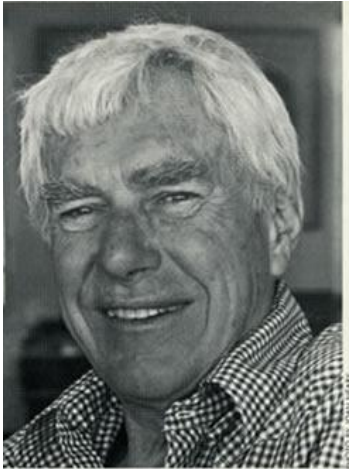


An abstract graphic featuring three blue, 3D-rendered spheres of varying sizes. Two thin, light blue lines intersect to form a triangular shape that frames the spheres. The largest sphere is at the bottom right, a medium-sized one is at the top right, and a smaller one is in the middle right. The background is white.

# **Webs of Significance**

**Part II.3. Cultures of the World**



### II.3. Cultures of the World: 'High-context' vs. 'Low-context' cultures

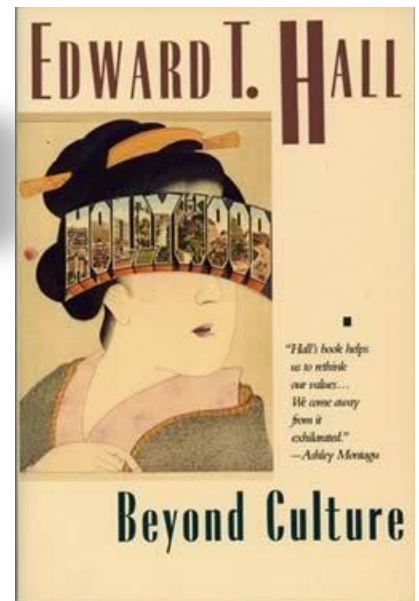
The diverse cultures of the world are often categorized into the so-called High- and Low-context cultures, depending on how much of the culture 'iceberg' is 'below the waterline' (invisible to the eye).

The distinction was first made by the anthropologist **Edward T. Hall (1014-2009)** in his book ***Beyond Culture*** (1976).

Hall recognized that meaning in live communication depends as much on the context of 'thought exchange' as on the actual words spoken ('meaning-as-use'); he viewed meaning and context as 'inextricably bound up with each other.'

The difference between *high* and *low* context cultures depends on how much meaning is found in the context versus in the code (words).

In high-context cultures, meaning is rooted more in the context and shared insights than in the actual words. As Hall stated in his other book, *Context and Meaning*, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall: 1982, p.18). People must understand the contextual cues and subtle implications in order to grasp the full meaning of the message.



People from high-context cultures expect more from others than do people in low-context cultures – it's like it is natural to expect your wantok/ family member to understand you better than a complete stranger ever could. 'When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly -- this keystone -- is the role of his interlocutor' (Hall: 1976).

Thus, in high context exchanges, much of the "burden of meaning" falls on the listener (Zaharna: 1995). Many things are left unsaid, because all members of the closely-knit

communities share common experiences and cultural knowledge (values, beliefs, attitudes and traditions) – they understand each other without words, in most situations (think, for example of your close family or friends: you do not need many words to communicate with them, because you know their ways, and they know yours). High-context cultures have a strong sense of group identity with clearly defined boundaries (it is difficult for ‘outsiders’ to establish close personal relationships with others – they are often viewed as ‘aliens’).



The melting iceberg in the Unartoq fiord, Greenland

**Low-context cultures** (American, English, Australian, Irish, German & Scandinavian, etc.) tend to place more meaning in the language code and less meaning in the context – they are more specific, explicit in the use of words. In low context exchanges, the ‘burden of meaning’ is on the speakers, who are expected to accurately convey their meaning in spoken or written words. People do not have much shared cultural experience, so they rely on words to convey their meaning. People in low context cultures value individual achievement and clear, direct communication. It is easier for ‘outsiders’ to find acceptance in low-context societies, because everyone is judged as an individual; that sense of group identity and commitment is weaker.

**(a) Why are some cultures ‘high’ context, and others – ‘low’ context?**

Most native societies and ‘nation states’ are high-context – Why, do you think? Geographical, political, or socio-economic boundaries have kept these groups in

relative isolation; common origins and history typically bond people together, forming more or less homogenous communities in terms of language and ethnicity.

Globalization, which has been picking up speed ever since European colonial expansion, has thrown some ethnic groups together, blending them into **multicultural** societies, in which ‘everybody is from somewhere else.’ Clan and ‘wantok’ ways quickly dissolved in the melting pot of the ‘new world’ where self-reliance and individualism, even selfishness, soon crystallized into a new set of survival skills.

Lower Context Cultures:	Higher context Culture	
German	French Canadian	Arab
Scandinavian (except Finnish/Suomi)	French	Chinese
American	Finnish	Japanese
English	Russian	Korean
Irish	Italian	Indian
English Canadian	Spanish	Brazilian
Australian	Latin Americans	Jews
	Greek	

Most of the diverse cultures of the world (including Papua New Guinea and Latvia) are, however, still ‘high context’ – the flow of human migration is relatively slow, even in our world, ‘flattened’ by the Internet.

Low context cultures, because they do not have very long roots, change faster than high-context cultures, which tend to be more conservative and traditional, preserving their ways from one generation to the next.

### Humour

These cultural differences provide many opportunities for humour. While jokes from high-context cultures will not translate well to someone of a different culture, a low-context joke will be clear to all. Here is one on business communication between IBM and a Japanese hardware manufacturer:

IBM requested parts from a trial project, with the specification “We will accept three defective parts per ten thousand.” The Japanese manufactured the parts, and sent them, with a note: “We, the Japanese people, had a hard time understanding North American business practices. But the three defective parts per 10,000 have been separately manufactured and have been included in the consignment. Hope this pleases you” 😊

### **(b) Context Is a Relative Metric of Culture**

An individual from a high context culture may experience the so-called ‘culture shock,’ when plunged into a low context culture, and the other way around. High context cultures are typical of close knit homogenous groups; they share common experiences and cultural knowledge, and expect reliance on the group.

In our Flat World, professional and personal lives often intertwine – a teacher, a lawyer, or a doctor from NCD may be posted to the Highlands, and the other way around. A low context culture is fast-paced; it demands self-reliance, independence, and expects many relationships, but relatively few intimate or long-term ones.

As you can well imagine, there are no fixed divides between (or within) cultures. ‘High /low’ context cultures represent, like Yin and Yang, the ‘opposites’ propelling the process of social change.

Socio-economic necessities of our ‘Flat World’ drive cultural changes: growing industries and cities create new social environments, very different from traditional closely-knit communities. This inevitably brings together people from different backgrounds, resulting in less shared cultural knowledge; this, in turn, calls for clear verbal communication and results in less defined group boundaries, shorter-term relationships and social alienation.

Papua New Guinea has been experiencing a major cultural shift, especially after the LNG Project took off in 2009. The dazzling diversity of smaller indigenous cultures has coalesced into a multifaceted national culture, with numerous subcultures.

**Nora Vagi Brash**, a talented PNG playwright, described the collision of cultures in Port Moresby in the 1970s in her thought-provoking satirical play *Which Way, Big Man?*



#### ***Appendix I Reading 6: Which Way, Big Man?***

**What are the issues raised in this play?**

**Why did Sinob and Gou Haia's party end in disaster?**

**Can you come across 'Sinobs' / 'Gou Haias' in high-context/ traditional societies, or are their types found only in low-context cultures?**

**What was the linguistic issue discussed at the party? Do you agree with Sinob that English should be the language of instruction in school? Why? Or Why Not?**

### (c) Subcultures (community thinking & behavior)

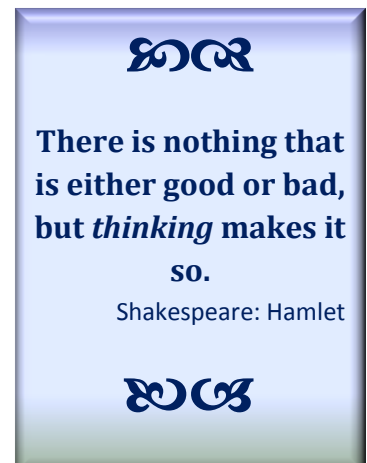
In sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, a subculture is a group of people with a culture (whether distinct or hidden) which differentiates them from the larger culture to which they belong.<sup>1</sup> All societies are made up of many people and groups of people whose ways of thinking and behavior may be very different from the mainstream; for example, all the indigenous cultures of Papua New Guinea are subcultures within the larger national culture; the culture of Port Moresby is different from that of Lae or Buka. Within Port Moresby, we can also distinguish teenage subculture, as well as organizational subcultures (i.e., UPNG, BSP, Coca-Cola, etc.) Basically, subcultures refer to the ways of thinking and behavior of smaller demographic groups within the larger culture. Nora Vagi Brash described the clash of several subcultures in her play – can you identify them?

Cultures and their subcultures are infinitely complex and intertwined – where does their diversity come from?

### (d) Why are cultures so different, if the mechanism of human thought and all basic human needs are universal?

The answer is in the arbitrary nature of our individual (and collective) experiences, tastes and opinions. Nothing good/bad, beautiful/ugly, right/wrong, just/unjust exists in the physical world – these are the constructs of our minds. Individual communities developed their own ideas and beliefs, likes and dislikes, and ways of solving life's problems in the process of their adaptation to their environment. People are creative – they devise different ways of doing things. Take swimming, for example; it can be done in different ways – breast-stroke, crawl, butterfly, back-stroke, doggy style, etc. In the same way, all human languages (despite their diverse 'styles') are generalization – it's just that people developed their own ways of doing it!

The photographs below are just a few examples of 'human ways' of thought and behavior; mankind, despite being 'so much the same in all times and places,' have countless ways of adapting to, (and changing!) their diverse environments:



<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subculture>





**Love Parade in Berlin**



**Satellite dishes in Aleppo, Syria**





Dubai, UAE. The man-made 'Palm' Island.



El-Atteuf, Algeria (North Africa)





**The As jute cemetery, Egypt**



**Suburbs of Copenhagen, Denmark**





**Ancient Roman theatre in Palmyra, Syria**







**Venice, Italy (the city on water)**



**Village near Lake Chad, Chad (Central Africa).**





**Men's House, Central Province, Papua New Guinea.**

**Photo by Dr. Nicholas Garnier**





**The last three photos are of Port Moresby (a scene in the Vision City & Fairfax Harbour).  
Courtesy of Sian Upton.**

## References

Hall, E.T. (1982). Context and meaning. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Zaharna, R.S. (1995) Bridging Cultural Differences: American Public Relations Practices & Arab Communication Patterns. *Public Relations Review*, 21, 241-255.

[http://ebookey.org/Secrecy-and-Cultural-Reality-Utopian-Ideologies-of-the-New-Guinea-Men-s-House\\_654215.html](http://ebookey.org/Secrecy-and-Cultural-Reality-Utopian-Ideologies-of-the-New-Guinea-Men-s-House_654215.html)