

# Telling the Truth about Culture: Intercultural Communication in Travel Writing

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## Abstract

We receive descriptions of meetings between cultures from a wide range of sources; for example, from the aspiring empirical objectivity of Intercultural Communication to the more entertaining portrayals of travel writing. But when travel writers employ the principles of Intercultural Communication in their descriptions, does this bring their travel writing closer to the truth about culture? My paper takes up this question through an examination of subjectivity and objectivity in the descriptions of meetings between cultures in travel writing. The writers I discuss are all native speakers of English and the culture they describe is Modern Greece.

**Keywords:** Objectivity, subjectivity, culture, Intercultural Communication, travel writing, post-colonialism, memory, art, truth, Modern Greece.

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## Introduction

The modern Business School now offers students courses in Intercultural Communication, a growing sub-discipline within the field of the social sciences. In today's global market many a lucrative deal falls through as a result of cultural misunderstanding. Through descriptions of meetings between cultures Intercultural Communication can equip business students with the cultural skills they need to avoid such expensive pitfalls.

Intercultural Communication is at pains to point out that no model can ever be entirely nonpartisan; that every description of meetings between cultures will always contain a trace of subjectivity. Even so, as an emerging new field in the social sciences, in its descriptions Intercultural Communication strives for an empirical objectivity.

Like Intercultural Communication, travel writing also describes meetings between cultures. But while travel writers may endeavor to be even-handed in their descriptions, few would lay claim an empirical objectivity. For, unlike Intercultural Communication, travel writing strives not only to describe but also to entertain. Hence, by its nature, travel writing tends toward the subjective.

Objectivity in this context might be defined as observation statements (descriptions of meetings between cultures) whose validity can be tested in ways that involve routine, objective procedures that do not necessitate fine, subjective judgments on the part of the observer (Chalmers 2008:24). A definition of subjectivity is less easily pinned down, but for our purposes here let us say that subjectivity is the choices a writer makes in order to produce descriptions of meetings between cultures.

The aim of this paper is to examine, through a discussion of four travel writers (and one intercultural-communication research scholar), the ways travel writers employ Intercultural Communication in their descriptions of meetings between cultures. Does subjectivity produce an ethnocentric distortion of a foreign culture? Or, conversely, can objectivity be pressed into the service of a covert subjectivity? Who tells the truth about culture?

To narrow down the field, the selected authors for my paper are all native speakers of English and the culture they describe is Modern Greece.

But first a few words about Intercultural Communication. In order to simplify a complex body of knowledge Intercultural Communication reduces business culture to binary dimensions, three of the most important of which are listed below.

Deal-focused	Relationship-focused
Monochronic	Polychronic
Achievement-oriented	Ascription-oriented

### *Deal-focused/Relationship-focused*

People from deal-focused cultures can do business without necessarily first establishing a relationship with their business partners. Ingroup-outgroup ("us" and "them") distinctions are less important because the job gets done by focusing on the task. People from relationship-focused cultures, on the other hand, need to establish a relationship with their business partners before they can get down to business. Ingroups and outgroups are important because the job gets done through one's network of personal relationships (one's ingroup). (Gesteland 2005: 21)

### *Monochronic/Polychronic*

In monochronic cultures time is a commodity; it is quantifiable and there is a limited amount of it. It is therefore necessary to use time wisely and not to waste it. There is a premium on efficiency and a sense of urgency when it comes to the deal. Time is the given and people are the variable. The needs of people are therefore subordinated to suit the demands of time (schedules, deadlines etc). Tasks are prioritized and carried out sequentially and people are dealt with one at a time. Interruptions are a nuisance. One should not allow circumstances and unforeseen events to interfere with one's plans.

In polychronic cultures, on the other hand, time is unquantifiable and unlimited. There is always more time and people are never too busy. Time is for spending on relationships because one gets the job done through one's network of personal contacts. Time is the servant and tool of people and is adjusted to suit the needs of people. Schedules and deadlines are often changed. People may do several things simultaneously as required by circumstances. It is not necessary to finish one task before starting another or to deal with one person before dealing with another. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an interruption. (Storti 1999:55).

### *Achievement-oriented/Ascription-oriented*

Business people from achievement-oriented cultures receive status for what they do. Achievement-oriented cultures tend to be informal and hierarchies are justified by past achievements. Business people from ascription-oriented cultures, on the other hand, receive status for who they are. Ascription-oriented cultures tend to be formal and hierarchies are justified by the power to get things done. (Trompenaas 1997:112).

Intercultural Communication locates Greece on the relationship-focused, polychronic and ascription-oriented side of this model.

## **Discussion**

I first got the idea for this paper when recalling the American travel writer Patricia Storage's account of her year in Greece, *Dinner with Persephone* (2006). Having spent some years in Greece myself, I was astounded at Storage's insight after such a short stay. I remembered being particularly impressed in the early pages of her first chapter when she unmasked the seeming ferocity of Greek officialdom. Storage writes that Greek officials assume the "self-consciously stern, imposing jailer's facial expression that means authority in Greece" (1996:7). I mentally compared this with other (mostly British) travel writers, who, in the name of entertainment, lampoon the Greek official as a pompous, self-important petty bureaucrat. The scales fell from my eyes. The unsmiling, imperious Greek official, who strikes such terror into the hearts of unsuspecting foreigners, is not expressing anger or disapproval but merely assuming the formal style required of an official position. Thanks to Intercultural Communication, I

could now observe with relief that in formal ascription-oriented cultures the incumbents of high-status posts are expected to behave in a manner commensurate with their office.

For reasons that escape me I put down the Storace book, but this first impression remained. And now, years later, through a haze of half-remembered travel books about Greece, the Storace chapter stepped forward to proclaim that modern (especially British) travel writers, in their eagerness to entertain were presenting a condescending ethnocentric caricature of the Greeks. By employing Intercultural Communication, I concluded, the travel writer could cut through to the truth.

So this was the idea for my paper. I would take up the cudgels for the Greeks against the patronizing colonialist distortions of the British travel writing establishment and hold up Patricia Storace as the exemplar of the new scientific method.

For this project I needed some worthy examples of British condescension. And, again, drawing upon memory, I settled upon Lawrence Durrell's *Reflections on a Marine Venus* (1978) and *Prospero's Cell* (1973), the descriptions of Durrell's sojourns on the Greek islands of Rhodes and Corfu respectively, and Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* (2006), the recollections of the author's childhood years on the island of Corfu. I had read all three books years ago and remembered laughing a great deal, so I had no doubt that I would find the examples of imperial mockery I needed. To these books I added the more recently read *It's All Greek to Me* by John Mole (2005), the comic record of an English banker's house-restoration exploits on the Greek island of Evia. The ethnocentric hypocrisy of all these authors would emerge, I surmised, against the backdrop of Storace's year in Greece. Finally, to give the exposé a scholarly anchor, I included Benjamin J. Broom's *Exploring the Greek Mosaic* (1996).

I began by re-reading Lawrence Durrell's *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, confident that I would soon come across the patronizing portrayals of the colorful natives from my first reading. And while truly comic portraits did emerge of Durrell's British companions, my hazily remembered caricatures of the Greeks refused to materialize. Indeed, what unfolded was a lyrical and heartfelt extended poem in homage to Rhodes and the island's inhabitants. To be sure, the Greeks are portrayed at times in amusing ways, but always with sincerity, admiration and affection. They emerge with their dignity more than intact. If Durrell makes fun of anyone it is the pedantic nineteenth-century British historian Cecil Torr, who was his major source for ancient Rhodes.

So I was now suddenly faced with a different task. Subjective travel writing did not necessarily produce a distorted picture. My original impulse to answer the clarion call of Post-colonialism had now become a tightrope-walk between the subjective and the objective portrayals of culture.

This new orientation was confirmed by *Prospero's Cell*, which indeed seemed, with one eyebrow raised, to have anticipated my paper. Durrell begins by lamenting the fact that it was very much the fashion in modern travel writing to falsify the local inhabitants through "comic and quaint abstractions" (1973:36). He then goes on to present his own portrayal of the island by employing precisely the above-mentioned tension between the subjective and the objective.

A dedication at the beginning of the book declares that the characters described within are real people who appear by their own consent. However, in truth, the main characters transcend their real selves to become the idealized strands of human temperament with which Durrell then weaves his tapestry. Dr. Theodore Stephanides is a scientist of towering scholarship who has produced five monographs about the island, none of which has been published. He represents the world of the natural sciences. Ivan Zarian, the tempestuous Armenian poet whose copious notes on all things artistic are unreadable even to himself, represents untrammelled romanticism. Finally, the ascetic Count C, who has withdrawn from the world to explore the realm of pure thought and who holds forth at great length upon everything but disdains to write anything down lest he sully his reflections, represents philosophy. During a philosophical retreat at the Count's villa where all these personages are assembled, the Count pronounces in turn upon the kind of travel writing each would produce if he ever wrote anything about Corfu. Theodore, he says, would write a scientific treatise recording every discrete fact of nature but containing no mention of the first edition of Petrarch in the Library or the beautiful "mother of Gorgons" in the Museum. Zarian would present a ferocious one-sided account of an enchanted island that has seduced every historical figure from Nero to Napoleon but would omit the fact that communications are bad and that the fleas during the summer are intolerable. Each author, in short, the Count C included, would collect and arrange his

knowledge "according to the form dictated to him by his temperament" (1973:107), but none would portray the whole picture. And the point is that it is only through the synthesis of these oppositions in the human temperament that Durrell, the only real writer amongst them, is able to convey a sense of the whole in *Prospero's Cell*. Science (objectivity) and ideas (subjectivity) in isolation can only ever convey just a part of the human story. In order to paint a faithful portrait of human culture, the writer needs to apply the touch of the artist.

Still, not entirely convinced, I reached for Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, the book at which I remembered laughing hardest. Surely there was something here that would stand up as condescendingly ethnocentric. But once again my memory was found wanting. For, while the local inhabitants may come in for some mild raillery, it is the author's own family and above all the island's teeming animal life who are the real comedy team. Indeed, the author's attitude to his subject matter might be best summed up in Theodore the polymath professor who treats the young Durrell as an equal and who respectfully never "talks down to him" (2006:91).

Like his brother Lawrence, Gerald Durrell displays a shrewd awareness of the principles of Intercultural Communication without needing overtly to appeal to them. When the family's luggage remains held up in customs, for example, it is only by applying the string-pulling power of their Greek friend Spiro that the family can secure its release. In ascription-oriented, relationship-focused Greece, obligations to ingroup members take precedence over outgroup concerns. The cultural imperative to cultivate relationships (for example, through hospitality and gift-giving) in a culture where the job gets done through one's contact network is portrayed in similarly understated terms.

The same lack of authorial intervention characterizes Durrell's portrayal of his gun-happy brother Leslie (where readers are invited to make up their own minds) and informs his treatment of Greece's turbulent history, as the following example illustrates. When Theodore tells the story of how he was chosen to lead the occupying Greek forces into Smyrna after the conclusion of the First World War, riding upon the traditional white horse, the plan becomes entangled in a comedy (or, in truth, a tragedy) of errors and the triumphal entrance is never effected. No mention is made of the Treaty of Sèvres, negotiated by the messianic Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, which placed Greece within striking distance of the Great Idea, the fond dream of the restoration of the Byzantine Empire with its glittering capital of Constantinople (Llewellyn Smith 1998:3). Nor do we hear of the aftermath of the occupation, the Great Catastrophe that was to change the face of Modern Greece forever. The story remains poised, an unpropitious augury, and readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

So rather than a picture of condescending mockery, the overall impression we get of the local inhabitants is one of sympathy and respect. The focus of the narrative is determined by the child telling the story; hence, the book is mostly taken up with comic portraits of Corfu's animal life and descriptions of the island's unique landscape. When it comes to the tension between the subjective and the objective, Gerald Durrell is also applying the touch of the artist.

After the wake-up call from the Durrells I turned to Patricia Storace's *Dinner with Persephone* with new eyes. Like the Durrells, Storace underpins her travel writing with the tension of opposites, but it soon becomes evident that she is operating with quite a different agenda. Drawing upon the Persephone myth of the book's title, Storace declares Greece "this country of the double nature" (1996:50) and divides the culture into convenient contradictions such as ideal and real, dream and reality, myth and history, immortal and mortal, and so forth. With her subject thus anesthetized upon the anthropologist's table she proceeds minutely to dissect the experience of her year in Greece, laying bare all the pretensions, hypocrisies and prejudices of her fickle hosts. On the question of history, for example, she chides the Greeks for inhabiting their world of "myths and immortalities" while reserving for herself the world of "history and mortalities" (1996:106). She underscores the point by poking fun at Greece's strident official rhetoric over the Macedonian question, pronouncing, King Solomon-like, that Greece has no better claim to Macedonia than any of the other bickering Balkan states. In Storace's hands the gravity of the Macedonian question diminishes to a group of children squabbling over a climbing frame in the schoolyard.

Continuing in the dualist mode, when the Greeks make extravagant claims about their culture (which they do throughout the book), Storace hits back with some of their own medicine: an ancient *Dream*

*Book* written in the second century B.C. by one Artemidorus. For example, when the ideal beauty of classical Greek statuary is invoked the dream book breaks in to declare all idealizing ineffectual. For Storace, a product of the US achievement culture where one receives status for what one does, the classical statues, however beautiful, express above all an inability to act. The statues fail because they cannot capture "the shocking joy of the attainable" (1996:46). And when the Greeks unwisely persist in their eulogizing; for example, when the hapless Mr. Angelchild declares to Storace that the famous Hellenistic bronze of a boy riding a horse is "the spirit of Greece, never in stasis", she pulls rank; in this case by wondering if Mr. Angelchild knows that the boy has long since been identified by scholars as a portrait of a black African (1996:73).

Through the arcane corridors of the *Dream Book*, Storace links idealization (sublimation) to her real cultural hobbyhorse, the subjugation of women. A page hardly goes by without Storace being molested by men in some way or another. She is propositioned by kiosk proprietors, ogled at by motorcyclists, sexually harassed by bank employees, hijacked by coffee-drinking old men, assailed by obscene phone calls, harangued by lecherous middle-aged émigrés etc. And it turns out that all this unsavory behaviour has its root in Greek culture and history; for example, in Greek tragedy, where the murder of Iphigenia is a social necessity while the response of Clytemnestra is a demonic outrage (1996:31); or in ancient Greek society, where women slaves were deemed not to be human but merely the appendages of men (1996:71). Even the Greek language is complicit, the ancient Greek word for marriage stemming from the word *ip andros*, meaning "woman under man" (1996:212).

And one is hardly in a position to demur. For the treatment Storace receives at the hands of Greek men is truly reprehensible. The only trouble is that rather than identifying with Storace and her sister sufferers, defenders of Greece gravitate involuntarily to the mass of ugly humanity on the other side condoning these outrages. Can we support Storace, for example, when she proposes the emasculation of Achilles, the progenitorial tomcat of all Greece, in order to rid the streets of Athens of his scavenging progeny? One suspects that Storace is speaking not to the general reader or to the Greeks, but rather to her highbrow feminist PC readership back home in New York.

The suspicion is confirmed by other cultural observations Storace makes. For example, when recounting the story of paying her electricity bill, she expresses surprise and irritation that the task will take her the best part of the afternoon. This is nothing however compared to her friend Leda, who must endure a full-scale evening visit with a bottle of wine and even a game of cards whenever she pays her monthly rent. For the monochronic deal-focused Storace, the needs of people are subordinated to suit the demands of time, while for the polychronic relationship-focused Greeks, time is for cultivating relationships.

Storace keeps her cultural blinkers on when she assesses *filotimo*, a defining characteristic of the Greek (especially male) identity and a slippery concept for outsiders to grasp. Storace describes *filotimo* as "the hunger for honor and prestige" (1996:79), and suggests that its general censorship of critical thought (e.g. on the Macedonian question) amounts to a national disease. Benjamin J. Broome in *Exploring the Greek Mosaic* similarly defines *filotimo* as "the love of honor" (Broome 1996:66), but adds that the term cannot be adequately expressed by a simple English translation. For *filotimo*, he says, is a complex social construct that informs many aspects of the relationship-focused Greek culture. First, it is a responsibility to the family, the most important social unit in Greece. Greeks have an obligation to uphold the family honor and to provide assistance to family members, a responsibility that extends also to members of the wider ingroup. Second, *filotimo* refers to appropriate behaviour within the ingroup. This means behaving in such a way as to increase ingroup prestige in the eyes of the outgroup and avoiding saying or doing anything that might reflect negatively on the ingroup. Third, *filotimo* relates to a person's personal sense of honor and self-esteem, which stands foremost in the Greek concept of the self. There is a constant emphasis on protecting and enhancing the *filotimo*, and it is impossible, Broome says, to have a good relationship with Greeks without an understanding of this central cultural need (Broome 1996:67). One must always be on guard against being outsmarted by the outgroup, for such injury to the *filotimo* would cause both the individual and the ingroup to lose face. A problem with *Dinner with Persephone* is that Storace seems bent on achieving precisely this goal: outsmarting the Greeks.

This is not to say that Storace's travel writing has nothing to offer the reader. *Dinner with Persephone* is a treasure-trove of information on the Greek culture and the Storace's scholarship is incontestably deep

and wide-ranging. Storace is also an elegant prose stylist who can capture a moment in pure poetry, as the following passage attests:

Greek is not a voluptuous language, or a lilting one, but stony and earthy, a language full of mud, volcanic rock, and glittering precious stones—this man speaks it with a consciousness of its long compound words and shifting accents, as if he is polishing a gem collection (Storace 1996:268).

But in her eagerness to outsmart the Greeks, Storace manipulates the instruments of the social scientist to impose her own culture's value judgments upon a foreign culture. She analyzes, but, unlike the Durrells, she fails to synthesize. She neglects to apply the touch of the artist. Instead she makes a hasty grab for the laurel of the artist, and falls short.

John Mole, in *It's All Greek to Me*, also avails himself of the dualist tension between opposites. In a Prologue he describes the traveler's dream of the "little whitewashed house with a blue door and blue shutters on an unspoiled island next to a beach with a taverna round the corner" (Mole 2005:viii). And the chapters that follow record how Mole defends his imperiled English ideal from a besieging Greek reality. For what greater fear besets the mind of the dreamer than to upset the delicate balance between the ideal and the real and to come crashing despairingly to earth, to the reality of real people caught in the grim contest of a pitiless real world.

Mole masterfully prepares the scene for this epistemological balancing act in his depiction of the ruined house that Ajax, the local butcher, has taken him to see. Through the decay of the years and the stench of goat manure, Mole descends at the far end of the gutted building a battered window-frame, still intact, and enclosed within the fragile casing, like a painting, the perfect Arcadian landscape for which every romanticizing philhellene yearns. Balancing precariously on one of the rotting floor joists, he leans out to get a better view.

Teetering over the gloom and the goat stink, I felt lightheaded. I ached for that idyllic world. I longed to get closer to the windows to prove that the vision was true, but the gulf was too wide. (Mole 2005:6)

The book thus becomes an account of Mole's desperate rearguard action to defend his ideal against the incursions of an ever-advancing reality while attempting at the same time to bring the vision closer by filling his ideal picture with real people. And in the comedy that ensues the character who spends most of his time in the pillory is Mole himself; as the fall-guy for his family and the cast of uncooperatively real Greeks but most of all as the victim of his own incurable romanticism.

In the butcher shop, for example, with the beautiful Eleni (the butcher's wife), when Mole glimpses through the loose sleeves of Eleni's T-shirt the little hearts adorning her bra he instinctively transports her to the heights of a classical ideal, while Eleni proceeds heartlessly to split open a very real cow's head on the marble counter with a meat cleaver.

And in a later encounter with Eleni, Mole touches upon an aspect of the romance of traveling only hinted at by the other authors; that travelers not only meet the exotic, they also become exotic themselves.

"Po, po, po," she said after every revelation. The romance of Tesco's and the Bakerloo line rubbed off on me. I was an alien with news of foreign parts. I liked the way Eleni looked at me with curiosity and compassion, abhorrence and excitement. (Mole 2005:164)

Mole presents the Greek relationship-focused culture with the same understatement as the Durrells. When he needs roof tiles for his house, his local suppliers recommend new imported Italian tiles because they pay the best commission (ingroup advantage). And when to the suppliers' incredulity Mole insists on old local tiles, the tiles can be procured only through Ajax the butcher (the job gets done through relationships), who collects them at undisclosed prices from the rubbish heaps of his customer contact-network, promoting as he goes the wares from his real-life German freezer-room purchased with the dream-house money he got from Mole. Similarly, in his portrayal of history, rather than adopting the hauteur of the scholar à la Storace, Mole conveys this indispensable link between the Greeks and their

past through his family's acquisition of an ancient olive tree, where for the price of a meal in a decent restaurant they become the owners of "a living timeline to Byzantium" (2005:271).

Mole also makes inroads into the vexed question of *filotimo*. When, in his encounters with Greek tradesmen, every request is dismissed as "impossible" and every plan, without consultation, is "improved", it dawns upon him that this ritual has to do with "asserting dignity and independence; with not being at someone else's beck and call" (2005:82). Doing someone a favor in the face of overwhelming difficulties (the impossible) or stamping one's own mark on decisions (improving the plan) restores the balance of power; it enhances the *filotimo*. The Greeks thus save face for themselves and for their ingroup. Becoming aware of this, however, Mole adds, does not make the ritual any less irritating.

In the final analysis *It's All Greek to Me* is a hymn to nostalgia; a paean to the pastoral ideal of a lost Arcadian paradise that can be sustained only fitfully through a running battle with reality. Even so, paradoxically, in the end John Mole succeeds in populating his ideal picture with real people. He applies the touch of the artist. The vision he beholds at the beginning of the book—like the idea for his book—becomes real.

Just to sum up; to return to the question of subjectivity and objectivity and who tells the truth about culture, the answer lies ultimately in the writer's ability to balance these two tensions to convey a faithful sense of the whole—to apply the touch of the artist.

And one last question: as Intercultural Communication and travel writing clearly share common ground, what implications might this survey have for the wider arena of Intercultural Communication studies? It all comes down finally to a writer's choice between communication and persuasion. For, while the principles of Intercultural Communication may satisfy the definition for objectivity, this does not prevent writers from employing those principles to advance their own subjective value judgments. If one distinguishing quality emerges between the travel writing of Mole and the Durrells and that of Patricia Storace, it must be that Mole and the Durrells approach their subject with openness, sympathy and respect. We feel that they have been accorded ingroup status by the culture they portray; we assume the same absence of a personal agenda that readers take for granted in intercultural communication scholars like Broome. Storace, on the other hand, by addressing persuasive appeals to a selected readership, chooses to paint only a partial portrait of her subject. She elects not to apply the touch of the artist. The resulting descriptions of meetings between cultures seek thus to manipulate rather than to communicate and they leave the writer (and the readers) on the outside looking in.

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