Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies
The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 5

11-1-2001

Healing the wound: some cross-cultural challenges to Australia – Indonesia relations

Freddy K. Kalidjernih

Healing the wound: some cross-cultural challenges to Australia – Indonesia relations

Abstract
Extract:
The recent strain in relations between Australia and Indonesia resulting from the East Timor Crisis has shown once again that cross-cultural misunderstandings might be the basis of potential conflicts between Australia and its neighbour if not addressed properly. Apart from political and economic interests of the two countries that might have influenced leaders' decisions and actions, these events have clearly indicated that people from different cultural and historical backgrounds really do behave differently.

Keywords
International relations, cross-cultural issues, value orientations

The Culture Mandala, 4 no. 2, November 2001, Copyright - Freddy K. Kalidjernih 2000

Healing the Wound: Some Cross-cultural Challenges to Australia – Indonesia Relations

*By Freddy K. Kalidjernih**

1. Introduction

The recent strain in relations between Australia and Indonesia resulting from the East Timor Crisis has shown once again that cross-cultural misunderstandings might be the basis of potential conflicts between Australia and its neighbour if not addressed properly. Apart from political and economic interests of the two countries (commonly related to human rights, transparency and democracy issues) that might have influenced leaders' decisions and actions, these events have clearly indicated that people from different cultural and historical backgrounds really do behave differently. To Australia, the future of Indonesia's democracy means greater attention will need to be paid to cultural aspects, along with consideration of political and economic issues arising out of Indonesia's past authoritarian regime.

The purpose of this paper is to explore some primary cross-cultural issues that are the challenges to Australia if it wishes to rebuild and foster its relationship with Indonesia in the future. The concepts and theories behind the discussion are not new inventions, but those which have been widely acclaimed and have gained significant success in practical applications. Also, the value differences of the two countries exemplified in the present work have been discussed for many years, but have received little attention in this context. This paper will be further divided into four parts: value orientations, historical perspectives, implications of belief system, and the future.

2. Value Orientations

The first and foremost challenge for Australia is to recognise the differences in value orientations and practices between Australia and Indonesia, and to be able to appreciate the differences. There is always a danger for some Australians who think they have know about the cultures of Indonesia simply because they speak a little Bahasa Indonesia. Having read much about Indonesia, travelled extensively across the archipelago, lived and worked for a few years in the Indonesian outback, visited Bali or played the Javanese Gong do not automatically constitute understanding of these cultures. In many cases they might have failed to recognise the nuances of the local's basic assumptions and values. If they find some practices that are unusual to them, they might regard them as "funny", "weird" or even "wrong". This kind of attitude would not happen if they were more willing to learn about cultural values in Indonesia in relation to its national history, and to be more aware of the current changes in the country.

Even though Indonesia is a multi-ethnic society, and has many different language and belief systems where variations exist as sub-cultures in the country, generally people in the archipelago subscribe to similar *major* value orientations. Or, put in other words, the people's belief systems and/or religions, societal structures, history together with education and technology, have greatly shaped their worldview. Value orientations [1] generally refer to a group of people's or society's unconscious beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings, known as basic assumptions or values - in relation to nature, time, space, etc. - that govern their behaviour. We can observe a society's cultural orientations, though these are very often hard to decipher, through their strategies and philosophies as well as visible processes and products, known as artefacts.[2] Value orientations, along with other government and military policies, could serve as bases for judging the extent to which issues of human rights, transparency and democracy are applied over time. The following issues are brief

illustrations of the different value orientations of the people from the two countries that might affect cross-cultural understanding.

First, an example of possible misunderstanding can be drawn in recent condemnations and debates about the situation in the post-referendum in East Timor. Some people and groups in Australia condemned human rights violations in East Timor, saying that the Indonesian government and military did not do enough to stop atrocities immediately after the referendum in the troubled region. To them, there is only one truth, a tacit agreement, which is universal. Any exceptions of illegal conduct that breach human rights and democracy should not be allowed as this will destroy the whole system. Parties involved should adhere to agreements. We might describe them as people with strict universalistic orientations. On the other hand, the argument put forward by the Indonesian government that the Indonesian Military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI*) had psychological constraints when they tried to stop the pro-integration East Timorese from doing illegal violence might be an example of particularistic practice. Members of the *TNI* had had good and long relationships with the pro-integration East Timorese in fighting their enemies. How could they suddenly attack and kill their own friends and brothers? Another case in point is the issue raised by one of the Indonesian government officers, which might be regarded as a particularistic practice.[3] Given the last decade of positive relationship between the two nations, Australia was rather over-reacting, showing unprecedented antagonism, when Indonesia was undergoing a difficult period. For many, this might be only an excuse or justification, but for others, it is based on their particularistic values. While universalistic orientation is rule-based behaviour, particularist judgment focuses on relationships and the exceptional nature of present circumstances.[4] If both parties are more aware of the values of each other's orientation values, unnecessary blaming games can be reduced or avoided.

Secondly, the imposition of a set of rules on Indonesians applying for a visa to enter Australia also reflects different cultural values being applied to locals. The Immigration Section of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta is very keen to know whether or not Indonesian students could support their stay and studies in Australia. It is true that the Immigration department should be assured that any applicants have sufficient funds for their upkeep, so as not to burden the country when they are in Australia. However, this regulation on most occasions turns out to be a sort of long and onerous investigation of legal documents, including the request for financial statements that are commonly regarded as confidential, even in Australia. If the Australians in their Jakarta office are more sensitive to the local's cultural background and practices, and if applicants are more co-operative in providing consistent information and documents, both parties could avoid spending so much unnecessary time and energy. And, most importantly, applicants who have paid a visa processing fee will not feel insulted by being treated as if not bona fide, hence losing face.[5]

The foregoing example shows that: to Australians, in communication, the mass of information should be vested in explicit codes.[6] Applicants should submit as many documents as possible for substantiation, so we will trust them as bona fide. However, to Indonesians, if you want to trust me you can simply see what I have already paid as mentioned in a piece of paper called "Confirmation of Enrolment" from the Australian institution. Or, isn't one bank statement enough to show that I have funds, though not necessarily a huge amount? Indonesians will certainly believe, in that case, trust should not necessarily be associated with transparency or details. To them, non-verbal actions are no less important in the creation and interpretation of communication. Trust is not necessarily stated in a piece of paper, but the relationship that take the persons involved into account is normally applied for achieving a particular purpose. As widely acknowledged - contrary to Western practices - in Asia generally (including Indonesia) people place relationship before law in doing business.

Such a diffuse culture reminds us of a practice of seeing a person from his status (such as kinship, social connections, education, profession, age and gender) rather than what s/he has performed or achieved.[7] Consciously and sub-consciously, this person could use his/her status as sources to legitimate actions. And, in such rather vague and indirect situations, it is hard to demand

transparency from him/her. S/he might tend to be vague on a subject, beginning on the periphery of the topic - sometimes with irrelevant details - before coming to the real point. This behaviour is different from the 'beating about the bush' practice that is common to other cultures, including the Western ones. 'Beating about the bush' is situational and personal, but this peripheral approach is a rather typical and permanent behaviour.

In Indonesian political history, a further consequence of such espoused relationship values is that generally Indonesians recognise some individuals to be charismatic leaders.[8] Charismatic leaders can be individuals in the military, government-bureaucracy, religious groups, etc. Because of such projection or attribution to these individuals, generally people believe or accept what they perform rather than that which non-charismatic leaders or individuals do. Even if what they do is sometimes irrelevant. As a result of such status-based conceptions, history has shown that people gave charismatic leaders potentially unlimited power. For some people, a charismatic leader is needed to make a change happen, because s/he is believed to be able to provide vision, inspire actions rather than make decisions, and instil pride. He is expected to be able to create condition for various social groups that are potentially in contest, to hold them together in an integrated rather than fragmented social system.

The second consequence of cultural practices that focus much on relationship is primordialism. Primordial identities exist in various social and religious groups in Indonesia. Primordialism, which has to do with people’s loyalty or sense of belonging to a particular individual or group, is also expressed in political allegiances. Support to charismatic leaders is more rational than primordialism. Primordial identities, which are rather emotionally and historically based, tend to create *cronyism*. This sort of practice is important to note in international relations as it can affect the mutual understanding of the people.

Since Sukarno and Hatta proclaimed Indonesia an independent state, Indonesia began to adopt modern-Western systems of governance. However, we will see in the next section that its contemporary history has also shown us that people of the country tend to elect charismatic leaders. These leaders could exercise great or excessive power, in many occasions surpassing legislative power.

Thirdly, Australia and a few Western countries have had great concern about Indonesia’s transformation towards a more democratic government and society. However it is doubtful that they will see Indonesia turn into a Western-type democratic government and society. Although distribution of power and decision-making process will not be in one particular person’s hand as in the past authoritarian regime, Indonesia’s new representative democracy has turned out to be a concentration of power in several sections of society and among individual leaders.

Generally, Indonesia’s collective culture means the level of compromise will be very high, as exemplified in the recent presidential and vice-presidential elections as well as the appointment of members of the 'National Unity Cabinet'. In Australia, the leader of the winning party will automatically become the Prime Minister of the country and s/he then forms the Cabinet. However, this did not occur in Indonesia. The formation of Indonesia's new government has demonstrated that status-oriented culture, which heavily subscribes to social connections, has nullified what some people might have expected from a supposedly Western-type democracy. The current Indonesian President preferred to appoint members of his cabinet from some non-winning as well as the winning political parties and the military to satisfy different groups' demands, making every one happy.

It is a widely accepted tenet that the better the economic condition of a country the better education the people can enjoy. Although it is not an absolute factor, more illiterate and/or educated society prepares better democrats.[9] An important aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the poor economic condition in Indonesia today. Demanding a full democracy in 'one night', rather than a gradual reform during a time of economic hardship, might induce a torn society. The former USSR

is perhaps a good example that we need to learn from.

3. Historical Perspectives

When learning about the present situation and/or condition in Indonesia, Australian people might wonder why it could become so erratic. Much has been said and discussed about the causes of the current Indonesian's insurmountable crisis as a product of the past authoritarian and corrupt regime. However, in international relations, perhaps we need to look further back to some events in the history of the country that might contribute to the present crisis. If one tried to understand the present rather chaotic situation in relation to human rights violation, democracy and accountability in Indonesia, without considering the country's long and unpleasant historic experiences, one might miss many essential points.

Needless to say human rights is a universal but not necessarily a universalistic value. Universal values are ethical issues that should be upheld anytime and anywhere. However, condemning human rights violations by comparing strategies in handling problems in the Western developed countries that at present have practically no economic or political crises, as Indonesia is now experiencing, might put the country into even deeper troubles. Human rights violations in Indonesia, either to individuals or groups of people, have to do with the consequences of centuries of Western colonisation and the last decades' hegemony in the archipelago, and the past regimes' abuse of power. It is an extremely complicated issue.

After Indonesia proclaimed itself an independent country, there are two events that need to be noted. First, the Dutch returned to the archipelago and attempted to re-establish colonial rule, an effort strongly resented by Indonesians. This sparked resistance that forced the Dutch to recognise an independent Indonesia in 1949. The Dutch occupied the archipelago for nearly three and a half centuries, interrupted by the Britain from 1811 to 1814, and left practically nothing useful but a set of colonial system and practices beneficial to the Master, but not suitable for the colony. After gaining independence, Indonesia maintained the Dutch-continental legal system for many years. Major amendments did not occur until recently. The legal condition in the post-colonial era, aggravated by the practices of the past regimes, has also led to severe corruption and abuse of power. Law has been manipulated to serve powerful individuals and groups, and those who were able to bribe legal servants. The judicial system thus did not work well. As far as the democratisation issue is concerned we note that the Dutch colonial regime did not really encourage democratic participation of the locals in running the country.

Secondly, during the Cold War period two contested ideologies, i.e. capitalism and socialism, have also affected the condition of the new nation state. As an ex-Western poor colony, Indonesia was so eager for freedom and so weak as to accept American global hegemony. Indonesia, for example, adopted a short-lived federal, then a liberal system of governance. As a result the United States began to dictate to this small, powerless country, in part by using financial aids and grants. Feeling pressures coupled with unstable political conditions and an unimproved economy, the Indonesian government leaned towards socialism. However, the economic situation kept deteriorating. On the one hand, some groups of people were not always in line with the centre of the power: they demanded self-governing territories. They played havoc in a few regions. On the other hand, the United States, which was concerned about the communism, intervened in the country politically, economically and culturally.[10] The country's political stability was thus shaky with mounting conflicts, particularly between communist and non-communist powers. In 1966 Sukarno lost control over the situation and transferred the state power to Soeharto after an abortive coup occurred.

We have seen that both Western colonisation and cultural hegemony have also contributed to the seed of disharmony in the future of this new nation-state. The West is thus responsible for what they have done. Today's Indonesia has been partly the consequence of their historic actions. As the Western physical nomination in the form of colonisation and cultural hegemony in the archipelago

recedes there lies exposed a country troubled by shattered cultures and a weakened economy, fragmented societies and the potential clash of religious groups. The current crisis hitting the country has invited another problem, i.e. huge financial loans from the International Monetary Fund, becoming the burden of the next generations. In short, individualistic perspectives that seek to suppress particularistic and historic realities in a plural society have endangered the life of the nation-state and the geo-politic constellation in the region.

Like cultural values, past experiences are normally shared, taught and passed from one generation to another and they further affect our present behaviour. Again, these experiences, absorbed into cultural values, bring implications on people in the archipelago's perceptions when they communicate and interact with people from 'Western cultures', like Australians. There will always a sort of 'trauma' living in the memory of ex-colonised people concerning the motives of the 'Western people'. Even today this sub-conscious emotion might sometimes appear as a response to an unpleasant and/or unacceptable situation provoked by Westerners.

In this regard, we note that economically Australia might try to get close to Asia and position itself as an Asia-Pacific country.[11] However, as a society, its cultural values and organisational structures and processes are essentially of 'the West.'[12] Its multicultural move [13] does not automatically reduce its 'occidental' identity. The relationship that Australia has developed so far with Indonesia is essentially based on economic and geo-politic advantages. Cultural exchange-programs introduced by the Australian government are mostly used to reinforce those advantages, not for the cross-cultural understanding for its own sake.

4. Implications of Belief System

Another important cultural aspect is the dominant religious belief that can potentially influence cultural values and attitudes of the people of the two countries. As suggested by some scholars, in some cultures, people tend to view themselves as subjugated to nature. Others seek to live in harmony with nature. Still some others believe they are able to master nature. Indonesia with its dominant Islamic teachings might fall into a subjugation-harmony society. While Australia, being a Western society, is an example of the mastery society. There is a tendency of the former society to consider that politeness should be established in the first instance of communication. To Australians, brashness is perhaps essential, being part of frankness in communication. Australians are brash believing that everyone should take control of one's own decisions and actions. While Indonesians believe that politeness is necessary and that external circumstances do play a role in shaping one's decisions/actions.

With some three hundred ethnic groups and a large population that is predominantly of Islamic background [14], Indonesia's society is profoundly religious. And in this respect, it is different from Australia. As an outpost of European settlement [15], Australia shares the heritage of the Western civilisation - Christendom.[16] Christians were intimately involved in the colonial activities under the Dutch regime. It goes without saying, unfortunately, as a Western country Australia might have to bear the historical consequences of being viewed as 'distrustful' by some 'conservative' groups of people.

5. The Future

If Australia still considers Indonesia an important neighbour in its foreign policy, rather than a potential rival of medium power in Southeast Asia-Pacific, Australia needs to achieve a balance in various cross-cultural aspects.

In the past, the success of Australia-Indonesia bilateral relations was predominantly measured by the political and military climates. However, the fact is that private sectors could be developed without political intervention. For example, people of the two regions had engaged in exchanging goods and

products long before an independent Indonesia was proclaimed. During the low ebb relations of Canberra-Jakarta, business people could maintain their professional relationship without much assistance from their governments. Ironically, business even considered it was political interests that had so far distorted communication of people from the two countries, not to mention the role of media in Australia and Indonesia in blowing up unfavourable issues.

Many other reasons have also been provided, and their implications debated, as to why there have been hiccups in Australia-Indonesia bilateral relations. But few explanations have been provided as to why private sectors could maintain their relationships better than the political elite. Many aspects have made this possible. In the past people of the two countries tended to see each other from similarities and took for granted that there were no serious problems. Relationships between the two nations are thus built on the 'surface levels', though they are aware of the importance of potential conflicts resulting from different cultural values and perceptions. They thus tended to avoid seeing dissimilarities, though cultural dissimilarities existed. It is my contention that from now on political elites must shift their mindsets (paradigms) and try, perhaps, to learn from the private sectors in handling their activities without much 'noise' and thereby avoiding potential breakdown. A few examples might be useful:

> 1. People in the private sector, such as business people, manage their relationship quietly. They do not play up issues and lecture each other when things do not go smoothly. They do not like making overstatements, but seek solutions for mutual benefit. An old adage should remind us: 'You may lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink.'
>
> 2. People in the private sector know when and how to promote mutual understanding. They know when to talk business and when to behave informally, rather than standing exclusively in their own cultural positions and pride.
>
> 3. People in the private sector avoid unnecessary retaliation or sanctions.
>
> 4. People in the private sector, and perhaps some non-governmental organisations, seek WIN-WIN situations rather than offering each other forms of 'assistance' that carry forward vested interests.

As exemplified by business and/or private sectors, smaller-unit relationships have been least affected by political disturbances. This reality suggests that to rebuild and sustain good relations between the two countries, greater attention should be directed to smaller and/or informal unit-relations along with the existing government-to-government relations, such as person-to-person or institution-to-institution relations. In business as well as other non-government activities, such smaller and informal relations can be widened through a network among the individuals involved. Connectionism (in a positive sense) that exists in many Asian cultures can be utilised in a pluralistic society, though still sharing more common value orientations.

Cross-cultural study in international relations is indeed important in the era of globalisation. How can we focus on 'globalisation' if we do not understand each other well? The recent difficulties in Australia and Indonesia bilateral relations are good lessons for both political elites now and the future. Promoting universal values, such as human rights, democracy and transparency in its neighbouring region is valid for a country like Australia. However, the region should not sacrifice local values, interests and identities, nor ignore its historical experience. Sadly, the growing convergence in people’s taste, the consumption of ideas and technology in the so called 'borderless world' has not brought a better understanding among people from different cultural backgrounds.

Notes:

* Freddy Kirana Kalidjernih holds a BA (Hons) in English Education, *Universitas Katolik Indonesia* Atma Jaya, Jakarta, and a Master of International Business, *Swinburne University of Technology*, Victoria - Australia (under a Higher Education Scholarship). He is currently an Overseas Education Consultant (for Australian Education), and a Lecturer in the *Faculty of Education, Universitas Katolik Indonesia*, Atma Jaya, Jakarta. His primary interests include Education Export, Cross-cultural Communication and Management; and particularly the Indonesian and English Education areas. He has been a member of *The Linguistic Society of Indonesia* (MLI) for 8 years.

[1] For further discussion on value orientations, see Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961).

[2] This is not intended to be a comprehensive definition. It is derived from levels of culture developed by Schien (1993).

[3] S. Wiryono,"Reflections on Australia-RI ties," *The Jakarta Post*, 4 October 1999, p.4. Wiryono was the Indonesian Ambassador to Australia from 1996-1999. According to him: "It is important for Australians to appreciate that Indonesia is going through a very traumatic period. The smoothly functioning democratic process that is taken for granted in Australia is yet to be established in Indonesia."

[4] See Trompenaars (1993).

[5] So far applicants have shown great tolerance to the Immigration Section. They do not usually protest directly to the counter in the Embassy though they were certainly not happy, because: a) They need a visa to enter Australia; b) In high-context culture, people are discouraged from expressing their dissatisfaction verbally or directly, but they tend to communicate using covert clues.

[6] See Hall (1959 and particularly 1976) on his discussion on High-Context Culture and Low-Context-Culture.

[7] Trompenaars, op.cit

[8] See Anderson (1983) on charismatic leaders with particular emphasis in Indonesian experiences.

[9] See Hofstede (1991).

[10] See Anderson (1998).

[11] See Garnaut Report (1989) and criticism made by Fitzgerald (1997).

[12] See Huntington (1996).

[13] See DEET (1989).

[14] See Geertz (1960). Geertz recognises the Javanese Muslims as *santri*, *abangan* and *priyayi*. Santri are devout Muslims. *Santri* is generally classified into traditionalist (conservative) and modernist (reformist). *Abangan* are syncretists who are more adaptable to the mixture of Hinduism and Javanese-derived mysticism. *Priyayi* is not normally recognised by experts as a religious division, rather it might be included in caste system. Conservative groups will tend to see "a big gap" between the East and Islam and the West, rather then recognise there are some universal values among the three civilisations.

[15] See Maddock and McLean (1987).

[16] Huntington, op.cit.

References:

Anderson, B. R O'G., (1983) *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures in Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

_____ 'From miracle to crash' *London Review of Books*, 16 April 1998, pp. 3-7

DEET [Department of Employment, Education and Training] (1989) *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia: … Sharing Our Future*, Canberra: AGPS.

Fitzgerald, S. (1997) *Is Australia an Asian Country? Can Australia Survive in an East Asian Future?* NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Garnaut Report (1989) *Australia and the Northern Asia Ascendancy*, Canberra: AGPS.

Geertz, C. (1960) *The Religion of Java*, Glencoe: The Free Press.

Hall, E.T. (1959) *The Silent Language*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

_____ (1976) *Beyond Culture*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Hofstede, G (1991) *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values*, Beverley Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Huntington, S.P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Touchstone Books.

Kluckhohn, C. and F. Strodbeck (1961) *Variation in Value Orientations*, Westport, Conn: Greewood Press.

Maddock, R. and I.W. McLean, eds. (1987) *The Australian Economy in the Long Run*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schein, E.H. (1992) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd ed., San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Trompenaars, F. (1993) *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, London: Nocholas Brealey Publishing Ltd.