

Intercultural Samplers (2)

Osamu Takai

1. Introduction

Culture is a complex concept. Researchers in the 1960s reported to have found over three hundred definitions of culture, and there must be more than that claimed by other researchers now. According to Storti (1999), "Culture is the shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of a group of people which result in characteristic behaviors."

This definition signifies two important points about culture. Culture has visible and invisible dimensions. It is visible since the culture of a group can be reflected in the people's behavior, and invisible since assumptions, values and beliefs are implemented in the mind of people. Behavior is neither arbitrary nor spontaneous. It always has the reasons to cause people to behave, which are their assumptions, values, and beliefs. Understanding this cause-and-effect relationship between the two dimensions of culture is important to successful intercultural communication. In this paper, bowing will be discussed and analyzed as a form or behavior that people share in the world. Bowing, however, will be interpreted differently by members of each different cultural group according to its shared assumptions, values and belief.

2. Bowing in Christianity

Around the world, people bow to greet, to defer, to show courtesy, and to pray. Bowing represents humility. People lower their head downwards by showing respect, reverence, and submission. In the beginning of history, people bowed their head with awe to God. According to the Bible (1996) of Christianity, bowing to God signifies showing reverence towards God: "Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the LORD our maker, for he is our God. We are the people he watches over, the sheep under his care" (Psalm 95:6-7). In those biblical days there was the connection between reverence, or fear, and love of God in the following descriptions: "For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth" (Psalm 103: 11); "The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13); "But the love of the LORD remains forever with those who fear him" (Psalm 103:17).

Bowing is considered the proper form or posture of the soul in worship of God by showing respect, awe and fear of almighty. There is a clear distinction between mortals who must place themselves under Almighty and the immortal God who will give His mercy on those who bow their soul showing their reverence and fear of God. The Book of Revelation, a book of worship, indicates this principle of bowing: "the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one who lives forever and ever" (Revelation 4:10).

3. Bowing in Buddhism

In Buddhism bowing is most often accompanied by joining palms together. These two behaviors are common to all sects of Buddhism. As the bow is made, the body bends forward at the waist, so that the upper part of the body forms an angle with the legs of approximately 30 to 45 degrees. The hands with palms together remain on the chest and move only with the whole body.

There are varieties in the styles of bowing for each situation. The two main kinds of bow used in daily practice are the standing bow and the deep bow or prostration. The standing bow is mainly used upon entering or leaving the sacred room, and in greeting one another, while the deep bow is usually used upon bowing to the Buddha who reached the enlightenment: “the direct and conscious realization of the oneness of the whole universe, and of his own unity with all things” (The Zen Center of Los Angeles, 2002).

In bowing, people pay respect to the Buddha with a reverent mind and respect to each other in greetings with a humble attitude. According to a story of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, the first thing he said in his enlightenment was: “Wonder of wonders! All sentient beings have this same (enlightened) nature ”(as cited in The Zen Center of Los Angeles, 2002). What this implies is that not only human beings but also all other beings have an enlightened nature which is the same characteristics the Buddha has. In bowing to the Buddha, people are actually bowing to themselves and to all beings with a respect and humble attitude.

4. Bowing as a form of greetings

Bowing is one of the most conspicuous behaviors in Japanese custom. It goes with and reinforces or sometimes replaces verbal expressions of greetings, thanks, apology, and request, among others. Generally speaking, there are three degrees of bowing as a form of greetings: the formal bow, the informal bow and the deep bow, which is only used for the highest form of salutation (De Mente, 1981).

The formal bow is properly made by bending the body at approximately 30 degrees while bringing the hands, palms down, on the knees (or sometimes the hands may be left at the sides). Ordinarily one holds this pose for a few seconds, and then returns back to the upright position. In less formal bow, the body is bent at about 15 degrees with the hands at the sides. This bow is used for any casual occasions among people of all ranks. The right kind of bow, concerning its degree and who bows first is determined by such things as relative ages and experience of the participants, their personal and/or professional relationship, and their purpose in meeting. Generally speaking, juniors in age or status are expected to initiate and bow slightly lower than their senior. The deep bow, which was used to Emperors in early days, is occasionally used by elderly people who practice in reminiscence of their youth.

The bow in Japanese custom is beyond simply showing politeness and good manners and to construct strong conformity in a group or society. It has been formalized as one of the superior and interior relationships of Japan’s vertically oriented society. The underlying

assumption represents humility: to respect the other person by humbling oneself or lowing oneself. This assumption is one of the most important factors to keep harmony in human relationship within a group, or a society such as in Japan.

Looking upon the American history, "Renaissance courtiers and Puritan ministers alike agreed that all men should bow and uncover when meeting or leaving superiors" (Hemphill, 1999, p.22). People showed the sign of honor and veneration and their readiness to listen to ones of higher social status by putting off the hat and bowing in testimony of submission. As individualism has prevailed in the society, the bowing with submissive implication has disappeared and the custom of hand-shaking remains with egalitarianism.

As the residue of chivalric ages, men's bowing to women may sometimes exist in the United States, though it may be very restricted to the squire dancing and so on. According to the manners for the middle class (Hemphill, 1999), polite persons used to bow and shake hands upon introduction and it was the general rule that acquaintances bowed to each other when they met in public. In those days, men were always to bow from politeness upon introduction to women.

5. Conclusion

Bowing is one of people's behaviors in greetings, paying respects to others, worshipping gods, or any other occasions. Though it is common behavior shared by many cultures, underlying assumptions, values and beliefs are different from each cultural group. In Christianity, from the fear of and submission to God, people lower their head down and worship God. Bowing is a sign of reverence and love of God, but is not integrated into the society such as the United States. Under God, people are considered equal, and the idea of submission included in the bow does not coincide with the individualistic society.

On the other hand, bowing in Buddhism has been developed as a sign of humble attitudes in human relationship. It has been refined as a complex social code to keep conformity in Japanese society. "Until the 1950s virtually all Japanese got their first training in bowing while they were still infants, strapped to their mothers' backs. Every time their mothers bowed, the babies bowed with them" (De Mente, 1995, p. 32). However, young generations are losing the cultural understanding of the values and significance underlying the Japanese bow due to the change of life styles and the influence of western philosophy. The topic of changing culture is beyond the scope of this paper.

Reference

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