

Setting the scene

PART

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A free sample from *Cross-Cultural Management in Work Organisations* by **Ray French**. Published by the CIPD.

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OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- assess the importance and scope of cross-cultural management
- appreciate the interplay of cultural and non-cultural factors within the subject areas of people management and workplace behaviour
- recognise the need for topicality in research, models and theories in the field of cross-cultural management
- understand the structure and main features of this book

CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT – AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY?

On 7 July 2005, terrorist attacks on the transport network in London killed 52 passengers and injured approximately 700 people. The victims of the atrocity accurately, and in this case poignantly, reflected the multicultural nature of London's workforce in the early twenty-first century (the vast majority were on their way to or from work when the bombs exploded). Those who died comprised citizens of 13 different countries including the UK.

Obituaries published in British newspapers over the following days told stories which gave a human dimension to oft-cited data on global labour migration. Some had – heartrendingly, in the light of the ultimately tragic events – made a conscious decision to move to the UK for a better life, whereas others were spending a designated period working in London as part of careers commenced in their home countries. Their participation in the UK workforce was at any rate an entirely normal occurrence at that time.

The existence of culturally diverse workforces is furthermore by no means limited to the UK or, more specifically, to its capital city. For many of us it is now an everyday event to deal with employees from many different cultural backgrounds in a single workplace, and it is no longer necessary to leave one's country of origin – or to be employed in an explicitly international role – to be touched by cross-cultural (or intercultural) concerns.

As indicated by its title, the focus of this book is on aspects of cross-cultural management *within* work organisations. Although its content may be of particular interest to existing or intending expatriate managers, it is now possible to present a strong case that all managers must possess cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity at the level of managing people at work. Even if it is felt that incomers should wholly adapt to the ways of the host culture, meaningful differences will continue to exist if we believe that an individual's core values are formed at an early age, deeply held and 'portable'. Many organisations are in any case concerned to secure and foster diversity within their workforce in order to enhance employee performance and secure competitive advantage.

What is very clear is that cross-cultural management is not an abstract body of knowledge; rather, its practical impact can increasingly be seen close to home – wherever that may be.

A MULTI-LAYERED SUBJECT AREA

The view put forward in this book is that an awareness of the impact of culture on people in work organisations can both enhance an understanding of the realities of day-to-day life in an increasing number of work settings,¹ and contribute to effective management of employees, in terms of meeting goals set to measure organisational success. In short, the underlying premise is that culture matters. However, it is important to recognise that culture itself is a complex multi-layered concept. Olofsson (2005), in an interview reported in the CNN news website,² notes that her experience as an author detailing cultural aspects of business behaviour suggested that in many cases people's awareness of superficial cultural difference has been increasing, in part due to the impact of diversity awareness programmes. She likens culture to an iceberg in which visible and tangible elements form only a small part of its true nature. Olofsson counsels against the danger of assuming that one is a cultural expert based on an awareness of surface aspects which fail to bring out the deeper levels, comprising peoples' core norms, values and assumptions.

The 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* memorably illustrated the power of superficial awareness of cultural difference in a scene in which one character – a mobster recently returned to the USA after three years living in Amsterdam – was asked for a summary of the 'little differences' deemed to be all-important, since he claimed that the two societies were essentially the same (these were not the precise words used!). The subsequent monologue included details about the patterns of drugs usage and the dressings put on burgers in fast-food restaurants. Although these details might be important in terms of being streetwise, few people would claim that in any meaningful way they capture the essence of Dutch culture.

Returning to the field of cross-cultural management, this subject area is pre-eminently one in which the adage that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing' is highly relevant. In Part 1 of this book the concept of culture as it takes effect within work organisations is analysed in greater depth, together with some models purporting to explain cultural differences. The subject area is an emerging one – we would expect no less, given the dramatically changing relevant business context – and it is important to recognise the existence of different and sometimes competing approaches. Throughout the book the question of which level or layer of culture is under consideration will be highlighted in order to enhance meaning and point to relevant workplace applications. Ultimately, the levels of culture are interconnecting and must be viewed as such.

To return to the *Pulp Fiction* vignette, patterns of drug usage in the Netherlands in the 1990s both reflected and reinforced *institutional* arrangements – in this case the legal system – and were also an expression of more deeply held *cultural values* – for example, on the importance of an individual's taking responsibility for his or her lifestyle.

The study of culture and cultural difference also necessitates a focus on institutional macro-level features of society – including educational, legislative and political systems. In Chapter 10 we will see that worldwide differences in human resource management strategies, policies and practices can helpfully be explained in terms of the particular variety of capitalism prevalent in a specified society or region (for example, the Anglo-Saxon, Rhineland or Asian versions). It has been argued (Hofstede, 2001) that the values and institutional approaches to understanding differences between societies are interlinked (values shape institutions which in turn reinforce norms), or are in any case reconcilable within organisational theory (Koen, 2005). Nonetheless, both aspects – individual or group values and institutional macro-social features – form a necessary part of cross-cultural business studies, and both are addressed in subsequent chapters.

AN EMERGING AREA

There are a number of recently published textbooks that deal either directly or tangentially with people management aspects of cross-cultural business activity, including Adler (2002), Holden (2002), Warner and Joynt (2002), Schneider and Barsoux (2003), Tayeb (2003), Francesco and Gold (2005), Guirdham

(2005), Koen (2005) and Magala (2005) – dates refer to editions issued most recently. Important source material textbooks from writers who have devised influential models of culture include Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997). Other textbooks focus specifically on the adjacent subject area of comparative or international human resource management, and these are referred to where appropriate throughout this book, particularly in Chapter 10.

All of the abovementioned works have made significant contributions to the subject area. They have also informed material contained in this book and I hope that I have acknowledged them sufficiently. The fact that a cluster of books have emerged within a relatively short period of time can be attributed to identifiable trends within business – in particular, *globalisation*. This word is dissected in later chapters because it contains a number of different strands not all of which are compatible within a single term. At this point the facet of globalisation most relevant is its sense of accelerating interconnectedness between nations and people, leading to the increased prevalence and intensity of cross-cultural interactions. Cross-cultural encounters might, for example, occur when companies decide to outsource work to new countries, or when organisations enter into new forms of networked relationships with overseas partners, or as a result of increased migration of labour. At the time of writing there was considerable debate within the UK over the likely results of Bulgaria and Romania's imminent EU membership in this regard.

As a result, organisational decision-makers and students of business and management have increasingly sought to comprehend the ways in which culture intervenes at workplace level. A great deal of existing writing on this topic sets out academic models of culture in order to understand its nature and impact with a view to enhancing managers' cross-cultural interpersonal competencies – for example, through an awareness of the phenomenon of culture shock. Holden (2002) categorises cross-cultural management in the late twentieth century as having been primarily concerned with managing cultural differences, recommending that it should in future focus more on ways of fostering synergy and organisational learning.

The field of cross-cultural management is a rapidly developing one with an increasing focus on the management of workforce diversity as a means of obtaining a competitive edge. This book aims to take the subject forward in the following ways.

One aim is to provide an evaluative summary of existing models of culture and cultural difference, rather than simply reproducing their main points without further comment. This, it is hoped, will enhance awareness of what is a complex subject area. A brief perusal of some of the main academic perspectives can only ever result in the 'dangerous little knowledge' referred to earlier. Very importantly, surface-level summaries or uncritical synopses of existing models of culture cannot effectively inform the experiences of managers operating in the cross-cultural field. It is more meaningful to survey a range of contributions to the field, keeping in mind the overall context of the subject area and the ways in which individual writers' work interrelate.

One of the writers whose work forms the bedrock of cross-cultural management is Geert Hofstede (2001). Hofstede identified up to five universal dimensions along which individual societies can be compared. One such dimension enables us to assess the extent to which a society is *individualist* or *collectivist* in terms of its values (this distinction appears frequently within the cross-cultural business literature). In the vernacular of cross-cultural management, Hofstede's approach is characteristic of an *etic* perspective – namely, one which identifies a society's features with reference to external measures. Data presented in this book reveal that Hofstede's work continues to provide a source of rich insights into the nature of cultural differences and the ways that these play out in the work setting.

However, it is also necessary to recognise the existence of alternative *emic* approaches to the topic which, contrastingly, focus on characteristics of individual societies and explain them on their own terms – ie without recourse to wider classification schemes. In later chapters we see how China can be understood within etic frameworks – including Hofstede and Bond's (1988) classification of China as a society high in

'long-term orientation' – based in part on the identification of ten fundamental Chinese values. This conclusion follows the construction of another universal dimension – time orientation – and resultant comparison with 'short-term-oriented' societies such as those of the UK and USA. But Chinese culture can also be understood with reference to the emic research of Fan (2000), who identified 71 core values that could be expressed by Chinese people wherever they live. This work concentrated on intrinsic characteristics of Chinese culture, and no comparison with other countries was deemed to be necessary. In seeking to understand Chinese society, both etic and emic approaches have their merits, and a shrewd observer should be aware of both traditions.

The combination of alternative explanations of culture forms a core theme within this book and will, it is hoped, help to deepen knowledge of the individual topics examined.

The evaluative approach taken also leads to some questioning of findings from earlier studies. It is noticeable, for example, that a high proportion of existing research data on cultural values, norms and behaviour was drawn from international managers – so we can legitimately question its applicability across a whole population, as international managers form an atypical group in several respects.

Cross-cultural management is also a rapidly developing field so one can expect new and sometimes radically different insights to emerge, and it is crucially important to be alert to them: there is a clear need for topicality. In Chapter 9 readers will note a commonly held view that people who arrive in a new culture – for example, international managers or students – as sojourners experience feelings of culture shock. The process of culture shock is widely believed to comprise key stages – from initial elation through despondency to eventual readjustment (which in itself can take several forms). This model of culture shock is enshrined in the core literature. However, Selmer (2005) on the basis of research has queried the validity of the processual view of culture shock and, indeed, the concept more generally. Although it might be precipitate to reject established views on the basis of one study, this example highlights the need to include newly published data in any analysis of cross-cultural management – a heightened concern, given the rapidly changing international business environment.

The difficult task – recognised if not actually achieved in this book – is to appreciate what is changing and what is enduring within the subject area. Hofstede (2001, p.36) makes a clear statement on the validity of his cultural dimensions and their implications, claiming that: 'Culture change basic enough to invalidate the country dimension index scores will need either a much longer period – say, 50 to 100 years – or extremely dramatic outside events. Differences between national cultures at the end of the last century were already recognisable in the years 1900, 1800 and 1700, if not earlier. There is no reason they should not remain recognisable until at least 2100.'

NON-CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

It is understandable that academic work focusing on cross-cultural management should stress the importance of culture as an explanatory factor: one would not reasonably expect to find a textbook in this area taking a 'non-cultural' perspective on the subject. Nonetheless, a true appreciation of culture's influence on business can only be gained via a realistic appraisal of its relative role. In this book the question of how much culture does in practice intervene in organisational processes will underpin material contained in subsequent chapters – specific reference is made to the relative importance of culture in Chapter 2.

The cultural or non-cultural debate takes place on several levels. It is important to record firstly that even those theorists who stress the centrality of culture as an explanatory tool conclude that it is only one variable affecting human behaviour. Hofstede (2001), the cultural theorist *par excellence*, makes it clear that individual differences – for example, in personality – account for significant variations: we are all to an

important extent truly unique. At the same time Hofstede recognised universal mental programming comprising 'expressive behaviours' such as manifestations of aggression. These behaviours are shared by all people.

The second way in which the extent of cultural influence is called into question arises out of the debate regarding the *convergence* of cultures within globalisation. Does the spread of global brands like Chelsea Football Club result in a narrowing of cultural difference between societies – and if so, to what extent and at what level?

Finally, work organisations can be seen to operate within universal principles. For example, in Chapter 5 we encounter the argument that certain contingent factors affect the ways in which organisations are structured. Within this logic, larger organisations will be more bureaucratic than their smaller counterparts in *all* societies, thus minimising cultural variation. Allied to this pressure for convergence is the possible conscious adoption of one country's working practices by another after observing their prior operation. For example, Dore (1973) noted how Japan as a 'latecomer' industrial nation was able to blend existing Western procedures with culturally specific practices.

All in all, cultural and non-cultural factors combine in complex multiple interlinked ways as they impact on work organisations. In this book reference is made to these linkages when referring to individual topic areas and, as an underlying theme, highlighted again in the concluding chapter.

One recent example of blurring in cultural and non-cultural explanations of working life relates to the 'offshoring' or migration of call centre jobs to new locations – for example, the Indian subcontinent. Caulkin (2005) in an article in *The Observer* newspaper relates the negative experiences of Indian call centre workers many of whom were at the time leaving their jobs following verbal abuse from customers. Caulkin (*op cit*) notes the difficulty in disentangling the causes of the problem, which he held to be only partly due to the location of the workers. While some abuse was of an unforgivably racist nature, in other respects it was no different from that experienced by UK-based call centre employees and could be traced back to unintended consequences of call centre operation *per se*. As Caulkin notes, 'It was Albert Einstein who defined madness as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Tragically, but predictably, this is what is happening in India and elsewhere as supposedly advanced countries export toxic Western management techniques to countries that can be excused for imagining that there is no alternative to what they are told is "best practice".' Readers can possibly input their own examples of the interplay between culture and other factors in reality.

THE CENTRALITY OF ETHICS

There should be no doubt that cross-cultural management is centrally bound up with ethical considerations. There is firstly the sense that cross-cultural awareness is itself inherently morally desirable in that it can lead to mutual understanding. In the words of the American spiritual teacher Sally Kempton, 'It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.'

Such a view suggesting that understanding is a necessary prelude to harmonious relationships has a long track record. The nineteenth-century Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle stated that 'No person was ever rightly understood until they had first been regarded with a certain feeling not of tolerance but of sympathy.' And yet the moral debates regarding mutual sympathy and comprehension have a particular resonance in the often multicultural organisations of the twenty-first century. In 2006 the Uphall Primary School in Ilford in East London included pupils who spoke 52 different home languages. In the light of a very positive Government inspectors' report the school can be regarded as a good working example of a diverse organisational environment. Furthermore, the seemingly successful mix of children from different cultural backgrounds can be regarded as positive in its own right. The school's headmaster expressed this view as follows: 'It's like a micro-world. We have got children from all corners of the globe. Our success story is how children who have witnessed really traumatic events – people being blown up and shot in the

street – how they have assimilated in school. I think sometimes when you see foreign dignitaries thrashing out a peace deal they would benefit from spending a day here. In 20 years' time, if some of these children were world leaders. the world would be a better place.'³

The somewhat idealistic tone of the preceding quotes should not obscure the fact that cross-cultural awareness may not in itself result in positive outcomes. Schneider and Barsoux (2003, p.219), in one of the leading textbooks in the area, point to potentially varying results of multicultural working. 'Teams have been shown in the past to either enhance or impede productivity, and this is even more true for multicultural teams. Research seems to indicate that multicultural teams tend to perform either much better or much worse than monocultural teams.'

Polarised results in cross-cultural work situations can partly be attributed to clashes of values, themselves linked to ethical considerations. This is a difficult area in which hard choices may be required. In Chapter 9 there is a full discussion of some ethical dilemmas arising from exposure to cultural values which conflict with individuals' own deeply held principles. The ways in which a person reacts to such dilemmas depend on whether he or she adopts a deontological stance in which the inherent goodness – or badness – of an act is the prime concern. Such a view holds that ethical behaviour is evaluated on universal criteria which are not therefore open to varying cultural interpretation.

An opposing stance is that of cultural relativism – not the same as moral relativism – which involves the interpretation of other people's behaviour from the perspective of their cultural background. The question of how to deal with non-negotiable moral issues – for example, relating to the rigid application of rules, perceived nepotism or complicity in sweatshop working practices (all of these are of course culturally laden terms) – raises profound issues and is explored more fully in Chapter 9.

Overall, one important theme within this book is that cross-cultural management is inextricably linked to the field of ethics, and that this interrelationship should be 'flagged' and its practical consequences addressed in order to strengthen the subject area, both in terms of academic rigour and in its potential to inform practice.

A CHANGING WORLD

One further theme of this book is the need to reassess the value of 'classical' tenets of cross-cultural management within a rapidly changing business context. In particular, since the focus of this book is on management within work organisations, it is necessary to keep abreast of developments both in thinking on organisational forms (rhetoric) and documented examples of new modes of organisation (reality). Clegg *et al* (2005) provide a summary of new organisational forms, all retrospectively dated by these authors from 1980 onwards. They include 'adhocracy', 'virtual organisations', 'network organisation' and 'postmodern organisation'. All of these are differentiated from the bureaucratic or 'Fordist' paradigm assumed to be dominant before 1980 (although this dominance is to some extent questionable).

Given that Hofstede's groundbreaking work on culture was based on research conducted in the IBM Corporation between 1967 and 1973 – albeit supplemented by additions and amendments made prior to his 2001 revision – can we say that his findings (together with those of others referred to in Chapters 2 and 3) are current – ie applicable in a changed organisational context? Some attempt is made to address the issue of topicality within this book. In Chapter 6, for example, we note the importance of an understanding of non-verbal communication (primarily body language) within effective intercultural communication. However, in virtual organisations, or even while using remote communication media such as email within a more traditional organisation, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to see the person with whom one is communicating. Registering nuances of culturally influenced reactions – for example, through eye contact – will very likely not be feasible, so the cross-cultural manager will have to ensure that he or she has guarded against misinterpretation (or outright offence) in other ways. Although this may previously have been relevant to some degree – telephone conversations across national boundaries are not a new

phenomenon – the increasing prevalence of new organisational forms and rapidly developing communications media bring such concerns to centre stage to a greater extent than ever before.

LEADERS PREDICT CHINA WILL BE UK'S BIGGEST EXPORT MARKET BY 2009

Yet concerns over language barriers prompt directors to call for Chinese lessons at university

British business leaders believe Chinese should be taught in UK universities because they predict that China will become Britain's biggest export market.

Company directors expect sales to China to be worth 10 per cent of the UK's global revenue, equivalent to £200 billion a year, by 2009, according to a study by consultancy Hay Group. Yet they are concerned that differences in culture, language and communication present barriers to doing business in China. Nearly half of UK business leaders plan to recruit Chinese MBA graduates to boost their prospects in China and many want a China module to be included in all European MBA courses. Fewer than 500 UK graduates a year are awarded a degree of which Chinese language is a substantial part.

'We are about to face a war for talent, both in China and in domestic markets, as companies scramble to recruit talented leaders and managers with understanding of the Chinese market and business culture,' said Deborah Allday, author of the study. 'Companies who fund MBA study for employees should demand China courses on all courses. Business executives should start developing Chinese language skills now.'

Lucy Phillips, *People Management*, 25 July 2006

This article points to the importance of understanding the culture of a rapidly developing new economic power in the early twenty-first century. It highlights several key areas which are important in this regard and hints at some of the possible barriers which could inhibit that understanding. Readers can track the accuracy of the predictions outlined in the article over the period in question. Similar predictions have been made regarding the emergence of Brazil, Russia and India into the global business arena. However, all predictions in this area are just that, and previous events alert us to the potential intervention of the law of unintended consequences, upsetting 'sure bets' for change.

Paul (2006), writing in the Singapore-based *Straits Times*, documents the fluctuating history of the Toyota Corporation, recalling how a proposed tie-up with the Ford company was rejected due to the breakout of the Korean War on the day it was first discussed. This appeared at the time to be a major blow to Toyota's fortunes. Subsequently, however, Toyota received large orders from the US Defense Department to supply trucks for use in that same war, described as Toyota's 'salvation' at that time. In early 2006 Ford announced plans to dismiss up to 30,000 workers and close 14 North American plants – this announcement following a few days after Toyota declared record production levels in America. In Paul's words, 'The wheel had come full circle.'

Predicting the future in international and cross-cultural business and management has always been, and is likely to continue to be, extremely challenging. While it is important to retain a topical focus, one should not be seduced by persuasive arguments proposing or even implying a logic of cultural determinism. There are no inevitabilities. That is one of the reasons why the subject area is so exciting.

THE ORGANISATION OF THIS BOOK

Throughout this book the intention is to approach the subject area from a global perspective. In other words, I have sought to avoid, or at least minimise, ethnocentric assumptions. This ultimately is a futile endeavour since my own (mixed) cultural background – not to mention current location in the UK – must

inevitably have insidiously influenced the ways I have approached writing the book. On a prosaic level, many of the examples used relate to the UK, either directly or via comparison, although I have tried to broaden out the material to encompass other societies. Recognising my own cultural values and being explicit about their impact on my approach to the subject is at least the first step to guarding against excessive narrowness in this regard, and it is hoped that this book will be of value to readers located outside the UK. That is, most certainly, the sincere intention.

Part 2: Culture – uses and limitations focuses on the concept of culture and the ways in which it has been, and continues to be, interpreted, providing a base for the discussion of topics presented in subsequent chapters. In Chapter 2 *The meaning(s) of culture*, the concept is explored through an examination of a number of definitions and perspectives. Culture is a contested concept and it is important to appreciate its multi-faceted nature, together with some of the difficulties inherent in pinpointing cultural difference (and similarity), before assessing its importance within people management and an understanding of workplace attitudes and behaviour. Chapter 3 *Understanding models of culture* looks at existing popular models of culture and cultural difference, identifying common threads in the literature. An evaluative approach is taken, in order to assess the validity and potential usefulness of some of the most popular models of culture. Chapter 4 *Conceptualising culture – the way forward* explores limitations in existing frameworks of culture in terms of both theoretical underpinning and the typical methods used in research within this area. Several newer alternative models are put forward for consideration. At this point the relative role of cultural convergence and divergence as applied to defined areas of business is reviewed and the interplay between these forces is discussed.

Part 3: Cross-cultural social relations in the workplace considers the impact of culture on a series of topic areas: organisation structure (Chapter 5), intercultural communication (Chapter 6), leadership (Chapter 7) and motivation (Chapter 8). In all cases, chapters include consideration of whether, and to what extent, traditional models and perspectives within these topic areas can be viewed as universally applicable. The alternative view – that culture can be seen as a contingent factor affecting workers' attitudes and behaviour in these topic areas – also forms part of the discussion. In each case the consideration of culture leads to a reassessment of the original topic, and so has wider currency beyond cross-cultural management. In Chapter 6, communication is also evaluated as a source of cultural difference *per se*.

Part 4: Managing across or within cultures moves the debate on to focus on the competencies needed by cross-cultural managers, and explores the links between culture and one area of management – HRM. Chapter 9 *Intercultural competencies, training and ethics* reviews existing literature in the field of competencies and puts forward suggestions for additional competencies increasingly required in view of developments in the cross-cultural business environment. The chapter includes a review of the nature of cross-cultural training and its efficacy. The key importance of ethical considerations and the likelihood of ethical dilemmas within the field of study is highlighted at this point. Chapter 10 *Culture and human resource management* includes a brief summary of how cultural values influence HRM policies and practices, evaluates the extent to which HR interventions can have varying results when applied in different cultural contexts, and identifies how institutional dimensions of culture can affect strategies, policies and practices.

Part 5: Looking to the future comprises Chapter 11, which concludes the book with an evaluation of frameworks purporting to explain cultural difference in the contemporary context. At this point we also revisit the question of the relative impact of culture as a factor influencing different facets of organisational life. We additionally identify a range of issues that could usefully inform the future study of cross-cultural management.

Most chapters include short activities which it is hoped will enhance the value of the text for readers. These are brief exercises which in essence ask for self-reflection and/or consideration of real-life or

imagined scenarios. In some cases readers are asked to undertake additional research. It would be nice to think that these short activities will add value to the extensive narrative contained within the book.

There are several references to the *People Management* journal, which is a useful source of up-to-date material, particularly in its regular documenting of events, issues and trends affecting cross-cultural management. Summaries of some relevant articles and reports are available via the CIPD website: www.cipd.co.uk.

Notes

- 1 The focus of this book is on legitimate work organisations, including summaries of existing research studies in the area. There are, of course, more negative aspects of international 'working' associated with globalisation, including the global 'trafficking' of women for prostitution and other forms of illegal labour. While these sometimes come to light in the media – for example, the deaths of the Chinese 'cocklers' in the North of England in 2004 – such practices are by definition difficult to research and so are, regrettably, largely outside the scope of this book
- 2 cnn.com/2005/travel/07/17/bt.cultural.etiquette/index
- 3 *The Independent*, 26 July 2006