The experience of cultural differences in asymmetric power relations: Japanese – Dutch encounters

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While the emergence of transnational networks creates connections between people on a worldwide scale, at the same time a countermovement can be observed of localization or ethnicizing that creates new polarizing divisions between people (Appadurai, 1998; Friedman, 1990; Hannerz, 1992; Roseneau, 1994). The twin processes of globalization on the one hand and localization, i.e. an increasing awareness of, and attachment to one’s local or ethnic identity, on the other, have been termed ‘glocalization’ (Ohmae, 1990; Robertson, 1995) or ‘fragmegration’ (integration and fragmentation) (Roseneau, 1994). These concepts reflect opposing tendencies of unification and division in contemporary society that can also be observed in multinational corporations. Management often remains firmly rooted in the parent country’s culture (Mintzberg, 1993; Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995: 175; Schneider and Barsoux, 1997: 223) and it is not uncommon for it to become challenged by the nationals of the host culture (e.g. Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Dahler-Larssen, 1997; Graham, 1993; Koot, 1997; Van Marrewijk, 2004). The rise of a global network economy and the resulting increase of intercultural contacts do not automatically lead to cultural homogenization. Rather, they seem to bring forth a heterogenizing countermovement of groups of people asserting their identity and distinctiveness vis-à-vis the other. If we are entering a seemingly borderless world, it is a world in which, at the same time, symbolic boundaries are reconstructed and local differences and cultural identities are marked and marketed (Featherstone, 1990).

While organizational scholars have shown a sustained interest in cultural processes in transnational contexts, the dominant approach in cross-cultural research has overlooked this process of ethnicization and, in fact, offers an a-contextual and apolitical understanding of cultural encounters. Cultural identity, as it is usually conceptualized, starts from the assumption that national identity imprints a value-based, mental program or collective ‘software’ in peoples’ minds (Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede et al., 1990). These cognitive models are represented through a small set of continua – individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, power distance, anxiety reduction, long-term or short-term orientation (cf. Trompenaars, 1993, for a similar approach) – which are claimed to manifest themselves in organizations through stubbornly distinctive patterns of thinking, feeling and acting located in the nationally constituted actors. Despite the appealing simplicity of a description in terms of dimension scores and the useful grip it promises to provide on a complex phenomenon, it gives a rather minimal, static and monolithic sketch of national cultures (see for a discussion of Hofstede’s work Clegg et al., 2005; McSweeney, 2002; Smith, 2002). A few general characteristics are considered to be deep-rooted determinants of behavior that are assumed to constitute a true and timeless cultural essence. This type of cross-cultural organization research ignores identity and ethnicity theorists who have put emphasis on the situational and relational character of social identification processes (e.g. Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 1993; Jenkins, 1996) – it restricts respondents to answering predefined questions without any reference to a specific situation or intercultural relation, treating national identity as ‘merely the passive embodiment of a predetermined cultural template’ (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003: 1074). So, even if the variance that is measured in survey research does capture some real or experienced cultural essence, it does not represent the actualities of everyday work situations. Consequently, the question of how these presumed differences work out in intercultural interactions remains unanswered. The study described in this paper explores the role of power and politics in the construction of cultural boundaries.

If we want to capture the actual complexity of everyday intercultural encounters in organizations, there is a need for detailed empirical research on daily practices in cross-
cultural corporations (Redding, 1994: 11; Schneider and Barsoux, 1997). This research should take account of both context and action (Bate, 1997; Collins, 1998; Pettigrew, 1985), conceiving of culture and identity as existing in a specific setting, shaped by and shaping social processes. In this article, an ethnographic account of the local response within a global enterprise demonstrates how national identities are accentuated by organizational actors as a psychological and political strategy in intercultural relations. Specifically, it draws upon ethnographic field data, collected by the second author during a half year-long study of the European head office in the Netherlands of Rajio cooperation (a pseudonym), a Japanese firm in consumer electronics (see also Byun and Ybema, 2005), and 33 interviews with both Japanese and Dutch managers working for subsidiaries of Dutch multinationals in Japan. This way, Dutch-Japanese encounters are explored in two different social contexts that are each other’s mirror image: Japanese management–Dutch staff (in the Netherlands) and Dutch management–Japanese workforce (in Japan). First, evidence will be offered in support of the claim that a national culture (or, rather, its ascribed qualities) constitutes a symbolic resource that is actively and creatively used by organizational actors to construct a sense of identity and to create cultural distance in a political struggle (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Koot, 1997). Second, in apparent opposition to this first line of reasoning, the impact of context rather than agency will be underscored, and culture acknowledged as a source of, rather than a resource for, action. The emphasis placed on human agency in processes of ethnicization, it will be suggested, should be counterbalanced by acknowledging the embeddedness of interactions and interpretations within historical processes, longstanding traditions and organizational structures that constitute the ‘unacknowledged conditions’ and ‘unintended consequences’ of human action (Giddens, 1979). While members of organizations act with intent and purpose, their practices have to be situated within wider social contexts that enable and constrain human action (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Chanlat, 1994; Layder, 1993). Ethnographic studies of transnational enterprises have shown the significance of specific historical relations between cultural partners and managerial strategies for processes of identification. In these cases, ‘cultural distance’ in Hofstede’s dimensions appeared to be a poor indicator of success in intercultural cooperation (Koot, 1997; Olie, 1994; Van Marrewijk, 1999). The specific situation at Rajio is one of cultural polarization between a Dutch shop floor and Japanese management, and could therefore be typical of the intercultural processes occurring in asymmetrical power relations. An inequality in terms of political influence, rewards and advancement opportunities is often a structural characteristic of cross-cultural cooperation within multinational enterprises. It certainly seems to be a distinctive mark of the structure of many Japanese multinationals, where strong central control remains the dominant model of organization (although, in the last decade or so, a more moderate degree is gaining popularity in Japanese firms, see Clegg and Kono, 2002) and western subsidiaries are generally tightly integrated into the head office strategy (Whitley et al., 2001, in Morgan, 2002). To be able to compare the findings with the reverse situation, the second author conducted a series of interviews with Dutch and Japanese managers working in Dutch multinationals in Japan. Interesting questions could now be answered, such as whether similar or dissimilar processes can be found in each situation? Is the experience of cultural differences situationally bound? In what ways are they context-dependent?

On the basis of the results of this comparison we argue in favour of a power-sensitive account of intercultural encounters in organizational settings. It seems relevant to find out the conditions under which particular cultural characteristics become emotionally charged and politically laden in intercultural interactions. As the distribution of power and resources among the Japanese and the Dutch in the two social contexts constitute a reverse division of roles (the Dutch dominating in a Japanese setting or the Japanese dominating in a Dutch setting) the comparison allows us to conclude that the unequal power relation between
Japanese and Dutch staff is indeed an essential attribute of the situation that has a profound impact on the salience of specific cultural differences. The redefinition of symbolic boundaries and the discursive construction of cultural distance is a means by which, on the one hand, the more-powerful try to sustain or strengthen their position and, on the other hand, the less-powerful attempt to renegotiate or challenge their subordination. Apparently, boundary talk provides a tacit resource to be drawn on in everyday organizational politics, in order to present an identity, establish a truth, or defend an interest.

References


