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Culture Shock in *Typee* and *La Relacion*

By Alan Oak

As I lay dying in the hotel room, I knew Pakistan, the country himself, was trying to kill me. He was a malevolent god “that [held me] over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, [abhorred me], and [was] dreadfully provoked” (Edwards). We were at war, and I was losing. Each new moment spent in this maw of Hell, Karachi, was another moment closer to final torment. I had to escape *immediately* from the stench of burning meat and open sewage, from the glass-eyed and dour-faced demons sizing me up through a greasy haze of petrol exhaust and honking horns, plotting how best to rob and cheat me. I had to escape from this shiftless and shabby nation of criss-crossing and unmarked streets, of unplumb building corners, of wiggly and slapdash lines in the road, of exposed wiring, of filthy toilets and moldy showers, where nothing ran on time and a thousand insults and inconveniences were explained away with the flimsiest of excuses. I had to escape. And I did. I left Pakistan a month into my second visit after two weeks of diarrhea and several days of paranoia on a one-way Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt, purchased at exorbitant cost only one day before and at the higher cost of insulting my friends and hosts. But I was free.

This was culture shock. So, when, in the course of my studies, I read the cross-cultural travel narratives, *Typee* by Herman Melville and *La Relacion* by Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, their experiences resonated with mine, both the good and the bad. Spread out as we are by five centuries, two continents, two nations, two languages, three religions, and thousands of changes in social mores and beliefs, our stories are more similar than different. We shared something universal to travelers among strange people in strange places—culture shock, a much bandied term that actually has a prescribed meaning to scholars of intercultural communications.

Like the the stages of grief, culture shock is a well-studied process of psychological and practical adaptation by the sojourner in an alien culture, and is generally considered to have four stages:

1. The honeymoon or tourist phase.
2. The crises or cultural shock phase.
3. The adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase.
4. The adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase.

(Winkleman)

As the originator of the term, Kalvero Oberg, said in 1954: “We might almost call culture shock an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad. Like most ailments it has its own etiology, symptoms, and cure.” “The phases are both sequential and cyclical. The shift from crises to adjustment and adaptation can repeat as one encounters new crises, requiring additional adjustments. One may become effectively bicultural, and then the adaptation phase is a permanent stage” (Winkleman).

Doing research for this essay, I found no literary criticism applying this particular understanding of culture shock to texts. Most of the literature relating to this phenomena is in the behavioral sciences and education, or else summaries of studies by those disciplines. There were a couple of texts cited in the databases that have “culture shock” in the title, but the ones I looked at used the term only in the ordinary sense. There were many references to postcolonial criticisms of *Typee* and *La Relacion*. These are valid and important perspectives, but I will not explore them in this essay. The particular cultural inter-weavings of sixteenth century imperialistic Spanish and Native American cultures, and of nineteenth century Yankee whalers with Pacific Islanders, are not to be discounted, but here I’m speaking of the universal.

There’s a fly in the ointment: If I’m going to use *Typee* and *La Relacion* as artifacts of the culture shock experience, they are not completely reliable. Both are first person narratives written after the fact to achieve certain rhetorical aims. Melville altered his autobiography to the point of fictionalizing himself as the narrator, Tommo, and changing the time he spent with the Taipai from four weeks to four months (Bryant). He was writing to entice the paying fans of travel stories, those who wanted thrilling adventures in exotic locales. Cabeza de Vaca’s journey spanned ten years, and *La Relacion* was written five years after his arrival in Mexico City (Covey 12-15) with the aim of gaining favor with the crown and better treatment for the Native Americans. Even in my case, my memories of Pakistan are eighteen years old; I am a different man now ripping a yarn to demonstrate certain ideas. It would be better, for the purposes of science, to rely on unedited journals, but we work with what we have. If my narrators tend to embellish and mold, the power of our stories comes from reliving those moments of original experience stored on the videos of our minds.

What I said at the beginning about my paranoia and desperation before running away like Melville’s Tommo from the Taipai and Cabeza de Vaca from the natives of Galveston Island was true in a way—it was true in my crisis state of mind. But there was a reason I’d traveled to Pakistan twice, and it wasn’t business: The first stage of my experience, the “honeymoon or tourist phase,” was wonderful. During my first two-week trip, I was giddy with the novelty. The

Pakistani people are far more hospitable than Americans, and whole families adjusted their schedules to entertain me, shuttle me around, and hold dinners in my honor. Even going from shop to shop, the merchants would hardly talk business without getting a boy, always perched nearby, to run out for tea or soda and maybe a few cookies. Each morning I woke to living poetry as the Imams delivered the call to prayer from the loudspeakers at the mosque. I leisured in the tropical breezes of open, old-fashioned houses with tilework and screened walls built in geometric patterns too ornate for hasty American construction. Traveling about town rivaled a day at Six Flags as the *tut-tuts*, three-wheeled taxis, hugged corners and swung around peddlers carts at high speed with one wheel in the air. And the food! To be awash in spices is the gourmand's dream, and I bathed my fingers and tongue in them at every meal. Dessert followed with fresh fruit fully ripened, so unlike the cardboard produce of the American industrial food chain. Such oranges and mangoes! I wanted to convert and stay, maybe get married; I even had a suit of Pakistani clothing tailored, the puffy white *shalwar-kameez*.

This first phase, the "honeymoon or tourist phase," "is characterized by interest, excitement, euphoria, sleeplessness, positive expectations, and idealizations about the new culture. The differences are exciting and interesting. Although there may be anxiety and stress, these tend to be interpreted positively" (Winkleman). We're not yet to the *shock* in culture shock. For Melville, the Taipai Valley was:

A utopic Eden, a realm of "perpetual hilarity" free of the economic upsets that fatherless Melville had himself endured. It [was] a place where there are 'no destitute widows with their children starving on the cold charities of the world; no beggars; no debtors prisons; . . . or to sum up all in one word—no Money!' (Bryant xvii)

In the Taipai Valley, wrote Melville, "the Fall presses very lightly . . . Nature has planted the bread-fruit and the banana, and in her own good time she brings them to maturity, when the idle savage stretches forth his hand, and satisfies his appetite" (195). In Taipai society, "the control of the chiefs [is] mild in the extreme" (200) and Tommo claims never to have "witnessed a single quarrel" between the Taipai, who seem to "form one household, who's members are tied together by the ties of strong affection" (204). The Taipai are beautiful to him, especially the women, and it is a paradise on earth.

After washing up on Galveston with the other survivors of the Narvaez expedition, Cabeza de Vaca had some trepidation that the natives would sacrifice or eat them. Instead, the natives cried for the pitiful condition of the Spaniards and brought them fish and roots to eat, acting in every way as good hosts (57-58). Cabeza de Vaca idealized the character and life of the natives. "These

people love their offspring more than any in the world and treat them very mildly” (61). “The people are generous to each other with what little they have. There is no chief. All belonging to the same lineage keep together” (63). He sounds much like Melville’s Tommo.

But paradise doesn’t last forever, and all honeymoons come to an end. Stress reactions, cognitive fatigue, role shock, and personal fatigue all begin to wear down the sojourner, and things no longer look so rosy (Winkleman). This is the “crisis or culture shock” stage. Oberg describes the signs:

. . . excessive washing of the hands; excessive concern over drinking water, food, dishes, and bedding; fear of physical contact with attendants or servants; the absentminded, far-away stare . . . a feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one’s own nationality; fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations; delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country; excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured; great concern over minor pains and eruptions of the skin; and finally, that terrible longing to be back home, to be able to have a good cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie, to walk into that corner drugstore, to visit one’s relatives, and, in general, to talk to people who really make sense.

I began this essay with a recounting of my own crisis period. Melville’s Tommo and Cabeza de Vaca went through the same dark night. Worse, they were actually captives. Tommo was a permanent guest by the chief’s order, and he lacked a practical means of escape because of a recurring, stress-induced, psychosomatic leg injury. Cabeza de Vaca went from an honored guest to a slave.

Tommo was dependent for emotional support on his American friend, Toby. After Toby escaped the valley, Tommo was consumed by the “profoundest forebodings” and “deepest melancholy.” He reminded himself that though the Taipai had been very nice to him, “they were, after all, nothing better than a set of cannibals” (118). The “mysterious disease” in his leg, he said, “remained unabated,” and no treatment from the medicine man, Tinor, could heal it (118). At a moment when “fifty savage countenances were glaring” at him, he said, “I first truly realized I was indeed a captive in the valley. . . I saw at once that it was useless for me to resist, and sick at heart . . . abandoned myself to despair” (119-20). He wanted to flee, but saw no means and fell into despondency.

Cabeza de Vaca wrote of his slavery and hard labor, “My life had become unbearable” (66). He does not say how his status changed, but it seems his mental state, cultural ignorance, and

lack of Stone Age skills reduced his value. He acted like a slave and became a slave. Other than relating that he'd been deathly ill, and feeling ill used by the manual labor he endured, Cabeza de Vaca did not relate anything of his inner life. But, surely, the honeymoon was over.

He wrote, "Because of the hard work they put me to, and their harsh treatment, I resolved to flee to the Charruco in the forests of the main ... So, I set to contriving to how I might transfer to the forest dwellers, who looked more propitious. My solution was to turn to trade" (66). He did escape and began to master the culturally difficult profession of trade, which required mastering local languages and customs. Tommo began to come out of his depression, too—his leg cleared up, he began to take exercise, he participated more in the life of the valley, adopted his own version of native dress in *tappa* cloth, and even began a love affair with the beautiful Fayaway. He "resolved to regard the future without flinching. [He] flung [himself] anew into all the social embraces of the valley, and sought to bury all regrets, and all remembrances of [his] previous existence, in the wild enjoyments it afforded" (144).

In this third phase, "The adjustment, reorientation, and gradual recovery phase,":

A variety of adjustments will be achieved during cyclical and individually unique adjustment phases. There may be an adjustment without adaptation, such as flight or isolation. Many people who go to foreign countries do not adjust to achieve effective adaptation; instead, they opt to return home during the crises phase.

(Winkleman)

My own weak will and the miracles of jet travel saw that I adjusted without adaptation. Tommo did not have that option immediately, but the stages of culture shock are recursive. When the traveler, Marnoo, arrived in the village and aroused the possibility of escape in his mind, Tommo began to fall back into thoughts of escape, depression, paranoia, and his leg injury reasserted itself. Finding a shrunken head that his hosts had hidden in the house (232) and witnessing a real cannibal feast (238) didn't help his frame of mind, and he began to worry anew about becoming dinner. He returned to the crisis stage until he finally escaped.

Cabeza de Vaca didn't have it so easy. No ships came to affect a rescue. Only a few enslaved Spaniards survived the first year, not enough in numbers or strength to form a cultural enclave. He and three companions had to persevere to the fourth and final stage, "the adaptation, resolution, or acculturation phase." It was in this way they became traveling medicine men by mixing Catholic ritual with Native American custom, were respected and revered by many native tribes, and were able to make their way across what is now the American Southwest and

Northern Mexico. Many scholars have pointed to Cabeza de Vaca's journey as the beginnings of Mestizo culture. As Anthropology Professor Michael Winkleman points out:

It is important to recognize and accept the fact that an effective adaptation will necessarily change one, leading to the development of a bicultural identity and the integration of new cultural aspects into one's previous self-concept. Reaching this stage requires a constructive response to cultural shock with effective means of adaptation.

After returning to the Spanish world, Cabeza de Vaca received an appointment as governor of the Rio de la Plata provinces and became an ardent champion of the human rights of native peoples, risking and then losing his appointment, and suffering persecution after he "systematically prohibited enslaving, raping, and the looting of Indians—which were what the majority of Spaniards had come [to the New World] for" (Covey 15).

Even those of us who ran away, though, Melville and I, were forever changed. I've spoken up many times for the dignity, respect, and common humanity of Pakistani and Muslim people against the bigotry I've been witnessed since 9/11. It's my duty as one of the rare Americans who've actually lived amidst the nuances of an Islamic culture, if only for a short time, and read the key Islamic religious texts, the *Koran* and some of the *Hadith*. Melville went on to draw the Polynesians favorably in his writings, *Typee* and *Moby Dick*, among others. He wrote in *Typee*, "How often is the term 'savages' incorrectly applied. None really deserving of it were ever yet discovered by voyagers or travelers" (27). The experience of traveling, the experience of culture shock, the real experience of another place and people forever changes you. Strangers become no longer strange; the Other becomes part of the We.

1

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