

## Cultural Boundaries: Imaginary or Real?

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Tässä artikkelissa tarkastellaan, millä ehdoilla rajojen metafora soveltuu välineeksi kulttuurin määrittelyyn ja kulttuurien kohtaamisen tutkimukseen. Tarkastelu perustuu filosofiseen analyysiin, joka ammentaa erityisesti Dave Elder-Vassin kirjasta *The Reality of Social Construction* (2012). Tulokseksi saadaan, että kulttuurirajat viittaavat ensisijaisesti yhteisöllisiin normeihin, joita erilaiset normipiireiksi kutsutut sosiaaliset ryhmät kannattavat ja toteuttavat. Kulttuurirajat ovat siten keinotekoisia, mutta todellisia siinä mielessä, että erilaiset kulttuurinormit voivat olla ristiriidassa keskenään ja eri normipiirit voivat olla keskenään erimielisiä. Rajojen metaforan todetaan sopivan kulttuurintutkimuksen välineeksi sikäli kuin se auttaa selittämään, mistä kulttuurien väliset konfliktit johtuvat ja miten kulttuurikonfliktit liittyvät erilaisien sosiaalisten ryhmien kannattamien ja toteuttamien normien rikkomiseen. Rajojen metafora sopii tähän tehtävään, koska sen avulla voidaan eri kulttuurit ja sosiaaliset ryhmät kuvata ja jäsentää erillisinä, mutta rajoiltaan sumeina ja muuttuvina, kollektiivisina entiteetteinä, jotka voivat sivuta toisiaan, törmätä toisiinsa ja olla osittain päällekkäisiä.

**Keywords:** cultural boundary, cultural conflict, cultural encounter, intercultural learning, norm circle

### 1 Introduction

In this paper, the metaphor of boundaries is discussed in terms of its suitability as a tool for examining cultural encounters and the defining of culture. The questions to be addressed are as follows: 1) To what do cultural boundaries refer, and of what do they basically consist? 2) On what conditions and to what extent is the metaphor of cultural boundaries appropriate? 3) On what conditions can cultural boundaries be broken or crossed? I examine these and other related questions based on a philosophical analysis that draws especially from Dave Elder-Vass's *The Reality of Social Construction* (2012). Elder-Vass combines a philosophical analysis of the concepts of cultural studies with the perspective of sociology of culture and he introduces the novel idea of norm circles, which is a powerful tool for analysing the issues of cultural encounters. By building on and expanding this tool, this paper provides a clear understanding of the basis of cultural differences and of transcending cultural boundaries, which are major topics of cultural studies and philosophy of culture.

### 2 The Notion of Cultural Boundaries

In his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1994, originally 1958), Chinua Achebe describes the clash of the tribal culture of Nigeria's Igbos and the colonial culture of British Christian missionaries in the end of the nineteenth century. The cultures begin to blend when the

white men come and try to communicate and live together with tribespeople. The novel explains how cultures with different ideas and beliefs can clash and be intolerant toward one another. Most of the theme is developed through the main character, Okonkwo, and his struggle against fear and anger. Throughout the book, Okonkwo tries to resolve the problems that develop all around him and within himself. As the story progresses, conflict overwhelms Okonkwo and leads to his, and the Igbo culture's, downfall. In view of this, Achebe's novel presents a gloomy example of a cultural encounter.

In general, cultural conflicts can take place in one of two main ways, both of which are presented in Achebe's novel. In the first way, the representatives of a culture (e.g. missionaries) do not acknowledge the cultural value and rights of another group, but instead forbid and prevent – with threats and bribes – traditions, practices, and customs of the group concerned. Colonialism (i.e. the exploitation of peoples by other peoples) and terrorism (for example motivated by religion) are extreme forms of this type of cultural conflict. In the second way, traditions, practices, and customs of one culture are more or less peacefully and even inadvertently replaced by those of another culture. This method of cultural conflict is often referred to as one of the effects of globalization (Ritzer 2004). Thus, (i) deliberate cultural oppression and (ii) peaceful cultural replacement (often driven by the economy) must be distinguished as separate forms of cultural conflicts. Both can take place slowly or rapidly and more or less systematically.

The concept of cultural conflicts involves another notion that is highly relevant here: cultural boundaries. The notion of cultural boundaries entails that different cultures form more or less distinct entities with more or less clear criteria for identity. Those criteria are supposed to make different cultures unique and capable of being differentiated from each other. Consequently, insofar as different cultures are identifiable, they cannot be reduced to being equal to each other, nor can they be amalgamated without losing their separate identities. However, the distinctness of cultures is open to debate because, for example, the distinguishing criteria for different cultures are negotiable and depend on tradition rather than being necessary and universally accepted. Accordingly, defining cultural boundaries is not like doing mathematics, where there is only one correct answer, but cultural boundaries are interest- and perspective-dependent, and even arbitrary to some extent (Elder-Vass 2012: 162–163, 171–173).

However, despite this vagueness, cultural boundaries have often been considered to be like walls that cannot be broken or crossed easily, because such crossing or breaking would require “intercultural learning” or “cultural acclimatization” in a kind of interim space (frontier or “brackish water”) between cultures. However, under certain conditions the learning is possible, meaning that people are able to interact and approach different cultures with tolerance and a benevolent curiosity. Activating this ability requires empathy and metacognitive skills such as interpreting, self-reflection, and help seeking.

The dichotomy between culture and nature has often been seen as crucial in the understanding of what culture is. This dichotomy means, among other things, that culture and nature are interrelated, so that culture is anything that is not nature and nature is anything that is not man-made and has not been manipulated by humans. Thus, culture is based on human agency, whereas nature is not. This fact – even if it may seem trivial – is highly relevant when attempting to define the concept of culture. Such defining is necessary in order to be able to identify and distinguish between different cultures. Therefore, we need at least an initial idea of what culture is in general and how it works.

As is well known, many definitions of culture have been set forth, but two main types are most commonly referred to: substantive and functional. Substantive definitions focus on what culture is, whereas functional definitions try to explain what culture does. The difference between these two is not necessarily clear cut, all the more so because many definitions define the essence of culture through the functions of culture. An example of this is the definition presented by Dave Elder-Vass. According to him, culture consists of institutionalized practices and artefacts that convey decipherable meanings relating to life and the world (Elder-Vass 2012: 38–39). Culture is thus a shared set of practices and objects, and culture creates and maintains meanings and understandings. That different types of definitions of culture exist demonstrates the underlying facts that cultures are social constructions and their constituent elements can be chosen and determined in various ways. Accordingly, cultural boundaries are constructed and, to some extent, imaginary – not inherent or natural.

### 3 Cultural Encounters

By referring above to Achebe's novel, (i) deliberate cultural oppression and (ii) peaceful cultural replacement were distinguished as the main forms of cultural conflicts. Apparently, cultural encounters can also take place without conflict, which is something to be expected insofar as cultural boundaries are artificial, imaginary and subject to change. These non-conflicting (or not necessarily conflicting) means of cultural encounters include the following:

- (1) Individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds (e.g. original population, immigrants, exchange students, expats, tourists) occasionally meet each other, ask each other various questions, get to know one another, and share things about one another's culture.
- (2) Different traditions (such as various religions and livelihoods) and their adherents and representatives (e.g. cultural majorities and minorities) live side by side – for example, in the same city or country – and have practical dealings (e.g. businesses, administration, and other activities) with each other on a regular basis.

- (3) Cultural events (like concerts, art exhibitions, and dance performances) gather and blend examples of different cultures' art and artefacts (i.e. dance, music, paintings, theatre, architecture).
- (4) An artefact or work of art, such as a novel, painting, sculpture, garment, dance, or building, combines elements and styles from different cultures and traditions.
- (5) Schoolchildren, students and other people learn lessons about cultures; they read books, articles, and blogs, see movies and documentary films, and listen to radio programmes presenting various cultures.
- (6) A visible manifestation of an alien culture is erected in the middle of another culture (for example, a mosque is built in the middle of a Christian city).
- (7) Scholars study and classify different cultures and present their research results to academic and other audiences.

Based on this in-no-way comprehensive list, we can conclude that basic forms of cultural encounters are (i) personal and (ii) non-personal. That is, they are (i) encounters between individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds and (ii) encounters with non-personal manifestations and representations of different cultures (manifestations that are naturally created, experienced, and thought by people).

Another common assumption, in addition to cultural conflicts and boundaries, is that cultures overlap or intersect in regard to some of their constituent elements. The nature of this overlap remains unclear, unless it simply means that the same traditions and practices can exist simultaneously in different cultures. In this view, cultures are hybrids consisting of elements from different historical periods and geographical areas, and some elements such as traditions and customs can exist in different cultures. For example, Islam and Christianity are traditions of various past and present cultures. Various cultural hybrids can exist and work well even if they consist of *prima facie* conflicting interests and agendas. Modern examples are the combination of market and state-planned economies in China, as well as the combination of secularization and new forms of religiosity in the West.

Elder-Vass asks whether the boundaries of a culture can be defined objectively despite the fact that cultures intersect, meaning that they may have one or many practices, habits, and traditions in common (Elder-Vass 2012: 162–163, 171–173). His answer is that intersection makes defining cultural boundaries inevitably arbitrary. As a result, one places two or more practices in the same culture, whereas another places them in different cultures. Furthermore, even when some practices really are unique to the culture concerned, there is something arbitrary about choosing those practices rather than others to define that culture (Elder-Vass 2012: 171). Thus, a lesser or greater discretion exists affecting the definitions of culture. Therefore, cultures are very far from being natural

aspects of the practices that constitute them. Quite the contrary, a culture is in some respects a purely nominalistic category of practices. Thus, what unites the practices that constitute a culture, and excludes others, is nothing more than the fact that the constituent practices have been labelled as components of that particular culture. In view of this, it is tempting to see cultures as a product of discursive construction. On the other hand, the practices and traditions that are bundled into cultures exist objectively and independently of the cultural labels attached to them. However, the idea that the practices and traditions collectively form a culture is purely the result of naming them as such. Elder-Vass emphasises that such naming only becomes effective when it is collective (i.e. when there is a group of people prepared to endorse and enforce it) (Elder-Vass 2012: 171–172). So if something about cultures is illusory and socially constructed, there is also something real, namely actual social groups promoting actual social norms (Elder-Vass 2012: 54, 173).

Based on this view, cultural hybrids can be defined as cultures, practices, and artefacts that combine styles and elements (e.g. traditions, designs, and ways of thinking) from different cultures (Douglas 1996). Furthermore, cultural hybridity and multiculturalism belong together insofar as both refer to societies where various ethnic groups and cultures live together. Many, even most, modern and ancient cultures are hybrids and multicultural in this sense, and only a few very isolated, small, and idiosyncratic cultures can be considered to be non-hybrid and monocultural.

#### **4 Norm Circles as the Creators and Maintainers of Cultures**

Collective agents that generate, intentionally or unintentionally, boundaries between different cultures and thus separate them from one another are what Elder-Vass calls *norm circles*. According to him, cultures are composed of complexes of mutually referencing and supporting norms that are advanced by the corresponding norm circles (Elder-Vass 2012: 166, 255). *Norm circle* can be defined as the group of people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm (Elder-Vass 2012: 22). Rules, for their part, are norms that have been verbalized and communicated (Elder-Vass 2012: 48). Each norm has its own circle and the membership of these norm circles may differ. The membership of norm circles may also overlap. Furthermore, Elder-Vass contends that culture is produced by specifically cultural norm circles (Elder-Vass 2012: 30, 54). *Specifically cultural* refers to the norms that regulate the practices and customs considered central and constitutive of a culture. However, in my opinion, this is a more complex issue than at first it may appear, as what is considered central and constitutive depends on the point of view, which is different for the insiders and the outsiders of a culture.

It is quite obvious that the commitment of the members of a norm circle to its norms can be conscious or unconscious, deliberate or automatic. Furthermore, what is especially important in norm circles as social groups is that they have the causal power to produce a tendency in individuals to follow standardised practices (Elder-Vass 2012: 67, 74, 254). If such standards are violated, which can easily happen to foreigners, who are not familiar with another culture's standards and values, a cultural clash in the form of a breach of a cultural norm can take place. Thus, cultural boundaries can be crossed in a negative way, meaning that cultural norms and values can be violated and remain unheeded, which can cause strong irritation in the members of the culture concerned. However, violations of cultural norms can also be eye-opening to the members of the culture involved and can thus raise awareness and understanding of cultural differences and characteristics.

It is worth pointing out that no norm circle is completely isolated and impenetrable like a solid billiard ball. Instead, norm circles can be compared to soft, spongy balls with a flexible and porous surface that allows for an exchange between all sides. In the same vein, norm circles can be compared to bubbles in soapsuds that yield against each other and can be clustered and merged together or even nested inside each other. Similarly, different traditions and practices can be clustered and merged together to form new cultural constellations.

Based on the concept of a norm circle, an interim space between cultures refers to the circumstances under which identifying, learning, comparing, negotiating and reconciling between different norms and norm circles are possible. These activities first require suitable qualities of the persons involved, including tolerance, compassion, and an interest in other cultures and persons. Second, the interim space between cultures consists of knowledge of higher-order norms and concepts that are necessary for the identification and categorisation of different cultures and cultural norms. Such higher-order norms include the distinctions between different types of cultural practices, products, and values, as well as between essential and nonessential cultural differences. In addition, language translations of different cultural norms may be required and, therefore, among other reasons, language skills are necessary for people who work in intercultural and international settings. All of these together – a sympathetic attitude toward other cultures, language skills, and general cultural knowledge – form an interim space between cultures. Critically, one could remark that this interim space is a (meta-) culture of its own that is not neutral, but strongly influenced by Western standards of rationality and of cultural studies. However, even if this criticism is at least partly justified, it is not completely accurate, because the interim space concerned does not need to be fixed but can be open to various standards, practices and traditions. Moreover, there can be different interim spaces between cultures.

We have seen that in Elder-Vass's view cultures are said to be composed of norms that are advanced by norm circles (Elder-Vass 2012: 54, 166, 255). Thus, the essence of culture can be characterised, first, in terms of the norms that guide human behaviour and practices and, second, in terms of the collective agent (norm circles, or the social form of norm sources) that maintains and strengthens those norms. Accordingly, cultural conflicts can be between norms or between norm circles. Cultural conflicts often concern different norms and rules recognised and followed by different individuals and groups. However, cultural conflicts can also be among different norm circles, especially if those social groups are very self-important and power seeking. Thus, various norm circles can also create conflicts over their influence and authority, and not only over norms endorsed by them.

It follows from this view that the most significant obstacles for and difficulties in cultural encounters are related first to different norms that are endorsed in different cultures and, second, to the collisions of interests between various norm circles that maintain and strengthen those norms. Insofar as I can see, the difficulties in cultural encounters concern cultural integration and involvement rather than cognitive understanding of different cultural habits and traditions. This view is in line with the more general fact that it is easier to learn to understand what an unfamiliar practice consists of than to adopt such a practice as part of one's self-identity.

## **5 Types of Cultural Conflicts**

When considered in greater detail, the following main types of cultural conflicts can be distinguished:

- (1) Conflicts between individuals representing different cultures.
- (2) Conflicts between different practices, customs, and traditions originated in different cultures.
- (3) Conflicts between different cultural norms.
- (4) Conflicts between various norm circles behind cultural norms.

Thus, individuals and collectives, their practices and ways of thinking, and norms and norm circles can conflict with and challenge each other. However, by no means am I suggesting that all conflicts between people are due to their different cultural backgrounds or are related to different cultural norms. Therefore we should add that a conflict of the first type mentioned above is truly cultural only if the conflict is based on one or another of the subsequent types of cultural conflicts. Fortunately, cultural conflicts are not inevitable, which is demonstrated by history's many examples of different cultures and their representatives existing side by side peacefully and influencing each other positively (consider, for example, the interaction between Islamic and Western

philosophy in the medieval context). Basically, cultural conflicts can be avoided, first, by negotiating, reinterpreting, and harmonizing cultural norms, and second by suitably limiting and containing the scope of conflicting norms (e.g. by restricting the manifestations of cultural identity only to the private life). Thus, harmonization and considered limitation (“sectorization”) are the main pathways to a peaceful coexistence of cultures.

Cultural conflicts can cause different types of processes, including struggles for cultural hegemony, isolation and withdrawal from intercultural contacts, and changes in cultures’ norms. Could it then be put forward as a conceptual truth that changing the constitutive norms of a culture results in the transformation of that culture? This must be considered carefully, and the answer depends on what *constitutive* means. If *constitutive* means “held as important and central”, then we can very well conceive that the norms of a culture can remain unchanged even if their mutual status or significance changes. This is the case in the West, where religion continues to have a presence in societies while secularization has progressed much. Thus, what is considered to be important and worth pursuing in a culture can change from time to time and from one point of view to another, without necessarily resulting in a complete dissolution of certain cultural norms and traditions. However, if *constitutive* means “essential and necessary”, then changing the constitutive norms of a culture obviously results in the transformation of the essence of that culture.

Based on Elder-Vass’s view, one could say that to encounter and understand a culture in its own terms, the constitutive norms of that culture should be identified and recognized. However, such identification is dependent on our prior concept of culture. Thus, the identification of the constitutive norms of a culture is not a completely innocent act, but subject to the prior identification of culture in general and the particular culture concerned specifically. Different pre-understandings of cultures are potential sources of cultural conflicts. For example, many people in the West are alleged to have a biased and negative pre-understanding of Islamic culture, and this pre-understanding is a potential source of conflict.

What then does *recognizing a culture* mean in this context? It could mean something like “at least temporarily adopting a tradition in imagination, but not necessarily permanently assenting it”. However, a looser view of the requirements for cultural understanding is also available. According to this looser view, the adoption of the norms of other cultures is not necessary for cultural encounters – not even in imagination (i.e. it is not necessary to consider what it would be like to follow the norms of another culture). Rather, it is necessary to have a basically benevolent attitude toward other cultures and traditions and their representatives. It seems to me that the difference between imaginary adoption (in the sense of being able to feel empathy and to know what it would be like to belong to another culture) and a sympathetic attitude is not enormous here.

Tradition and diverse practices that constitute a tradition can be distinguished both conceptually and ontologically. This is seen in the fact that a tradition as a whole does not necessarily perish if a practice that has been part of that tradition dies out. Consider, for example, changing farming traditions in different cultures. Traditions are thus historically changing collections of diverse practices, and different traditions may share many practices (Lehtonen 2014: 89–90). According to Elder-Vass, a practice is only an element of culture when it is shared by a norm circle and when that group puts some sort of pressure on individuals to conform to it (Elder-Vass 2012: 160). This pressure can be stronger or weaker. If the conforming pressure is strong, encounters with other cultures can be unconstructive and apt to end in nothing but collision (consider the “billiard ball” metaphor). However, a conflict does not necessarily need to develop, because a culture can be conforming also in its tolerant and sympathetic attitude toward other (perhaps not so tolerant) cultures (consider the “soft balls and soapsuds” metaphor).

## **6 Conclusion**

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that cultural boundaries refer primarily to different social norms endorsed and enforced by various social groups called norm circles. Social norms govern different traditions, practices, customs, and ways of thinking that are considered to be characteristic of different cultures. That different definitions of culture exist demonstrates the underlying facts that cultures are social constructions and their constituent elements can be chosen and determined in various ways. Cultural boundaries too are man-made but real in the sense that different cultural norms can conflict with each other, and different norm circles can disagree. The metaphor of boundaries is thus an appropriate tool for cultural studies, insofar as it helps to explain why cultural conflicts exist, and how cultural conflicts are related to the breaking of norms endorsed and enforced by different social groups. The metaphor of boundaries fits this task, because with the help of it different cultures and social groups can be structured and represented as distinct collective entities, yet with blurred and changing borders, that can side, collide, and overlap with each other. Different cultural norms do not, of course, only separate and repel, but can also attract and magnetize people. Furthermore, no culture is categorically closed to influences from other cultures. Instead, different cultural norm circles interact and can adopt traditions and practices from each other, upon which new cultural hybrids and innovations can originate. Therefore, different cultures can be compared, along with another related metaphor, to spongy soft balls and penetrable bubbles in soapsuds rather than to solid billiard balls. The soapsud metaphor is suitable also because cultural boundaries are, to some extent, artificial and subject to change as different traditions can be clustered and merged together to form new cultural constellations.

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