

MOSTAFA SHOUL  
Oujda University, Morocco  
shoul@hotmail.com

## WHEN AT HOME DO AS THE ROMANS DO

One of the most appropriate definitions of man is that he is by nature a being of culture (Lorenz 1981: 209). This means that culture is part and parcel of man's life. To boil down the ethologists' idea of culture, the latter is considered to be some kind of ritualization<sup>1</sup> of social behaviour, which in the long run becomes second nature. Such scientists underline the fact that "in species which are mentally more advanced the behaviour to conspecifics is determined to a greater extent by innate components and less by acquired achievements than is their behaviour toward the environment". This is so even in man, Lorenz claims (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970: viii).

Nevertheless, though species' behaviour is more or less pre-programmed, there is room for phylogenetic evolution, which amounts to behavioural alteration. Such alteration may be explained, in the case of human species, by adaptation to new environments and interaction with other communities.

Culturally speaking, this is what has been taking place ever since human communities formed and interacted. Thus, we can easily notice their mutual influence on the level of language as well as on that of customs and costumes, etc. With the help of globalization, change is occurring at a much faster pace. Take the example of the blue jeans. Though it symbolizes one of the modern American cultural aspects, it is a European contribution both linguistically and physically. Indeed, historians trace its origin back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, where not only Genoa and Nîmes provided the original fabric, but also gave their names to the popular dress in the forms of jean and denim (serge de Nîmes), respectively. But nowadays, with different shapes and fashionable cuts (and simulated raggedy holes, for that matter), the blue jeans has won an international status.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Whenever it is of advantage for an animal that some of its incidental behavior be understood by another, selection operates to transform the behavior pattern in question into a conspicuous signal. This modification of a behaviour pattern to serve communicative function is called ritualization" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970: 97).

Contributions from different countries or nations can lead to hybrid cultures: when you consider the Samoan national dress, for example, it noticeably exhibits the coexistence of two different cultures through the combination of a local, traditional dress, the sarong, and a western jacket. On the other hand, Punk fashion, which is essentially western, is heavily influenced by indigenous cultures of nations from America, India and Oceania.

Such cultural give-and-take is only natural and even healthy, though when occurring unexpectedly it may seem shocking, iconoclastic or at least ridiculous.

Under particular circumstances, cultural exchange takes place in a rather less smooth way. The extreme case of such unfortunate exchange is witnessed during colonization when the colonizers impose their own culture on the occupied nation as part of their civilizing enterprise. A change in culture can also be imposed in a sovereign country by revolutionary leaders. One can think of the example of Mao Zedong's China. Even with so-called democratic and liberal regimes, new cultures may gradually and surreptitiously be instilled through advertising and stardom models.

In the present paper, I will consider the interaction of various cultures in immigrant-hosting countries, to begin with; then I will examine the centrifugal wave-like expansion of particular cultures whose epicentres are leading countries like the USA.

In general, willing immigrants easily and even eagerly adapt to the culture of the host country. They do not necessarily do so in a repudiating reaction towards their own culture, but probably with a selfish view to socio-economic promotion. Besides, they have to comply with the adage "When in Rome do as the Romans do". Nevertheless, very few are those who completely shed their ancestral lore, even when they leave their home land for good. They would stick to a more or less significant part of their culture if only in the intimacy of their dwelling.

The question here is: How can a compromise be reached for an immigrant to live in harmony with two dissimilar cultures? In other words, to what extent can the new culture substitute for the underlying one in a reconcilable way, without making the "experiencer" feel that he is deprived of his ethos? Obviously, a trade-off is not attained the same way for all aspects of culture. Concessions may readily occur as far as particular elements are concerned, but only grudgingly, if at all, as for other elements. As a case in point, I will take one aspect of culture which is in itself a kind of culture (etymologically speaking). It is puericulture; that is child raising.

Puericulture, or bringing up children, is one of the most important concerns of a society. It is a fateful commitment not only for the parents, but also for the whole society. This means that this is no laughing matter, and parents, wherever they live, would hardly act in accordance with any authority that would interfere with the habitual education of their children.

Bringing up and educating children may vary from one society to another; however, all normal parents would make their supreme effort to make of their progeny the happiest and most well-bred kids, wishing they would thus lead them to a successful and accomplished adult life. To achieve this, parents resort, among other things, to the universal "carrot and stick" method; that is to affection and reward on the one hand, and threat and punishment on the other. It is the backbone of both formal and informal education, whether seen as edification or indoctrination.

To get closer to the point, we will consider the second and the potentially more reprehensible part of the method: the stick. We will also consider a specific context: North American land and culture where immigrants from non-European origin try to integrate.

After a long history of caning and other forms of corporal punishment that were commonplace in all civilizations of the world, North American education, whether institutional or parental, has refrained from such practice which is now being regarded as unproductive, and even destructive concerning the child's personality, which would ricochet on his entire life. Law came to bury such immemorial usage not only in public institutions but also in the bosom of the family.

People who settle in North America and particularly first generation immigrants who come from certain eastern countries find it very hard if not nonsensical to spare the rod, because they firmly believe that this will spoil the child. Of course they do not go as far as making of the rod the only way to breed their children, but they think it is useful when other means fail to obtain the desired result. They would simply argue that it has worked for millennia, why not now? Nevertheless, they can no longer raise their children just as they have been doing in their new country. It is socially unacceptable for them to resort to corporal punishment, be it only a slap on the buttocks, in public. They can however try, but only at the risk of being denounced by onlookers to the nearest authority. Better still, even at home they are seriously advised not to "touch" their kids. The latter are instructed in their institutions to report any act of "violence" against them at home. If such unfortunate act takes place, the children, victims of such act, are taken away to some kind of asylum by force of the law.

The lawmakers do not take into consideration immigrants' culture, and immigrants opine that it is unfair to be imposed such a law which is too lenient with the young and too harsh with the parents. They would even justify some unorthodox behaviour of their own children by such immoderate lenience towards these not yet mature people. Thus, for example, parents from North African origin in Holland blame this kind of law that gives their children enough freedom to become delinquent. They argue with officials that if matters were left to them, teenagers' problems would have never existed. In their eyes, law comes to deprive them of one of their essential cultural rights: educating their children as they see appropriate.

By the way, does the law deprive only immigrants of such cultural component? Is Western culture innocent of children punishment? Though Westerners generally abide by the rules, it does not mean that they docilely accept them. The reason is simple. Punishing children has always been part of Western culture as anywhere else. It is deeply rooted in customs and especially in religion. The famous dictum "spare the rod and spoil the child" is inspired by the Bible. Thus, we read from the Old Testament "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes," (Proverbs 13: 24) which in a new version would read "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them."<sup>2</sup> In French, the same meaning is expressed euphemistically as "Qui aime bien châtie bien."

This millennial education is now officially banished from western societies, and parents bow to the facts only reluctantly. Such decision has been a turning point in the family relationship. To take such bold step certainly needs some sound justification. So on what objective or scientific ground is it based? The answers will be dealt with later.

All in all, nobody is for punishment just for the sake of punishment. Unless they are psychopathic, parents resort to correction only when necessary. Besides, they more often show affection and give rewards heart in hand. That is the "carrot" part of the saying.

Linking this more pleasant part of the proverb with the eastern immigrants' situation, we acknowledge the following. Just as in enforcing obedience, they are equally much exuberant with pleasurable things. This is in conformity with their culture as well. Thus they can show their affection for, satisfaction with, or willingness to reward their offspring in a joyously unrestrained manner. They can hug, cuddle and kiss their children in public, express their feelings toward them in different cheerful and extravagant ways, in motherese or as a singsong, and what not.

Such behaviour is also unaccepted in their western host country; yet it is not a question of child thrashing. Parents are frustrated when they are informed that they are not to touch their own kids. A law relative to such issue has been put into force to prevent any kind of child abuse. Watson wrote in 2008 that "Sweeping new policies set to be introduced in the UK will mandate parents to get government permission to kiss their children or take them to the swimming pool in public."<sup>3</sup> This is a thoughtful preventive endeavour; however, parents refuse to be regarded as potential perverts, and what is more humiliating, they argue, with their own progeny. Watson adds that

<sup>2</sup> Other verses convey the same meaning: "Foolishness is bound in the heart of the child, but the rod of discipline will drive it away from him" (Proverbs 22: 15); "Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die" (Proverbs 23: 13).

<sup>3</sup> Prison Planet, <http://www.infowars.com/government-permission-required-for-parents-to-kiss-children/>. Retrieved: 12-10-09.

such “measures (...) are “poisoning” relationships between the generations, according to respected sociologist Professor Frank Furedi.” Again, authorities can interfere and take away the children if the latter report that the parents are somewhat affectionate with them.

The indigenous population seems to accept such rules, but again only reluctantly according to opinions voiced in forums on the net. However, willy-nilly, things become normalized: the distance created between parents and children is becoming part of the new western culture.

If, through the introduction of new policies Western culture has adopted a neutral not to say indifferent parent-child relationship, and native families come to live with them after all, why is such way of living imposed on non native minority families? To my understanding, “Minorities – both the individuals belonging to minorities and the minorities as groups – also enjoy certain human rights specifically linked to their minority status, including their right to maintain and enjoy their culture, religion, and language free from discrimination.”<sup>4</sup> So, why can’t they enjoy the experience of their ancestral culture? Maybe the answer lies stupidly in the straightforward “When in Rome do as the Romans do” stuff, which, to a certain extent, can be acceptable.

Now, if we leave Rome and go to the immigrants’ fatherland, will the situation be different? Maybe a little, and maybe for not long. Indeed, one can notice that the immigrants’ original culture is grossly preserved at home, but unfortunately, in many cases, folklorized. But what may be worse is that a radical cultural transformation is lurking. Indeed, globalization is working hard though slowly to settle a “universal” culture. It is not inevitably the homogenization of the world culture, but a one-way spread of the leading countries’ culture. What reinforces such cultural hegemony is not only economic leadership or military dominance, but also certain academic findings and visionary hypotheses which would be adopted by decision makers and later brought down by the law, as is the case of forbidding parents to cuddle and kiss their children. Once they become infrangible, sacrosanct rules in their originating country, they are ready to be exported worldwide. This means that soon, and if things go the way they are supposed to, parents of eastern countries will witness the same frustrating experience of being emotionally separated from their kids.

How scientific and objective are those researches and findings to gain such a success with the authorities? To my mind, some of the academic discourse is rather lame and not always consistent. In fact, all branches of modern science dealing with the study of humankind equate man with animals. Thus, they explain most of our behavioural acts through patient and painstaking studies of animal behaviour, from little insects to apes. “This ethologi-

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pdhre.org/rights/minorities.html>. Retrieved 12-10-09.

cal knowledge," says Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970: viii) "based on animal studies, can contribute to a better understanding of human behavior, and K. Lorenz recognizes this as 'essentially the most important task' of the branch of science which he founded." This is how, for example, they can explain why we have in particular situations horripilation reflex. Our skin reacts just like an animal's in response to cold or emotional stress as if we still were hairy hominids or even apes. Such vestigial animal reaction, which has no useful function anymore in man since the latter has shed most if not all his hair, is only known thanks to its functional existence in furred and feathered animals, discovered by ethologists.

Since it is widely believed in scientific circles that we evolved from animals and we do share many characteristics with them, human science researchers would break down our behaviour into basic instinctive animal reactions. Besides, biologists insist that part of our brain evolutionarily speaking characterizes reptiles, hence the term reptilian complex, and is in charge of survival responses and rage, etc. All this points to the fact that our behaviour is programmed and, therefore, natural. We can go further and reason that, eventually, culture, which is at least partially a set of behaviours, is natural.

To go back to offspring bringing up, but this time in the realm of animals, we can notice thanks to the accumulated data brought by ethologists that even animals have recourse to the carrot-and-stick strategy. Thus, as far as threat and punishment are concerned, dolphins, the most intelligent sea mammals, give their misbehaving young an electric shock with their snouts. Smaller sea animals also resort to physical correction: they may simply see that "the cohesion of the family is achieved" by maintaining discipline as in the case of cichlids where "the mother leads the young as soon as they are free swimming, and takes into her mouth those who swim too far away from the swarm and spits them back among the others" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970: 345); or they can "use the threat of punishment to keep would-be jumpers in the mating queue firmly in line and the social order stable, as is the case of small goby fish at Lizard Island on Australia's Great Barrier Reef.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, animals entertain an affectionate relationship with their offspring. Such warm behaviour can be represented by acts ranging from social grooming to kissing, through physical contact. Scientists report many instances of such conduct. For example, some animals, defined as contact animals, "[display] a definitive appetitive behavior for bodily contact. This is true in chimpanzees, gorillas, and many other primates, which if kept alone often deteriorate, unless their keeper permits them to make contact, plays with them, and scratches or strokes them" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, p. 345). What is more, "In anthropoid apes and man mouth-to-mouth feeding of young by

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.physorg.com/news102079128.html>. Retrieved 14-10-09.

their mother has become known, but adult chimpanzees also greet one another with a kiss" (p. 106). Even fierce animals like canidae can show similar behaviour: "A dog in a friendly mood greets by licking and nibbling..." (p. 94); and specialists speak about the "affectionate mouthing" of wolves (p. 105).

Such activity is apparently deeply ingrained in the studied species. As for the need for contact, for example, it

Seems to have its roots in the drive for close contact on the part of young animals, and the behavior of contact-seeking adults show clear similarities with parental care and infantile behavior (...) Chimpanzees put their arms around each other, and even high-ranking animals, when frightened, will clasp a lower-ranking animal for reassurance. In general, however, other animals flee to the high-ranking one for protection (...) Bodily contact has a calming effect, and low-ranking chimpanzees beg for it (...) Young gorillas and adult females seek body contact with old males when they rest (...) just as the young of most mammals seek contact with their mother" (p. 345-6).

Studying animals makes us understand our own species, *Homo Sapiens*. This is what Lorenz claimed in the previous century. Even nowadays researchers still claim the same thing. Dr Wong who conducted the study on the goby fish says that "It is clear the fish accept the threat of punishment and co-operate as a way of maintaining their social order – and that's not so very different to how humans and other animals behave." She concluded: "While it not be accurate to draw a direct link between fish behaviour and specific human behaviour, it is clear there are general patterns of behaviour which apply to many higher life forms, ourselves included. These help us to understand why we do the things we do."<sup>6</sup>

So if we do the things we do in a natural way, just like animals, responding instinctively to familiar stimuli, why some officials would make a fuss of it? In other words, what is abnormal or unnatural if we correct in a reasonable way or cuddle and kiss our own children? If prohibition of such behaviour is instituted in the proverbial Rome, we can in a pinch admit that foreigners should comply with this decree. But the problem is that our world today has become a global village, and the name of this village is Rome. Even if you think you are at home, sooner or later you should do as the Romans do. After all, don't they say "all roads lead to Rome"?

#### REFERENCES

- Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. 1970. *Ethology: the Biology of Behavior*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. New York.  
Lorenz, K. 1981. *L'homme dans le fleuve du vivant*. Flammarion. Paris.

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.