

Teaching Cultural Metaphors: The Dance of Shiva and the Kaleidoscope

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Background

Martin Gannon and his associates began to develop a cultural metaphor for each national culture in 1988 (see Gannon & Pillai, 2010). The book, *Understanding Global Cultures*, which is now going into its 5th edition, describes an innovative method, the cultural metaphor, for understanding easily and quickly the cultural mindset of a nation and comparing it to those of other nations. In essence, the method involves identifying some phenomenon, activity, or institution of a nation's culture that all or most of its members consider to be very important and with which they identify cognitively and/or emotionally. The characteristics of the metaphor then become the basis for describing and understanding the essential features of the society. Cultural metaphors can be used to profile ethnic groups, nations, clusters of nations, and even continents. This is the approach adopted in *Understanding Global Cultures* for profiling: each nation in depth, the base culture and its evolution across national borders, and even continents. Countless social scientists, particularly cross-cultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists, have devoted their lives to the study of culture. The cultural metaphors are based partially on the work of cross-cultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists, who emphasize a small number of factors or dimensions such as time and space when comparing one society to another.

Gannon and Pillai (2011) have identified 31 metaphors that members of given societies or nations view as very important if not critical. However, we needed to identify metaphors that would be relatively complex so that we could make several direct comparisons between the metaphor and the nation being represented by it. Also, we wanted to have a metaphor for each society that would have several suitable features that we could then use to describe it. In addition, we sought to include numerous factors or variables such as religion, small-group behavior, cultural characteristics, gender relationships, the role of family, the stage of economic development, and many other factors when using the metaphor to describe the society, recognizing that some of these factors are important in some societies but not others.

By way of illustration, our example of a cultural metaphor for modern India is the *Kaleidoscope*. This metaphor stands for the constantly changing culture of modern India that can be exemplified through India's numerous religions, festivals, call centers, educational system, and the national sport of cricket. For instance, the culture of valuing education in Indian families and the experience of being ruled by the British has contributed to a well-educated English speaking work force in India, which has an edge

over other Asian developing countries when it comes to partnering with multi-nationals from the U.S. and U.K. The section on modern India, the *Kaleidoscope*, needs completion by looking at traditional India, which is depicted through the use of the metaphor of *The Dance of Shiva*. Obviously, there is a large overlap between traditional and modern India as Hinduism has shaped interpersonal relations, business practices, and the role of women and family in India.

Using a Cultural Metaphor: A Training Example

At the 2009 Academy of Management Conference in Chicago, Gannon and Pillai showed how the metaphor could be brought to life to teach Indian culture. Their objective was to suggest innovative ways to communicate the metaphorical approach to students, organizational employees, and other audiences. The highlight of the presentation was a live performance of the “Dance of Shiva” by the Indian Dance School of Chicago under the leadership of Ms. Gauri Jog: <http://www.gaurijog.com/>. The three-stage process, through which the presentation unfolded, is described in detail in the following paragraphs.

The **first stage** included both a general introduction of metaphors as a framework to describe global cultures and a summary of the various other approaches used to understand cultural differences (e.g., Hofstede, 1980, 2001) and the Global Organizational Behavior and Leadership (GLOBE) study by House, Hanges, Davidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004). We then presented the highlights of both chapters on India, *The Dance of Shiva* and *The Kaleidoscope*. For the *Dance of Shiva*, we included topics such as the cycle of life, the family cycle, the social interaction cycle, and the work and recreation cycle. For the *Kaleidoscope*, we discussed the different religions of India, traditions at weddings and festivals, call center culture, the importance of education in modern India, and the role of cricket in Indian sporting life (see Gannon & Pillai, in press, for detailed descriptions of both chapters).

The **second stage** of the presentation showcased a performance of the *Dance of Shiva* by members of the Indian Dance School in Chicago. We had worked with the group for several months and explained the purpose of the presentation, which was to bring the metaphor to life for the audience of international management scholars, teachers, and practitioners. The dancers proceeded to demonstrate the different steps as the narrator explained the cycle of creation and destruction and its relationship to Indian culture (see Figure 1 below). While it may be possible in major urban areas to solicit the help of a local dance Indian troupe, it is probably more feasible for instructors of cross-cultural management to use YouTube videos in the classroom. Several videos of the performance of the Dance of Shiva can easily be found on the Internet. This is also true for other chapters from *Understanding Global Cultures* (e.g., Brazilian Samba, Argentinian Tango, and German Symphony), as YouTube has videos to demonstrate almost every metaphor.

In **stage three**, we shared some additional strategies for teaching the Indian cultural metaphors such as:

Discussing the results of the GLOBE study for the Indian context

As Chhokar (2008) suggests, Indian culture is very diverse and complex and with the transition that it's undergoing today, it is quite challenging to map India on the GLOBE dimensions. However, India scores high on collectivism (the family is one of the basic units of Indian society), humane orientation (being altruistic and charitable is important in Indian society), power distance (the centuries-old caste system and British rule have contributed to a structured society), and low on gender egalitarianism (India is a male-dominated society). The GLOBE study also found that there is a strong desire for the reduction of power distance and a clear preference for a higher level of performance orientation and future orientation (Chhokar, 2008). These results were discussed in the context of the two chapters, the *Dance of Shiva* and the *Kaleidoscope* from *Understanding Global Cultures* (Gannon & Pillai, 2010) in which we highlighted India's history and culture and how they shape modern business practices.



Figure 1:
The Dance of Shiva performance by members of the Indian Dance School at Chicago

Using specific Harvard business cases, books and articles about Indian companies or Indian business practices (<http://hbsp.harvard.edu/>)

A few examples are provided below but others can be found and tailored to the specific needs of the class (e.g., management, marketing, strategy, business policy, and ethics) by entering “India” in the search box on the Harvard Business publishing website:

- a. Infosys in India: Building the software giant in a corrupt environment
- b. India way: How India's top business leaders are revolutionizing management
- c. Hollywood in India: Protecting intellectual property (cases A and B)
- d. Tata Nano: The people's car
- e. Lost in translation

Experiential exercises and role-plays

Cross-cultural negotiation between Americans and Indians can be taught by presenting the two chapters on Indian culture and the chapter on American culture (*American Football*), forming students into teams, and engaging them in a negotiation role play (see the instructor's manual on the Sage website, www.sagepub.com, for *Understanding Global Cultures* for more examples and ideas).

YouTube videos

As indicated earlier, videos of the Dance of Shiva performances by Indian dance schools can be found on the Internet. YouTube also has a good collection of videos on Doing Business in India and related themes.

Films such as *Gandhi* and *Outsourced*

Films are a wonderful tool for bringing important concepts to life. They engage the audience, evoke emotions, and provide interesting insights into other cultures. *Gandhi*, the enormously successful multi-Oscar-winning film, is a good introduction to Indian history and aspects of Indian culture. It complements *The Dance of Shiva* chapter and allows for discussion of concepts such as power distance, untouchability and the caste system, charismatic and servant leadership, etc. The Hartwick College Leadership Institute (www.hartwickinstitute.org/) has a case study system for the film which includes teaching notes and the DVD. *Outsourced* is a good fit for the *Kaleidoscope* chapter because it deals humorously with business process outsourcing and call center culture. It tells the story of a call center manager from the U.S. who travels to India to train his replacement when the call center function is outsourced (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0425326/>).

We hope that this description is helpful to the readers, to discuss cultural differences in an educational, interactive and engaging manner in their classrooms.

References

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