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Food, pets or gods? Different attitudes to animals in non-western cultures

Would you accept if somebody offered you a meal – but a meal made of a dog? Do you know that a cow can bring you good luck? Do you think these suggestions are acceptable or not?

The way we perceive the world we are living in is strongly influenced by the culture in which we were brought up. Culture is a set of values, views on reality and behaviour codes, common for people who share similar style of living¹. Culture is a system of symbols, is continuous and acquainted in the process of learning.² It is impossible to live in isolation from culture, it penetrates all spheres of our life.

The term “value” indicates what is important for us, what matters, what is seen as good or bad, important or unimportant. Values tell us about what we believe in and how we evaluate somebody’s behaviour. Values are taught at home, often unconsciously, and reinforced by the society – so we can say that values are generally culturally determined.

The trouble begins with the notice that in different cultures different values dominate which tell us what to do and how to behave.

In this short essay I would like to present where the differences in values collide - taking into account the area of how different cultures treat animals and where misunderstandings might occur.

We have learned what is and what is not appropriately labeled human food. Because of that learning you can experience emotional reactions when you see that what you label nonfood items is used as food in non-western cultures.

Most people categorize animal life into wild animals and domesticated animals. And how do they typically divide domesticated animals in western world? Probably into animals used for food, animals used for sport and recreation, and pets.

Think of a small puppy, a cute, cuddly, warm, loving creature. Most of us see this puppy in the category of pets, for which we relate warm, loving feeling.

¹ Marek Szopski, *Komunikowanie międzykulturowe*, WSiP 2005, p. 10.

² Ibid. p. 17.

But now imagine you are on a live animal market and you stand next to a man who fingers this puppy, merely discussing with the dog butcher which bits of the animal tasted best. Disgusting? Unthinkable? It is a pet, not food!

Another example comes from the Arabian world³, where dogs are acceptable as watch dogs and as hunting dogs but are not kept at home as pets. Why not? Because they are seen as unclean and a low form of life. It is very insulting among Arabs to call someone a dog.

To prove how strong are the ideas about which food is acceptable for human consumption and which is not let us refer to the American law: “in 1989, California made it a misdemeanor for any person to sell, buy, or accept, any animal traditionally kept as pet with the intent of killing, the animal for food. Asian-American groups argued that eating dogs and cats is an extreme rarity among Southeast Asian immigrants and called the law racist”⁴.

Nowadays, the attitudes towards animals in China are changing⁵. Until recently, few Chinese regarded animals as pets and many viewed them just as something to eat. It was due to law regulations: raising dogs was banned under the rule of late Chinese leader Mao Zedong⁶ as a bourgeois pastime. It was made legal only a few years ago once living standards rose with the economy. But as the 27 of January 2006 has opened the Year of the Dog, the attitude toward dogs will apparently change: they will be used as an auspicious seasonal gift.

Similarly to China, in today’s Japan⁷ almost everyone associates his or her birth with a particular animal – saying for example, “I was born in the year of horse” – and it is assumed that one’s character and fortune in life are influenced by the animal representative of their birth year.

One could notice that we – the westerners – also possess our zodiac signs among which you can also find animals. But contrary to Chinese or Japanese, our fate is not so strongly determined by our zodiac sign and a fierce belief in the influence of someone’s zodiac sign on their life is more or less seen as a superstition and has nothing to do with religion.

Another example comes from Korea⁸, where we can find two reasons for eating dogs. The practice seems to have originated from famine. Many people used to experience lack of food in spring, some forced into killing and eating their dogs. It is believed that the practice of eating dogs only gained prevalence due to the Korean war and the resulting nationwide starvation. But on the other hand, Korea achieved

³ Fred E. Jandt, *Intercultural Communication. An introduction.*, SAGE Publication, 1995, p. 140.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Internet sources (all sources were found on 24-26.03.2006): http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4651950.stm

⁶ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2006-01/27/content_516194.htm

⁷ <http://web-japan.org/factsheet/flora/culture.html>

⁸ http://www.geocities.com/yoons_choi/koreandogs.html

an economic success in the 80s, which should have stopped this cruel practice. But it did not. The groundless superstition that eating dogs is good for male virility was quickly marketed by dog meat dealers. Over two million dogs a year are killed, based on the belief that eating dog meat invigorates male sexual vitality. For appetite, dog's skin may be burned off with a blow torch, often while the animal is still alive. Many dogs are deliberately put to slow cruel death as a result of the superstition that the more animals suffer, the better the meat becomes.

Of course, there are people and institutions fighting against these practices (e.g. Korean Animal Protection Society, International Aid for Korean Animals) and trying to change the current situation⁹. But contrary to the Californian law mentioned above, the Korean government is going ahead with their plan of legitimizing the dog meat trade through the introduction of a policy on the hygienic control of the dog meat trade, which in turn will greatly encourage dog-eating practice.

Dog-eating evokes really strong objection in our culture but imagine what the Indians feel once they discover our habit of eating beef? From their point of view it is us who are barbaric. Misunderstandings in this field had already happened in 19th century. In 1857¹⁰ sepoy, or Indian soldiers, rebelled against social and religious indignities (remember that since 18th century the British East India Company began taking over much of the subcontinent, manipulating conflicts between local rulers and imposing taxes). The main reason for the rebellion was (the fact) that Indian soldiers were given British ammunition packed in grease wax casings. They believed the British used cow and pig fat to make the cartridges. Since it is against religion to consume beef (for Hindus) and pork (for Muslims) they refused and challenged the British by revolting. Civil discontent spread the Indian Revolt, which was finally suppressed in 1859 by the British government.

Nowadays in India you can find reports on “kukur vivaha”¹¹ (“marriage of dogs”) – during this ceremony children marry dogs “to ward off evil”. Parents of children whose first tooth grows out of the upper jaw perform such marriages “for the peace and welfare of the entire community” because such a growth is considered “inauspicious”.

On the other hand, the opinion of Peter Foster (the Daily Telegraph's South Asia correspondent in New Delhi): “Dogs in India are for kicking, not petting”¹² is confronted with website www.dogsindia.com whose aim is “to bring together all dog enthusiasts in India and all over the world, to share ideas and information,

⁹ <http://www.koreananimals.org/urgentaction.htm>

¹⁰ http://www2.vscs.cc.tn.us/kbell/RegionalNotes/South_Asia.htm

¹¹ http://www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_1297669.html

¹² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?view=BLOGDETAIL&grid=P30&blog=asia&xmml=/news/2006/01/12/blasia112.xml>

enrich their knowledge about dogs, and work for the betterment of our loyal and affectionate companions”¹³.

As far as the status of dogs in India is concerned, you can say India is a country of contrasts. But the status of cows is unquestionable.

Hindus tend to say¹⁴ that a man who does nothing useful in life but s/he takes care of cows, deserves respect and will rebirth in next life as a human being. To be in cow's service means to be in God's service. A cow is a talisman of good luck, and symbolizes maternal good. It gives five products to people: milk, butter, cheese, urine and excrement. The received fertilizer is used for greasing floors and walls of houses to symbolically “clean” them. The fertilizer might also be formed into round cakes, dried up in the sun and used as fuel. It burns long and some praise the aroma of dishes cooked on this fire...

Nobody dares to kill a cow, even if it is old and unable to work. Cows are let free and we can see them on roads, fields or bazaars. There are no cows in the centres of big cities like Bombay, Calcutta or Delhi, where it has been ordered to remove the saint animals because this lowers the prestige in the eyes of foreigners.

In India the cows' holiness is part of spiritual tradition. Cows join the world of culture and religion and the world of nature. In Europe there is no such a link, culture and nature are opposing. In Christian tradition there is one and only God and no place for reverence for animals. One can find a dove or a lamb in the Bible but only as symbols of superior beings such as angels, Christ, the Holy Ghost, or the God Father – but the animal is never a symbol of holiness itself. Maybe that is why it is so difficult for the westerners to reconcile the holiness with a cow?

And what about the scarabeus – the Egyptian symbol of immortality and resurrection, also a symbol of good luck. People have fewer problems with accepting it as such a symbol although – let's face it – it is only a beetle. But what we have learned about scarabeus is completely different from what we have learned about a cow. Of course, they ARE different, it is enough to take a look, but if you put them in one group of “good luck symbols” which figure would you choose as a small gift for your friend?

Already on the basis of the few given examples it can be seen that knowledge about different customs is necessary when you want to communicate successfully across cultures. But knowledge alone is not enough to achieve understanding. Knowledge reduces stress in new situations and allows you to look at a problem through the eyes of somebody else. But there is no use of knowledge if you are not motivated – motivation here means curiosity, openness and will to contact with other people. With motivation comes the need to get to know more about our interlocutor. Being open, empathic (trying to understand what the other

¹³ <http://dogsindia.com>

¹⁴ <http://archiwum.wiz.pl/2000/00074500.asp>

person feels and thinks) and being able to adapt your behaviour to different situations and people you communicate with, increases your chances for mutual understanding. It is particularly important when representatives of different cultures meet. Our growing experience in contacting people from various parts of the world has already shown us that openness, respect and trust, together with self-esteem and will to cooperate are the best means to ensure respect and recognition for oneself.

The attitude to animals is just a small part of a huge area of the intercultural communication field where misunderstandings might occur. I wanted to present some of the views and how they are culturally affected and thus fulfill (to some extent) one of the conditions leading to understanding: to deliver knowledge. Although personally I cannot agree with the way dogs are treated in Korea because according to the criteria used in my culture it is unacceptable (what in turn places me in the ethnocentric position). I generally opt for cultural relativism, which postulates evaluating cultures according to their own criteria. What is rational for one culture, might be totally irrational for the other. Even if you think that worshipping a cow is an unreasonable idea, once you are in India pay a rupee to feed the animal – if you show respect to another culture it will surely be reciprocated. And a small step forward to better relations will also be made.