

## **Complicating the Concept of Culture**

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## **Complicating the Concept of Culture**

This essay argues against a simple, reified view of culture as a set of ideas and norms belonging to a group or nation and considers implications of a more complicated concept for discussion of world culture and the global/local nexus. Most anthropologists define culture as the making of meaning, with an emphasis on the process itself as contested. It follows that world culture is locally produced in social interaction, and that meanings are then re-constructed in the global/local nexus. Power matters, particularly the hidden power to make resources for meaning making widely available, and to make them attractive and scientifically persuasive. How actors succeed in claiming particular ideas as global and how the locals strategically respond are questions where anthropologists can contribute to understanding the global/local nexus and the exercise of power within the world polity.

*Keywords:* culture, world culture theory, sociology's institutionalism, global/local nexus, anthropology, cultural meaning, globalization

### **Introduction**

Both world culture theorists and their interlocutors make frequent reference to the concept of culture—specifically to “world culture” or “global culture” on the one hand (e.g. Lechner and Boli 2005), and to “national culture” on the other (e.g., Schriewer 2004). But what does “culture” mean?

Anthropologists, for whom the culture concept is central, used to define culture as the property of a group, that is, the beliefs and patterns of behaviour typical of a particular society (Baldwin et al. 2006). However, in recent decades anthropologists have moved away from that simple definition. Moreover, the majority of anthropologists write about culture at the

local level, raising the question of what a concept as sweeping as “world culture” or even as “national culture” might mean. Meanwhile, the general population has embraced anthropology’s traditional, over-simple definition of culture, readily using it to stereotype and exoticise other people and even to mask talk about race—to the point that some anthropologists seek to abandon the term “culture” altogether (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991; González 1999).

In this context, I seek to complicate the concept of culture as used within comparative education and to ask how a more complicated, nuanced concept might operate in discussions of world culture and the local-global nexus. The first section of this essay will note that many anthropologists today define culture as the making of meaning, often with an emphasis on the process and with attention to the contest over meaning between more and less powerful actors. The second section will consider the ways in which power matters to the construction and diffusion of ideas around the globe. My illustrations will come primarily from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s anthropological study of logging and environmentalism in Borneo, *Frictions* (2005), an analysis that has inspired anthropologists who study educational reform across multiple “levels” (Vavrus and Bartlett 2009), and from my work with Ntal Alimasi on the flow of educational reforms into and through the Republic of Guinea (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001).

Before beginning, however, I take a short detour to consider what “local” and “global” mean and to offer a few other caveats.

***What counts as local or global?***

What counts as global and especially what counts as local are rarely spelled out (Moore 2004). To begin, there are many localities or “scales,” not just two. In *Frictions* (2005), Tsing reports from the various perspectives of settlements in the Meratus Mountains, of a provincial university and its nature-loving students, of the nation as represented by Indonesian-based logging companies, and of global organizations as represented in Jakarta and at a conference in the United States. Local and global are thus two ends of a more complex continuum (compare Napier 2003), and what counts as local depends on the contrast of interest. In some critiques of world culture theory, it is national culture that is portrayed as the opposite of the global; for example, Schriewer, in the proposal for this volume, uses “local agency” to refer to a to “a group or nation.” On the other hand, although anthropologists occasionally write about national cultures, we more often focus on villages, towns, urban neighbourhoods, or other small-scale settings—even face-to-face settings like schools and classrooms.

In line with the anthropological focus, I propose to define the “local” as particular people who have the possibility of interacting regularly in particular places (including electronic sites). By that definition, an academic department is local but the Comparative and International Education Society is not, since its members meet only about once a year. The White House is

local, but the entire US government is not, nor is the United States as a nation. The World Bank conceived as the people who regularly interact at its building on H Street in Washington is local, but the World Bank conceived as people in all of its offices around the world and their interconnections with the UN, national governments, and NGOs is not.

Whatever counts as global, it is at the opposite end of the continuum from the local. A commonsense meaning of global would be ideas or norms that are widespread across the world, even universal. A more complex meaning, as I will point out below, would be ideas or norms that people successfully present as widespread across the world, whether they truly are or not. Following Tsing, a third meaning of the “global” involves travelling and translation (2005: 213ff). She describes, for instance, how provincial Indonesian activists brought stories about the activist Chico Mendes to mountain settlements in Borneo from Brazil, by way of North America and Malaysia. In this sense, the global refers to the movement of people or ideas or things, which travel from one *local*-ity to another and require translation in the new setting. Because of their travelling, they may indeed be widespread (meaning 1); they may also be claimed as widespread or universal (meaning 2) even if they are not really so widely shared.

It is important to remember that in any particular setting there may a hazy borderland rather than a sharp distinction between the global (in the sense of what comes from elsewhere) and the local (in the sense of

indigenous). People or ideas may fall in both categories simultaneously. In our study of the flow of educational reforms into and through Guinea in the 1990s, for example, we found that many people had one foot in the local (whether the Ministry of Education or a village school) and one foot in the global (whether experience at an international NGO or time spent at a French university), while many educational ideas could likewise be seen as both foreign and indigenous (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001).

### ***Other caveats***

Three other caveats. First, since culture and power are complex and contentious topics, I write as one US anthropologist without claiming to represent the entire discipline. Second, the culture concept is an analyst's abstraction for describing and explaining complex human behaviours, even though the experiences we describe as "cultural" are very real, as anyone who has experience culture shock can attest. The third caveat is that writings by dozens of world culture theorists and their interlocutors fill thousands of pages and do not, of course, manifest perfect consistency. Thus it is possible to find world culture theorists or their allies recognizing many of the points I make at least somewhere in the corpus, if not always in the core of their arguments. What I attempt to do here is to correct a few tendencies that seem misguided from an anthropologist's point of view, to emphasize and encourage other tendencies, and to consider what kind of anthropological work would contribute to the discussion.

## **Culture as meaning-making**

Definitions of culture have continued to evolve since Kroeber and Kluckhohn published about 200 of them in 1952; Baldwin et al. (2006) recently listed 300 more. In spite of the diversity of perspectives, most scholars agree on one point, namely, that culture is the opposite of the natural, “instinctual” or innate.

Beyond that, since the cognitive turn of the 1950s and 1960s, many anthropologists have described culture as the making of meaning—meaning being beliefs and norms, understandings and know-how, or “knowledge” very broadly defined (e.g., Anderson-Levitt 2002, Fischer 2007, Strauss and Quinn 1998), that is, “the whole of the social processes of signification” (García Canclini 2006: 121). Today anthropologists rarely include behaviour per se in definitions of culture; we are still interested in “patterning in human activity” (Erickson 2011:25), but the word patterning points to assumptions and expectations, often tacit, that guide behavior and identify what is surprising rather than to the whole of behaviour per se. Thus meaning making refers not only to the act of interpreting what is going on, but also to the know-how and norms required to behave like a sensible person. In this double sense, culture is “acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley 1979: 5).

When writing about meaning making, some anthropologists emphasize the meanings, describing culture as a cognitive system or a body of

knowledge, as ideas and propositions (e.g., Goodenough 1981, D'Andrade 1995; Strauss and Quinn 1998), or a system of symbols (e.g., Geertz 1973). World culture theorists use the same kind of language when they refer to scripts (e.g., Ramirez 2003), blueprints (Chabbott and Ramirez 2000), or models (e.g., Meyer, Kamens and Benavot 1992), or when they define culture as “socially shared symbolic and meaning systems that become embedded in objects, organizations, and people” (Lechner and Boli 2005: 16).

However, since the 1980s many anthropologists have shifted the focus to practice or performance and hence emphasize the process of making meaning over the meanings themselves. For example, Brian Street defines culture as “an active *process* of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition” (Street 1993: 25; emphasis added). This shift represented part of the general movement in the social sciences to recognize the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). However, the shift also happened as a reaction against the exoticising and even racialising, mentioned above, of a static concept of culture. Thus some anthropologists have proposed treating “culture” as a verb (Street 1993, Wax 1993), while others propose the adjective “cultural” to allow for a more fluid, less reifying discussion (e.g., Appadurai 1997). Focusing on meaning making as a process also makes it easier to consider the operation of power.



Defining culture as meaning making, particularly when focusing on practice and process, has many implications for writing about culture in general and about world culture and its connections to local culture in particular. I will explore them in the rest of this section.

***Culture does not act***

Any definition of culture as meaning making, whether focused on the meanings or on how they are made, implies that culture does not act. Culture does not do things to people; rather, people do things, and one important thing they do is make meaning. Recognizing that human beings are the actors and even naming individual actors (as does Bodley 2003 as well as Tsing 2005) brings clarity to the analysis and makes it easier to see how the global interacts with the local.

In contrast, world culture theorists sometimes write as if culture has a life of its own and makes things happen. They write, for example, that “Worldwide models define and legitimate agendas for local action, shaping the structures and policies of nation-states and other national and local actors” (Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1997:145). However, Lechner and Boli acknowledge the tendency to write in this vein as “the specter of reification” and clarify that talking of world culture as doing things is merely a convenience, “sparing us the need to unpack it into its components or into the actions of people using the symbolic resources at their disposal” (2005: 26). (Their metaphor of people using resources is apt, and I will return to it later.)

If it does not reify, much of the literature on globalization relies heavily on the passive voice and is vague about who does the acting. However, some texts do name the actors. For instance, in their essay “Development and Education” (2000), Chabbott and Ramirez identify development professionals and US economists as actors, as well as organizations like UNESCO, the Ford Foundation, comparative education journals, academic programs, and NGOs. Similarly, Ramirez (2003) refers to “the actors themselves—individuals, nation-states, organizations, professionals and other “modern” experts” (p. 242). Here, I take the claim that organizations or national governments are actor as another shorthand gloss for what actually happens, since organizations are complex collections of people co-constructing meaning and sometimes struggling with one another over competing meanings.

***Cultures have no one-to-one relationship with groups***

Reflecting on culture as meaning making also leads to the conclusion that groups do not “own” particular cultures. Meanings are too frequently shared across group boundaries, on the one hand, while not everyone inside the group necessarily shares the same beliefs and norms, on the other (Goodenough 1981; compare Bateson 1958). Thus, contrary to the views of anthropologists like Ruth Benedict and to notions among the general public, anthropologists today do not imagine a one-to-one correspondence between a collection of beliefs and norms and an identifiable group of people. We avoid defining culture as the beliefs and patterns of behaviour *of a particular*

*society*, and we no longer conceive of cultures as “complex wholes” or “configurations” (Erickson 2011). Today we recognized that “cultures are not bounded and separable” (Strauss and Quinn 1998: 7).

From the point of view of the individual, then, “we are all multicultural” (Goodenough 1976), with “each person a junction point for an infinite number of partially overlapping cultures” (Strauss and Quinn 1997: 7). From the perspective of the world’s population, it does not make sense to classify the world into distinct national or regional or even local cultures; rather, some anthropologists propose that we envision the world as a single ecumene, in which cultural meanings are shared across networks that may be local but that often span the globe (Foster 1991; Hannerz 2008; Wax 1993). In this sense, any locally generated cultural idea or norm, from a dance craze or pop song to a particular way of teaching reading or a passion for democracy, has the potential to spread around the world. All culture is potentially global.

In any discussion of “world culture,” then, exactly who participates in or uses the culture so named is an open question. The notion of “national culture” or any other named culture must likewise be unpacked. For example, when Jürgen Schriewer writes about the “nation-specific discourse developments ... determined by cultural, religious, political and ideological forces and traditions intrinsic to each society under study” (2004: 527), he makes it clear that in the case at hand, he is not referring to his target

nations of Spain, China and Russia in general, but rather specifically to “educational knowledge as documented in scholarly education journals” published in each nation (2004: 493). It would be interesting to investigate further who the journal editors, review boards, or other participants were.

### ***Groups sometimes claim to own culture***

But why, one might ask, if culture has no natural borders, is it so easy to speak of national cultures or ethnic cultures as distinct bodies of beliefs and norms? The explanation is that people often engage in meaning making deliberately and strategically, and one reason they do so is to create distinct group identities (e.g., Moerman 1965). There is a great deal of work done to construct “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) by claiming ideas and values and ways of doing things as one’s own; for example, many Americans insist that baseball is an American sport in spite of its importance in the Dominican Republic, Japan, Korea and other parts of the world (Sharrock 1974). Thus cultural differences are at least partly about the construction of group identity (Barth 1969), and the concept of a national culture is itself a cultural product (cf. Foster 1991).

It follows that what counts as world culture is not necessarily shared by all or even many people in the world, but is rather whatever is successfully claimed as world culture by those people who manage to have a say in the matter. As Lechner and Boli explain:

“To say that a cultural element is universalistic ... is to say that the element is presented to the world ‘as if’ it were universally meaningful,

applicable, useful, or proper. The element is presumed to have universal (worldwide) scope; it is presumed to be interpretable in a largely uniform way and to make sense both cognitively and, often, normatively, in any particular local culture or social framework” (2005: 21)

Unfortunately, the passive voice prevents them from specifying who is doing the presenting and the presuming, for it would be instructive to investigate who claims to speak for world culture and how they manage to put their claims across.

### ***All culture is locally made***

If meaning is made in social interaction, it follows that all culture is locally produced by particular people who interact in particular places. As Erickson puts it, “the locus of culture as experience, as learned and enacted, is the local community of practice” (2011: 31-32). Even when they are alone, people doing interpretive work draw on and respond to resources generated by other people, and in doing so they are interacting with other people. The interaction may not always take place face-to-face; it may happen over the telephone or through email or texting, but if it is regular interaction I would nonetheless refer to it as local production of meaning.

If all culture is locally produced, then even world culture must be locally constructed in the sense that the ideas or norms are generated in some particular locality by people who have occasion to interact regularly. The question becomes, what are the locations where this happens? The ideas and norms that actors claim as world culture are constructed in such places as World Bank offices and university conference halls, in Ministry of

Education offices when aid officials meet with local decision-makers, and in classrooms where inspectors are introducing internationally sanctioned texts. By the same token, national culture is constructed in a myriad of local interactions, from the halls of Congress or Parliament to a bar where people debate who belongs in this country to classrooms where children are taught national history.

Global meaning making is also local in the sense that global actors (that is, people who claim to speak for the world or for universal standards) draw on resources from their own locations to make meaning. For example, in Guinea, visiting international reformers proposed recognizably US or recognizably French reforms for Guinean reading instruction depending on whether they came from Anglophone North America or from France (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001); their Western ideas were not a monolith. Similarly, Tsing points to the “particularities” of global projects, giving an example regarding conflicting visions of the rain forest in Indonesia. Whereas the people who live in the Meratus Mountains see the “trees as social networks” (2005: 256), both loggers and environmentalists from the West imagine the forest as a natural area in symbolic contrast with social spaces. This Western view, says Tsing, is drawn from historical European experiences in which elites seized forests and drove peasants out of them, emptying them of the social (2005: 201).

The global/local nexus likewise refers to the production of meaning in particular places—places of encounter between travelling actors or ideas and local actors. In *Frictions*, Tsing shows how global projects like the international logging trade and also like environmental protection of the rain forest take place in interactions that engage people representing global concerns, people representing the nation, provincial actors, and people who live in the forests in question. Her word for interactions is “friction,” a metaphor that points to the resistance and obstacles encountered in such interactions, but also to the “grab” (friction as discussed in physics and engineering) that is necessary to make anything happen. Importantly, in her analysis of such encounters, she illustrates how a global movement like the arrival of international logging in Borneo’s rain forests was contingent on many factors and far from an inevitable event.

***Traces in artefacts are resources for further meaning making***

If meaning is constructed in social interaction, however, how should we think about the artefacts that researchers find so revealing, such as policy documents, special terminology, or the very structure of school systems? Certainly, meanings generated in social interactions leave traces in the form of artefacts, including language, texts, and institutions (Cole 1996; Wertsch 1998). World culture theorists seem to agree; that is what I take Lechner and Boli to mean when they write of culture as “embedded ... in objects and organizations” (2005: 16). It is what Jürgen Schriewer means when he writes [in the proposal for this theme issue] of “meaning processing schemata” as

“rooted in ... in collective experience crystallised into language and language-bound semantic corpuses.” From a constructivist perspective, these traces are not culture per se, but rather the effects of past cultural construction, which then serve as resources available for further meaning making. For example, an aid worker seeking to explain the difficulties faced in implementing universal primary education will find a wealth of pre-established vocabulary and explanations published in documents by UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNDP, and mentioned by colleagues in the office and at conferences (cf. Schriewer and Harney 1999 on national resources).

As resources, artefacts like a word, a text or an institutional arrangement do not carry fixed meanings, for people who encounter them for the first time have to interpret them, that is, to generate their meanings anew. Those who take in global ideas adapt them—“creolize” them, to use Hannerz’s term (1987). For example, the Indonesian activists who brought the story of Chico Mendes to settlements in Borneo modified the story to conform to Indonesian political realities, omitting Mendes’ central goal of unionizing the rubber tappers (Tsing 2005: 233). In our study of the import of educational reforms into Guinea, Alimasi and I noted varying degrees of creolization. At one end of the continuum, Guinean decision-makers adopted some notions “as is,” without attempting to change them, although even in such cases transformations happened as the ideas were translated to provincial leaders and then to local leaders and finally to classrooms



(compare Napier 2003). At the opposite end of the continuum, there were cases where the Guineans adopted nothing more than the label for an idea to attach to their own concerns, giving a term like “rich texts” or a concept like “cultural relevance” a meaning quite different from the meanings intended by outside reformers (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001).

Somewhere in the middle of this continuum lay what could properly be called “creolized” ideas, borrowed ideas transformed to the point that they become something new, albeit still recognizable.

### **Power matters**

Importantly, anthropologists do not assume that meanings are simply constructed and traded in a cultural free market. Rather, anthropologists and other social theorists have been concerned with contest over meaning and “culture as hegemonic power relations” at least since Marx (Fischer 2007: 4-5). Street’s definition of culture cited earlier refers to “contest over definition” (1993: 25), and it is a contest played out on uneven ground. As Karabel and Halsey put it, “There is, to be sure, considerable latitude available to those engaged in struggles over the ‘definition of the situation,’ but the question of whose definition will ultimately prevail is pre-eminently one of *power*” (1977: 543, emphasis in original).

Regarding world culture, one question is how power matters when global ideas get constructed in the first place. What contests over meaning take place inside and also between global institutions? What are the processes (say, within the World Bank, within an education ministry, or in the

editorial office of an academic journal) by which certain meanings and not others leave traces?

Another question concerns the global/local nexus: How does power shape the diffusion of ideas around the world and contests over their re-interpretation in local settings? Here, world culture theorists acknowledge that they downplay power, offering as a rationale the argument that dominant actors like the World Bank or the United States do not exercise power to impose world culture because many tenets of world culture, such as human rights for all, are actually not in their interest (Ramirez 2003). However, whether in their interest or not—and neither world cultural theorists nor constructivists presume that states are rational actors—nations and international organizations actually do exercise power both overtly and in hidden, subtler ways, as I will show in this section.

### ***Visible power***

Sometimes ideas are imposed outright. Actors engaged in delineating and promoting global culture are sometimes in a position to impose acquiescence—or at least the appearance of acquiescence—through economic or political clout. For example, Ramirez (2003) notes the effect of World Bank decisions on the ebb and flow of vocational education in Africa. Similarly, the World Banks and its allies have influenced whether primary education or secondary and university education receive greater attention over the decades.

In the Republic of Guinea, it was a question of economic clout. Local high-level managers and experts judged that donors were willing to fund only projects that matched the donors' needs or interests, and feared not getting the funds if they did not accept projects as defined by the donors. Here is how one decision-maker expressed it in an interview:

Nous ne pouvons pas dire non à un projet, parce que nous sommes un pays pauvre. Quelque modeste que soit l'argent, nous lui trouvons une raison d'être. ... Dire 'non' à un projet? Non, nous allons plutôt négocier. Nous allons lui trouver une place qui sert à nos objectifs. ... Mais il faut le faire avec tact, avec souplesse. Est-ce qu'il faut prendre un marteau et taper? No. C'est eux qui apportent leur argent. Alors, il faut les prier.

We cannot say no to a project because we are a poor country. No matter how small the amount, we find a raison d'être for it. ... Say 'no' to a project? No, instead we will negotiate. We will find a place for it that serves our objectives. ... But it must be done with tact, with flexibility. Must one pound it in with a hammer? No. They are the ones bringing their money. Consequently we have to make polite requests. (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001).

The workings of raw power were completely visible to this local decision-maker.

### ***Hegemony***

Hegemony, in contrast, is power that is invisible, even to the people who benefit from it. It is the taking for granted of a particular social order, which serves some people's interests more than others, as natural and legitimate. Anthropologists have always noticed the hold of received knowledge, and since the 1970s have found language to express this idea in Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Ortner 1984). Here I consider four ways in which hegemony operates, with implications for the reconstruction of global meanings in new local settings.

### *Past influence*

If culture does not act, as claimed earlier, then culture cannot make people do things. That said, it is fair to assume that traces left in the form of language or the form of whole institutions make it easier or more obvious for people to construct certain meanings rather than others. Ideas “repeatedly taken up and reiteratively agreed upon, endorsed and legitimized in the framework of recurrent international conferences, inter-governmental coordination meetings or expert panels,” as Schriewer (2009) puts it in the context of world culture, come to be seen as inevitable, although the possibility of improvisation never disappears. At the risk of reifying the notion of culture, we sometimes write that the traces or meaning making tend to channel new instances of meaning making into certain well-worn grooves.

Thus actors who have been in a position to influence past meaning making and to shape past institutional practices, or whose allies or predecessors have been in that position, enjoy a great advantage in shaping future meaning making. We can ask, for example, who are and who have been the school superintendents or high status education professors or other decision-makers and opinion leaders who have had a stronger hand than other people in shaping institutions.

### *Wide distribution of culture-making resources*

Another form of hegemonic power is actors’ ability to make widely and readily available the terminology, reports and other texts, and ways of doing

things that fit their perspectives and suit their interests, so that other actors find it easy to use those resources when constructing local meanings. The tools and mechanisms for diffusing resources—web sites, publishing industries, university courses, research institutes and their reports, not to mention the conferences at which terminology gets repeated—are not evenly distributed across the world. Affluent nations and large international organizations have a huge advantage here.

### *Cachet*

A third form of hegemonic power comes from the desire identified by world culture theorists of states or other actors to “model” or “copy” a script or blueprint (Meyer et al. 1997), or even to “enact” an identity ( Ramirez 2003: 252). Economic and political power matter in developing the kind of prestige and legitimacy that make ideas attractive to imitators. Alimasi and I noticed that in Guinea in the 1990s, Western science had prestige, and aligning oneself with it garnered a bit of that prestige; anything to do with the United States also had a certain cachet, to use Alimasi’s term for an aura of success or modernity with which actors sought to identify (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001). The wealth that made development of university and research complexes in affluent countries, and the wealth that contributed to the development of the United States’ image in the world (for instance, through the movie and music industries) generated the kind of prestige that made Western ideas attractive.

Ideas brought to Guinea by French and US and Canadian reformers also carried weight because they could be presented as international standards. In other words, the local aid workers and consultants were in a position to speak on behalf of an imagined global culture, to present an idea “as if” it were universally meaningful, applicable, useful, or proper,” to return to Lechner and Boli’s phrase (2005: 21). Like officials of affluent governments and members of prestigious think tanks, they had the kinds of credentials and held the kinds of positions that gave their counsel the status of global culture, and thus invited imitation.

### *Persuasiveness*

Of course, an idea can attract imitators not only because its promoters have the right credentials, but also because the idea itself appears reasonable and promising. Science can persuade not only because it carries prestige but because it is intellectually convincing. Some of the decision-makers we encountered in Guinea, for example, were genuinely convinced by the arguments of French linguists or by teaching methods they had witnessed when studying in the United States or Canada. “Research shows, Madame, that this method is best,” I was told.

Even when an idea is indeed worthy on its own merits (assuming one can make such an objective assessment), it is important to ask about the scientific and educational structures that encourage people to see this idea as reasonable and good. Research actually produces contentious and sometimes contradictory results, always requiring interpretation, but seen

from a distance, the publications and conferences in France or Britain or the United States can appear to have identified “best practice.” Moreover, researchers working for UNESCO and the OECD and the World Bank can produce and publish un-juried studies, distributed in beautiful packages on the web, to further bolster particular ideas.

The power to conduct research—or to claim and disseminate certain research results—is the most hidden but perhaps the most powerful of the means by which actors with economic and political power influence contests over meaning. Again, universities have a particular role, as future decision-makers find their way to universities in the United States and Europe—financed by grants from the French government, for example, or by Fulbright scholarships from the United States—and in taking their degrees get exposed to the massive research industry of the North.

### ***Strategies in response***

In contests over meaning-making, actors at the importing end are hardly passive. They exercise a range of strategies and responses, some of which I have already illustrated. At one end of a continuum, it is possible to resist outright when economic or political power is being used to promote an idea. For example, Alimasi and I encountered a few Guineans who refused to accept an idea at all, whether for their own scientific reasons or out of resistance to donor power. The clearest evidence of strategic resistance, as Steiner-Khamsi illustrates in this volume, are reforms that disappear the moment the donors are gone. Another strategy, often used when outright

resistance is desirable but impossible, is to “master” an idea without appropriating it, as Wertsch discusses with reference to Estonians who mastered Soviet history without making the Soviet perspective their own (1998). The Guinean elites who sought to maximize loans and grants from donors to patch together their own projects likewise mastered without appropriating; another strategy was to play one donor against another (Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001). As Steiner-Khamsi and Quist (2000) illustrate, actors may also borrow from elsewhere to use the cachet of an external source to promote an idea that is contentious in their own society. Meanwhile, as already noted, some decision-makers seemed to accept certain ideas through strong identification with the Western teachers or collaborators who introduced them to the idea. Others far at the appropriation end of the continuum made the ideas their own out of intellectual conviction—conviction that might, of course, have been bolstered by their opportunity to study at Western universities.

In short, when global ideas enter a local arena, meanings are re-made not only because local actors inevitably reinterpret ideas in the context of their own frameworks, but also because they may struggle against the meanings offered or imposed by global actors. To ignore the contest over meaning and the relative power of different plays is to miss a crucial part of the flow of ideas around the world.

## **Conclusion**



I have argued here that in discussions of world culture and the global/local nexus, we should avoid a simple concept of culture as beliefs and patterns of behaviour belonging to a nation or other group. Rather, I recommend a messier and more complicated notion of culture as the contested process of meaning making. This more complicated notion has implications for the way we think and write about world culture and about the global/local nexus.

### ***Implications for world culture***

The notion of culture as contested meaning making implies that people, not faceless forces, create world culture and make globalization happen, and that what happens is contingent rather than inevitable. Neither world culture nor national cultures are bounded, distinct units; who shares which ideas and norms within their boundaries or across them is always open to question. What counts as world culture is not necessarily widespread; it can be defined as whatever people successfully claim as world culture, and hence may be just one set of meanings among many others shared by a particular network of actors within the global ecumene. World culture is locally produced in social interaction in the sense that particular people construct it together in particular places, drawing on familiar resources from their own localities. The construction of world culture is as contested as any other production of culture.

### ***Implications for the global/local nexus***

The global/local nexus refers to the interaction or “friction” of travelling ideas with ideas held by local actors and, like the production of world culture, it

happens locally. When world culture travels, translation happens; people at the receiving end necessarily reconstruct meanings using resources at hand.

Power matters in the process by which world culture travels, sometimes directly but often indirectly. Actors with great political power or wealth may have influenced in the past what has become thinkable and unthinkable; they can make their preferred ideas and norms readily available in the present as resources for further meaning making; their ideas enjoy the cachet of the powerful and the modern; and their ideas may be sanctioned by the research and university complex that they support. When global ideas enter a local arena, meanings are re-made not only because local actors inevitably reinterpret ideas in the context of their own frameworks, but also because they may resist or deliberately redefine meanings offered or imposed by global actors.

None of my claims should be especially problematic for world culture theorists or anyone considering the possibility of global culture (to paraphrase Ramirez 2003: 249), as long as they remember that people are, ultimately, the actors, and that power matters. I am not necessarily disagreeing with world culture theorists—just trying to put a human face on their arguments and trying to move from grand abstractions to how things actually happen, how the work is done, how the sausage is made.

### ***Implications for research***

The notion of culture laid out here invites certain kinds of research which have not yet become commonplace in comparative education. There have been some studies of the translation of global ideas when they arrive in new localities, as in Anderson-Levitt (2003) and Vavrus and Bartlett (2009). However, it is less common to observe the interactions among global, national, provincial, and local actors on the spot as Tsing (2005) does. Even rarer is the attempt to observe the process by which global ideas are originally constructed and contested, although it is possible to carry out such studies, as through participant-observation at international donor meetings (e.g., Anderson-Levitt and Alimasi 2001), through interviews with meeting participants who have hashed out national and international standards (e.g., Lamont 2009), and through historical studies of the development of donor policy (e.g., Jones 2007). There are particular roles for anthropologists in this work. More fieldwork inside the World Bank, inside development agencies, and inside universities and research institutes where received knowledge gets generated would provide everyone with better tools for noticing and questioning hegemony.

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