt alive, valuable, meaningful. Here, hooks noticed the enormous powers residing in representation. Representation's power resides in two manifestations, here. If people belong to a certain culture, everything they do, whether they want to or not, expresses this culture. The ways in which people walk, talk, belch, decorate their environments, have sex, dress, eat, or hold their head; they all express a certain culture. In whatever they do, people represent a culture, then, or they embody different cultures; whether they want it or not. The realm of representation also contains all the explicit ways in which people are given the task to represent something. If people are appointed to be ambassador for Mozambique in China, for instance, they represent their country, but also its culture(s).

As the prefix re- suggests, representation is a manifestation of something else, then. Yet the question with culture is, what this 'something else' is. Here we encounter the loop of culture. Most CEO's, for instance, will not accept an old, second hand, creaky kitchen table as their desk. They will want an impressive, massive, solid, big, shiny table, with one chair at the head. This table and the organization of space that it implies, represents a specific distribution of power, and suggests that the CEO has a real power that is represented through the table. Yet it also works the other way around, for what would the CEO be without it, or without a salary, without the dress or the suit, without the contract? More in general, the paradox here is that any culture uses multiple sets of representations, but at the same time the entire set of representations also embodies that culture. It is not the case that there is some entity of 'culture' that comes first, and is then represented. Culture is 'present' only through representations. This is why the struggle about what is being represented, is so immensely charged.

In this context, hooks noticed the nigh unstoppable force residing in movies, as powerful instruments of cultural representation that influence the ways in which people think, feel and sense. This was partly a matter of who was or was not being represented on the screen, but more importantly of how people were being represented. In the context of the U.S.A., it concerned a movie industry with its own aesthetic and political agendas and its own people in charge. Still, any kind of political power has always been invested in this force of representation, and for good reason. The first Jesuits who came to the South Americas had well-developed programs to teach indigenous peoples to sing Christian songs. Currently, the Chinese government is very capable of suppressing any form of cultural expression in the Western Uighur part of China. Aside from political oppression, or lethal violence, the Chinese government developed massive and intensive teaching programs to make Uighur people give up their own culture and to make them culturally Chinese.

Situations like these may drive people to a point where they would rather die than give up on what organises their lives meaningfully, affectively and sensibly:

their own culture. This does not mean they desire to die, although this can also happen, but that they are willing to risk their life in a struggle or battle for their own culture. Mahatma Gandhi took this risk, for instance. Yet his murderer also did. The latter was a Hindu nationalist who considered Gandhi's agreeing to the separation of India and Pakistan to be too favourable to Muslims. He was willing to sacrifice his own life in the fight for a dominant Hindu culture. He knew he would be captured, having killed Gandhi in a crowd with broad daylight, tried and sentenced to death. And so it happened.

To many, culture will not be experienced as a matter of life and death on an everyday basis. People simply live their culture. The latter phrase may seem odd. Do people not *have* a culture? In the next part of this chapter, when answering the question of how to define culture, we will make a scholarly decision to reject this idea of people 'having' a culture. A culture is not a car. It is a form-of-life; people live it, and this is why they are so attached to it.

We started this chapter with the song "The world es mi familia", from the animation movie *Coco* (2016). Its lyrics were written by Adrian Molina and the music by composer Germaine Franco, a Latino and American of Mexican descent. The movie deals with the most famous day of festivities in Mexico, *Día de muertos*, on the 1st and 2nd of November. For those not familiar with this festival, the film is just fiction that as such can be fun. To Mexicans it may mean much more. They do not simply *know* the festival; they live it. The song goes like this:

Señoras y señores
Buenas tardes, buenas noches
Buenas tardes, buenas noches
Señoritas y señores
To be here with you tonight brings me joy, que alegría
For this music is my language, and the world es mi familia
For this music is my language, and the world es mi familia
For this music is my language
And the world es mi familia
For this music is my language...⁸

Textually, the song embodies a cultural interaction between an English-U.S. American and a Spanish-Mexican culture. This interaction becomes evident given that two languages are mixed in one sentence, as in 'the world es mi familia'. The latter phrase makes it sound as if the boy considers the whole world to be his family, which gives it a harmonious touch. Yet the cultural meanings and connotations of 'family' differ substantially across cultures, ranging from a core cis family with father, mother and two kids, to large and flexible groups of relatives, which need not even be related by blood. As for the harmony within families, all readers can decide whether families are only about harmony and cooperation or whether there may be considerable conflicts involved. As for the concept world, we will be discussing it closely in Chapter 3 and then conclude that assuming world to be 'one' may be the wrong way of looking at it.

⁸ Adrian Molina and Gemaine Franco, "The World Es Mi Familia," cf. note 1.

For now, the most important thing is that the song clearly indicates that culture is always related to collectives, from relatively small to bigger ones. This will be the focus of the first six chapters. Let us therefore consider, in the next part of this chapter, how culture can be defined as a collective endeavour; and let us choose how to define culture.

1.2. What is the definition of culture?

All the people in the world are dreaming (get up stand up)
Some of us cry for the rights of survival (get up stand up)
Saying c'mon c'mon! Stand up for your rights (get up stand up)
While others don't give a damn
They're all waiting for a perfect day
You better get up and fight for your rights
Don't be afraid of the move you make
You better listen to your tribal voice!

“Tribal Voice” by Yothu Yindi⁹

In the field of cultural studies, so-called objective ways of studying, or say measuring culture, are possible, but the question is how meaningful these methods are. Consider, for instance, the visas that the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection hands out, requesting applicants to confirm they understand that:

Australian society values respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, Parliamentary democracy, equality of men and women and a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play and compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good. Australian society values equality of opportunity for individuals, regardless of their race, religion or ethnic background.¹⁰

Scholars from the University of Western Australia then wondered: would these values indeed be subscribed to by Australians? They organised an inquiry to which 7000 people replied; the results revealed that power, achievements and traditions are not on top of the list of Australians' values. Instead, they value benevolence, security and societal universalism highly.¹¹ These values are specified as:

People who value benevolence would strive to be loyal, dependable, honest, helpful, kind, and forgiving. ... Individuals who value security deem social order, national security, and their family's (and own personal) security to be very important. ... People who value universalism in a society, attach great importance to equality, social justice, tolerance, wisdom and peace in the world.¹²

Given this, one would surely love to meet Australians. Yet the passages quoted and paraphrased, above all, show the limitations of so-called empirical data in the cultural domain. How representative are the 7.000 who participated? How many Aboriginals replied, for instance; and would they agree that “equality, social justice, tolerance, wisdom and peace in the world” are the backbone of Australian culture?

⁹ Yothu Yindi, “Tribal Voice,” Lyrics by Mandawuy, first release September 1992, track 3 on *Tribal Voice*, Mushroom Records, 1991.

¹⁰ “What are Australian values?,” The Values Project, August 16, 2018, <https://www.thevaluesproject.com/blog/what-are-australian-values/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Would they feel they were being dealt with benevolently? And then, though Australia does not collect statistics on the ethnic origins of its residents, it asks people to specify their ancestries during each census. In 2016, 16.5% of Australians felt to be East Asian, Southeast Asian or Central and Southern Asian. Did they respond to the survey? If so, would they have swapped their culture of origin for this Australian one? And just one more question: if Australians prioritise security, the question is whose security, or in how far the longing for security by some is compatible with benevolence and universalism.

With culture, we are in the diverse and, at times, disparate realm of histories, situations and positions with different values that people are, or *feel to be*, attached to. We approach this complex field inevitably with our own cultural background. This is why any empirical evidence is always framed by positions or situations from which people collected and interpreted it. The values mentioned above, moreover, illustrate that culture is not something people simply *have*, but that it is dear to them, *drives* them and shapes their life-worlds. You cannot 'have' benevolence, for instance, you have to embody, practice and enact it. The Australian example also makes clear that there are no pure cultures. Australia only seems to be an exceptional migratory country here. Generally, human beings are a migratory species. The history of Europe is one relentless dynamic of migration. In this context, the 19th-century nation-state's desire to discipline or purify national cultures becomes close to an anomaly. Still, the very construction of the nation-state, and the passions involved, demonstrate once more that cultures are not rational constructs. They are a matter of affect.

We will return to the notion of affect in Chapter 5. For now, literature helps to understand what is meant by it. Ever since the Second World War, Dutch history includes the history of the so-called Dutch-Moluccans; some 15.000 family members of 3.500 soldiers who had served in the Dutch colonial army and were expelled from Indonesia in 1950. Their arrival in the Netherlands was a shameful affair, since they were not welcomed into Dutch society but were stowed away in separate and isolated camps. The painful results of this cultural exclusion became evident during the decades that followed. Sylvia Pessireron, daughter of first-generation migrants, addressed this in novels between 1998 and 2014 that carried titles such as *Closed trunks; The silenced soldier; We came here by service order; Between people and ghosts; To marry in seven Dutch cultures*.¹³ In an interview Pessireron stated: "Yes, the pain of your parents – and you can only feel it. They do not talk about it – perhaps this is the worst." (transl. mine, FWK) Apparently, this pain is something that determines the parents' lives, is present always, though not expressed, as an undercurrent that defines all relations.¹⁴ It is a matter of affect that is prior to language, or than can block language. On an everyday basis it may lead to emotions of sadness, anger, depression, confusion. Affectively speaking, *knowing* the history of the Dutch Moluccans is not enough; what matters is to feel it, to sense and understand it, and to acknowledge the pain embodied in it.

¹³ *Gesloten koffers* (2014); *De verzwegen soldaat* (2012); *Wij kwamen hier op dienstbevel* (2003); *Tussen mensen en geesten* (1996); *Trouwen in zeven Nederlandse culturen* (1998).

¹⁴ On the expressive force of silence in the Dutch Moluccan context, see Gerlov van Engelenhoven, "Whereof one cannot speak...": *Deceptive voices and agentic silences in the articulation of identities of the Moluccan postcolonial migrant community in the Netherlands*. AUP, 2021.

In many definitions of culture, the intrinsically relational aspect of affect is missing. For instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines culture as “1. The arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively; 2. The ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society; 2.1. The attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular social group.”¹⁵ In this case, culture with a capital C is mentioned first, and the lower-case culture, as it were, only comes second. And if the dictionary opts for the ‘intellectual achievement’, then feelings, emotions, or affect do not play a decisive role in either case.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) came closer to an adequate definition of culture when he used a definition by sociologist Alfred Weber to describe culture as follows:

Since man is ‘an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,’ I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning.¹⁶

The fragment in quotation marks is Weber’s here, and it is culturally speaking telling that Geertz’s definition incorporates what he learned from someone else. As for the definition of culture itself, I firstly notice that Geertz defines mankind as animals. This emphasises not so much intellectual achievement, but rather drives and impulses. Secondly, culture is seen to be palpably made and done to people, given that it suspends them in a self-made web. This ‘web’ metaphor is affectively charged – one can feel its push and pull. Thirdly, culture is not about applying objective natural laws or discovering them by means of experiments, but a search for significance, meaning and interpretation as a matter of sense.

Still, Geertz’s definition is highly metaphorical. I endeavour to be more precise and will take my cue from a concept proposed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), which was subsequently politicised by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1942-). The latter, in a study on early medieval communities of monks, noticed that these monks replaced notions of possession – of what one *has* – with what is used or practiced: something one *does*. In so doing, they shaped a form of life from scratch that existed counter to and relatively independent from political power. It was a life, moreover, that did not exist separately from its form. Form and life were one: a form-of-life. David Kishik’s study on the concept has shown that form-of-life has always been observed from two sides: “the first view focuses on the unity and necessity of the human form of life as a given that persists over time, the opposite view emphasizes the diversity and contingency of different human forms and the ability to alter such conventions”.¹⁷ This is analogous to the ambiguity addressed in the previous part of this chapter – on the one hand, people have proven to be extremely flexible to adapt culturally, on the other hand, they have been willing to give their lives for the preservation of their culture.

Now, Agamben defined form-of-life in opposition to the modern political organisation of society. According to him, modern politics is a form of politics that

¹⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), s.v. “Culture.”

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

¹⁷ David Kishik, *Wittgenstein’s Form of Life* (London: Continuum, 2008), 121-22.

starts with the invention of sovereignty as supreme state power. This state power takes as its point of departure unprotected, naked life, so as to organise this life politically the way it wants to. Most people feel a baby that is born to be valuable as such, for instance. But what happens if the state does not grant or guarantee this new born child citizenship? Then it becomes illegal, and is without protection of the state. The difference between the two forms of life is captured by the difference between the Greek terms *zoë* and *bios*: between a life shared by all beings, and a politically disciplined form of life. Counter to this politically organised form, Agamben posited an autonomous form-of-life, which would be a 'happy form of life':

This 'happy life' should be rather, an absolutely profane 'sufficient life' that has reached the perfection of its own power and its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold.¹⁸

What Agamben proposes here, implies that any form of life is valuable in itself and does not depend on the acknowledgment of the state. If Agamben defines form-of-life in terms of its own power and communicability and in opposition to the rule of power and law, this can also be translated to the domain of culture. Culture is a communicable form in its own right, then, in a bottom-up organisation of life.

As Geertz noted, culture is a self-woven web in which people come to be entangled. Such culture-webs can be considered to be prior to politics. In this context, it is an unfortunate omission that Agamben did not pay attention to the monastic community of women that Hildegard von Bingen realised in the 12th century: against all the odds, in the context of the patriarchal powers of the Catholic church. Monks, as men, had always already implicated in the political game, and their attempt to organise their own life was less of a leap of faith. Women did not have that privilege. Nevertheless, they built on and established their own cultural existence in a community that lived its own form-of-life. This proves the point that culture, in first instance, is made bottom-up. In both cases, the examples are templates that show that there was never once an entity of culture that existed already. Or it consisted in part but that part was made into a new form.

The making of a life worth living in contemporary circumstances was defined by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre as a matter of *autogestion*.¹⁹ Again, this was a term that indicated that a form of life was made bottom-up. Elsewhere Lefebvre's phrased it like this: "A real culture is at once a mode of living, a way of thinking and an ability to act. It is a sentiment of life incorporated in a human community".²⁰ In a study called *Cultural Complexity* the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz also used the concept 'form of life' to indicate one aspect of life in general – next to the state, the market and explicit social and cultural movements.²¹ With form of life Hannerz meant interactions at the most local level. Here as well culture appeared to

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, transl. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 114-115.

¹⁹ Henri Lefebvre in *The Urban Revolution* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and *State, Space, World: Selected essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁰ Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 160. The original can be found in Henri Lefebvre, *La somme et le reste*, Tome II (Paris: La nef de Paris, 1959).

²¹ Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

be distinct from Culture, then, as if cinema or pop music would be something different than the organization of a bedroom chamber. Yet Culture is simply part of the broader field of culture, not distinct from it, as any bedroom will prove that is decorated with movie stars or pop artists.

All the aspects considered above, bring me to the following definition of culture:

Culture is a form-of-life, embodied in how collectives of beings *performatively* shape all aspects of their life and world, in communal existence, as a distinct, partly arbitrary, affectively charged, meaningful expression that is transferable through time and space, that can produce change, can resist change, or can cope with change.

Via the noun 'form' and the verb 'shape' both media and representations are implied. Forms can only be shaped in and through media, and it is only through these that representations can come to exist. As for the media and representations, this definition concerns much more than Culture with a capital C; the latter simply indicates the ways in which media (language, paint, space, etc.) are explored to the fullest in their potential to express being. Culture is part and parcel of culture, that is. 'Performatively', meanwhile, does not indicate the theatrical or dramatic. The term is derived from speech act theory, indicating instances when people simultaneously do what they say, like when they say: 'I promise'. In promising something people are both saying and doing just this: they perform the act of promising. Translated to the realm of human behaviour, or culture, the performative suggests that a culture becomes what people repeatedly express in their actions and doings.²² For instance, if people repeatedly, or always, take off their shoes before entering the house, the activity becomes an expression of their culture. No prior essence, like say 'politeness', is then merely expressed through this act. Culture is not an indication of the essence of people but of what people do, repeatedly and recurrently, and this repetition comes to be experienced as a matter of essence for that culture.

We started this part of the chapter with the song, "Tribal Voice", by an Australian band called Yothu Yindi: 'Child and Mother'. This is a band that consists of constantly interchanging musicians of aboriginal and 'balanda', that is non-aboriginal, or European-Australian descent. Its most famous singer died in 2013 and, although his name should no longer be mentioned according to aboriginal custom, his family gave consent to showing his work. Perhaps music is the best example to indicate the difference between representation and form-of-life. People not only 'look at', or listen to music, or interpret it. They do it, are moved by it and dance.

We will delve deeper into the relation between culture and politics, and between culture and the political in the next two chapters. Correspondingly, we will deal with the 19th century model of the nation-state that has become so self-evident globally. The first question is: In what sense is culture a matter of politics itself and how was and is culture used by politics?

²² The transition from speech act theory to human behavior and identity was made by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).