

Deep Culture Podcast – Transcript

The Deep Culture Podcast explores the psychological impact of intercultural experiences, informed by the sciences of brain, culture and mind. Join hosts **Joseph Shaules** and **Yvonne van der Pol** as we look at the personal growth that can come from travel, living and working abroad, learning a foreign language, growing up in a multicultural context—and the challenges of bridging different cultural worlds.

(Episode 21 – Culture in the Cradle)

Yvonne van der Pol and Joseph Shaules discuss cultural differences in parenting and the process of enculturation—how cultural patterns shape us as we grow up. We learn about the 3Rs of parenting in the Netherlands, and pressures Joseph felt to be a “winner” growing up in the US. Ishita Ray explains how the life lessons she learned growing up in Eastern India—as a young girl she was scolded for playing with boys—prepared her to fit in . . . or not . . . to Indian society.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	I was so angry. It seemed unfair. What's wrong with playing after dark? What's wrong with the girl playing with boys?
00:00:17	Joseph	Hello. This is Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I am here with my co-host Yvonne Van der Pol. How are you doing today, Yvonne?
00:00:30	Yvonne	Hi, Joseph. Wonderful to be here. I'm doing fine. The sun is shining.
00:00:34	Joseph	We've got beautiful spring weather in Tokyo. So everything is great. So Yvonne, this episode's title is Culture in the Cradle
00:00:44	Yvonne	Culture in the Cradle, wonderful title. And what does that mean?
00:00:49	Joseph	Well, what we're interested in in this episode is how is it that we learn our culture or put differently, how is culture passed down from one generation to the next? So, for example, how did being raised in the Netherlands make you Dutch or how did being raised in the United States make me somehow American?
00:01:12	Yvonne	We kind of take it for granted that when we grow up somewhere, we are shaped by culture. But how does this happen?
00:01:20	Joseph	That's a great question because after all, you know, Dutch parents, aren't trying to teach their children to become Dutch. They're just trying to be good parents. So somehow parents pass on cultural values without thinking about it.
00:01:34	Yvonne	And there is research into this topic and it's something called parental ethno theories. And that's about the way that cultural attitudes affect parenting. And we'll talk about it a bit later.
00:01:47	Joseph	And it is something that you can notice sometimes when you travel to different countries, you may see parents that are treating children very differently than they would, where you come from. I remember a British friend of mine who was visiting Spain and he said: “Oh, it was crazy. You know, the families take their children out to dinner at 10:00 PM, but they should be in bed!”

00:02:10	Yvonne	I can imagine that impression. And I guess what it means to be a good parent depends a lot on cultural expectations.
00:02:19	Joseph	And it's also true that it's not just parents that pass on culture. You know, children are influenced by everything in their environment. So the simple fact of growing up in the Netherlands also somehow shapes people to become Dutch in many ways.
00:02:36	Yvonne	So in this episode, we'll dig into this question of how culture is passed on and we'll hear more examples of cultural differences parenting.
00:02:45	Joseph	And that brings us to part one Kawa no Ji
Part 1: Kawa no Ji		
00:02:45	Joseph	So Yvonne, I think the first challenge that we face with this topic is to even know what to call this process that we're talking about, this process of learning our own culture.
00:03:09	Yvonne	Yes, it's so taken for granted. We usually just say growing up.
00:03:13	Joseph	And it's interesting that we talk about our native language, but we don't really even have a word like native culture.
00:03:22	Yvonne	I studied anthropology and the term anthropologists use is acculturation: the process of acquiring the culture of the community you grow up in.
00:03:32	Joseph	Or a psychologist might use the word socialization to talk about how we learn to function in society.
00:03:38	Yvonne	Yeah. So one point that these different terms have in common is that they are an unconscious process. They happen just in the act of living everyday life.
00:03:49	Joseph	And I guess this is common sense, but I also find it really amazing that there is this unconscious cultural learning process that happens as children grow up. I mean, caretakers somehow pass along cultural lessons without realizing it.
00:04:04	Yvonne	Well, I agree, but I'm not sure if pass along or cultural lessons is quite the right way to say it. Cultural patterns are part of the developmental process of growing just as acquiring our native language is a natural part of growing up. Being shaped by our social environment is a natural part of human development.
00:04:26	Joseph	So in that sense, humans are simply cultural by nature.
00:04:31	Yvonne	And that actually reminds me of a quote by Edward Hall, where he talks about this. And he says: "It's frequently the most obvious and taken for granted and therefore the least studied aspects of culture that influence behavior in the deepest and most subtle ways." So, let's get an example here. I was fascinated by one thing you mentioned to me, Joseph, and that was this idea in Japan of <i>kawa no ji</i> , which you said literally means the character "river", but it refers to a typical arrangement of a family sleeping together. You said it's typical and people take it for granted, but I guess it also has a deep cultural significance.

00:05:16	Joseph	You have to kind of imagine it: the character for river is made by three vertical lines and the middle line is shorter than the other two. And that kind of represents the water that's flowing between the banks of the river.
00:05:30	Yvonne	Okay. I can picture that, but it's not a river that we're talking about here, huh?
00:05:36	Joseph	No. So in Japan, the term <i>kawa no ji</i> is also used to talk about a typical way that the child sleeps between the parents. The shorter line between the two longer lines is the image of the child sleeping between the parents. And traditionally that would be on a <i>futon</i> on a <i>tatami</i> mat.
00:05:56	Yvonne	Do children sleep the same <i>futon</i> or like the <i>kanji</i> on a separate smaller one in between?
00:06:01	Joseph	Well, I guess sleeping on the same <i>futon</i> would be typical.
00:06:04	Yvonne	And what does that represent?
00:06:07	Joseph	Well, in Japan, it's not rare for children to sleep together with their parents, even up to elementary school age. So the term <i>Kawa no ji</i> kind of represents this family closeness, a kind of family fusion. And it goes along with things like children taking a bath together with their mother or father, a kind of family bonding, and there's even a special word for this parent child bond. It's <i>amae</i> , which is, it's kind hard to translate, but it's something like nurturing dependence.
00:06:39	Yvonne	Interesting. So <i>kawa no ji</i> is really about more than the fact that children sleep together with their parents. It reflects Japanese attitudes towards family relations towards human relations, I guess.
00:06:53	Joseph	Yes. And it's not just that parents are close to their children. In Japan, there's a strong sense of public and private spaces being separate and inner spaces are to be kept safe and pure and outer spaces are more public and less pure. And that's why taking off your shoes in a Japanese home is a big deal. You need to keep these separate realms separate. And there are even terms for that <i>uchi</i> , which is inner space and <i>soto</i> , which is outer space.
00:07:23	Yvonne	So the child sleeping between the parents is actually like them creating an inner safe space.
00:07:30	Joseph	Exactly. But, but of course, Japanese parents aren't consciously thinking, oh, I'm going to create a safe space for my child. And of course not all Japanese parents sleep onto <i>tatami</i> mats or even sleep with their children. But these larger patterns, they're something that all Japanese understand. They're part of this larger Japanese worldview.
00:07:51	Ishita	It's striking that everything is so interconnected.
00:07:55	Joseph	Yeah. And it goes on and on. I mean this fusion, this sense of collective self is reflected in other aspects of everyday life. Like the fact that Japanese elementary school children serve lunch to their classmates at lunchtime and that no one starts to eat until everyone has been served. Or the fact that there's one style of backpack used by elementary children all over the country.

00:08:25	Yvonne	It's also fascinating Joseph. And it makes me wonder though how you learned all of this. Of course, I understand that you have lived in Japan for quite a long time now.
00:08:35	Joseph	Well, it's interesting because it, in some ways it's easier for me to notice those things because they contrast with the way things are done in the US. It can be really hard to uncover those patterns in your own home cultural community. You just don't notice them. But this also makes me wonder Yvonne, how common is it in the Netherlands for parents to sleep in the same bed with their children until elementary school? Do they take baths together?
00:09:02	Yvonne	Yeah, of course the Netherlands is a culturally diverse country and there's a wide range of parenting practices, but the focus is on developing autonomy and independence. It's quite visible from early on, I think. And just born babies, they stay in their cradles in the same bedroom with their parents or maybe the first couple of months. It's, not so common for parents to sleep in the same bed with their children.
00:09:26	Joseph	And how was it for you when you were growing up?
00:09:29	Yvonne	Oh, well for instance, my brother and I, we had a separate bedroom and from early on, that was our space. And actually the two of us had a whole floor that was ours.
00:09:38	Joseph	Speaking of space. Can I ask something about the Netherlands? When I've been there I noticed these big windows in the houses where you can see inside. And I, it feels like there's no privacy
00:09:50	Yvonne	Indeed, many houses have large windows. And more importantly, the curtains are often open and not only during the day also the evening. So anyone passing the street or on the sidewalk could easily look inside a house and get this glimpse of family life. It's absolutely normal. And it's this idea of, we have nothing to hide and for newcomers, this is hard to understand.
00:10:15	Joseph	Wow, that is so different from this <i>uchi</i> – inside, versus <i>soto</i> - outside distinction in Japan. When I was a child, we got punished by being grounded. We weren't allowed to leave our room or leave the house. In Japan, parents sometimes punish their children by putting them out of the house and the child will, you know, cry to be let back in.
00:10:42	Yvonne	Well, I don't have many memories of being punished, but being grounded to our rooms indeed the way it was done. And Joseph, what else have you learned about American deep cultural values by living in Japan and seeing parenting there?
00:10:58	Joseph	One thing that I noticed is that Japanese parents tend not to praise their own children in public or in front of others. They play down the accomplishments: "Oh, he's not so smart. Uh, and she's always acting up." Americans often have this idea of self-esteem that children need to feel good about themselves in order to, to grow and succeed. But how about in the Netherlands?

00:11:23	Yvonne	Well, in the Netherlands, children are definitely praised in public. Praise in the Netherlands is more related to gaining self confidence in life and not as much in becoming a winner or in being the best.
00:11:38	Joseph	Well, I love these stories, but you know, I think we should clarify something. We talk about passing on cultural patterns, but we don't mean that there's some single Japanese or American or Dutch culture that all Japanese or American or Dutch people share in some absolute way that there is some kind of cultural essence.
00:12:00	Yvonne	Exactly what we are talking about is more complex than that. And we're talking about cultural patterns and those patterns are infinitely complex and dynamic, and those patterns are created by interaction. They don't exist in some purified form.
00:12:16	Joseph	And in this podcast, we use the term deep culture to talk about these unconscious cultural patterns within us and the patterns that are in the world around us,
00:12:26	Yvonne	And deep culture is dynamic and it exists at different skills. For example, every family has its own family culture. The way things are done in that specific family and different regions have distinct cultural patterns well and so on.
00:12:42	Joseph	And naturally these change over time. So the cultural patterns that my grandparents grew up with are different than what I did of course. And so some patterns may change quickly over a generation, but others may be carried on for hundreds or even thousands of years.
00:12:59	Yvonne	Yes. And what is so remarkable about deep culture is that all this complexity just feels natural to us. We take it for granted.
00:13:08	Joseph	And that brings us to part two "Playing after dark".
Part 2: Playing after dark		
00:13:25	Yvonne	As I reflected on these deep culture patterns for this episode, I was struck by the complexity of all there is to learn and that we are not simply learning to be good children. We are learning to fit into and hopefully succeed in the community and society that we were born into.
00:13:43	Joseph	Yeah, that's so true. But you know, that can also create this kind of inner tension that I think everybody feels at least a little bit that sometimes what we feel as an individual doesn't match the expectations of the community around us. And so we have to learn to navigate in a world, which may not always make sense, or it may not feel fair. And that is something that Ishita Ray, from the podcast team, discovered growing up in Eastern India.
00:14:27	Ishita	One of the biggest lessons I learned growing up was to listen in silence with a lowered head when being given advice by someone older, not betraying any surprise or shock and definitely not questioning. I remember one evening in summer when I was playing <i>Kabadi</i> . It's a team sport played in India. It's very physical. You tag other players and score points. You tackle them. And I was the only girl playing in the group of all boys. I was having so much fun that I played well after dark

		only to see my clearly displeased grandfather walking up to me and ordering me to stop playing immediately to head back home with him. He made it clear that playing with boys until after dark was not expected of me. I was so angry. It seemed unfair. What's wrong with playing after dark? What's wrong with the girl playing with boys? I felt angry with my parents too, because they did not defend me their daughter in front of my grandfather. It was a revelation to me, how my parents avoided conflict in the presence of my grandparents as if they were not in control of their own household. I realized that they too had to follow the expectations of others. They too had to fit into a larger world that was beyond even their control.
00:16:15	Ishita	Looking back, I realized that this is a key lesson for a child growing up as I did in India. You learn that everyone has a position or a place in society. And that respecting that place is what helps maintain peace. Indian society can be harsh. There are great disparities. There are uncertainties and risks. For many people, daily survival is an ongoing challenge. So these predetermined roles give a feeling of stability. Spending time in discussion or questioning is a luxury that is better avoided. When things go well, each person has a dignity that comes from playing their role well. Too often though, the reality is tremendous inequality, especially for women. As an adult, now, as a professional woman, I navigate this complexity every day. I follow social expectations, but I use them creatively. I bend them and sometimes I even break them. What I learn from <i>Kabadi</i> is that yes, I can play the game. And sometimes I must fight to change the rules.
00:17:43	Yvonne	And I love it though, how Ishita explains this tension of knowing how to get along yet playing the game of life in our own way. And that makes me wonder, Joseph, what were the life lessons that you learned growing up in the States?
00:17:59	Joseph	Well, one of the lessons I learned growing up was that I felt like I always had to be unique, and I had to explain my uniqueness. You know, adults asked me, you know, what do you want to be when you grow up? What is your favorite sport? What kind of music do you like? In elementary school there was an activity called show and tell, and each child brings some object to show to the class and explain, and this was called sharing, but it seemed a little bit more like showing off.
00:18:31	Yvonne	And she just spoke about learning to listen without questioning with head down.
00:18:36	Joseph	Well, I was told by adults "Look at me when I speak to you!" And I was expected to give reasons for my opinions, and tell people what I wanted, and why. And in school, I remember having to learn to give a persuasive speech and I had to write all these essays to practice making an argument and proving my point. And I got the feeling that, you know, you're nobody, if you're not unique and can't explain it.
00:19:05	Yvonne	That's quite a lot of pressure.

00:19:08	Joseph	It is. And part of expressing this kind of unique self is all these choices you have to make. You know, when you go to a restaurant you're asked, well, would you like super salad? What kind of dressing? Would you like French fries or baked potato? Would you like rare, medium rare or well done. And, and you even negotiate with the server, you know, can I get the ice cream on the side, or can I substitute the French fries for fresh fruit?
00:19:35	Yvonne	So what were the larger live lessons you learned from all this choosing and explaining and convincing?
00:19:42	Joseph	Well, the feeling that I had, although nobody said this openly, was that life is a competition. And when I was a child, the last thing I wanted to be called was loser.
00:19:58	Yvonne	Ah, and that's quite a contrast with the Netherlands. We don't really like winners, and you shouldn't stick out too much. And I also assume that the winner / loser mentality contrasts with Japan.
00:20:10	Joseph	Well, yes, there is an expression in Japanese That's very similar to this idea: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."
00:20:18	Yvonne	Well, these are great stories and also they are stories. So it makes me wonder, is there research about all of this?
00:20:26	Joseph	Well, that brings us to part three, the three R's.
Part 3: The Three R's		
00:20:26	Joseph	So Yvonne, I understand that in the Netherlands, there is something called the three R's
00:20:47	Yvonne	Indeed, and the three R's are <i>rust, reinheid and reglemaat</i> , and it stands for rest, cleanliness and regularity. And let me explain: rest is of course of the utmost importance for children. They just need a lot of sleep and it relates to regularity and routine waking up, having naps and going to bed at set times. And I could even tell you the ideal bedtimes for children per age. And then cleanliness. And that's literally related to personal hygiene to washing and bathing. And of course, also at set times.
00:21:23	Joseph	Well, I will admit that I had never heard of the three R's until I read this fascinating article about cultural difference in attitudes towards parenting, called: <i>Themes and variations, Parental ethno-theories in Western cultures</i> .
00:21:41	Ishita	And let's explain that first. What are parental ethno-theories? Well, here's a quote from that article: "Parental ethno-theories are cultural models that parents hold regarding children, families, and themselves as parents. Parental ethno-theories are often implicit, taken for granted ideas about natural or right way to think or act.
00:22:05	Joseph	So the basic idea is that parents have beliefs or attitudes about parenting, about how children develop or how they should be raised. And this research compared the attitudes of American, Dutch and Italian parents to see how culture affects the raising of children. And, this is

		where I first came across the three R's. And I even remember asking you if it was true that this is a common idea among Dutch parents.
00:22:33	Yvonne	And that was many years ago Joseph, when you worked on your book <i>The intercultural mind</i> . And I remember that I looked it up because it seemed both, old fashioned to me and also still in use. And actually I did some research again for this podcast and the three R's were first mentioned in the early 19th century. Can you imagine?
00:22:55	Joseph	Wow. So that's like 200 years ago and it's still going on.
00:22:59	Yvonne	Yes, exactly. And actually, it was yesterday that I had a follow up conversation with a young couple, three months after their relocation to a Latin American country: But it was amazing, they literally said that they focused from the start on the rest and regularity for their three and six year old's. And only when they had the routines and rest, we will all be happy as a family. And in fact, I think that many Dutch parents might simply assume that the three R's are things that babies everywhere needs, that they are universal. I was fascinated by the idea of culturally regulated customs of care.
00:23:40	Joseph	And, and here's a quote about that. "Culturally regulated customs of care are behavioral sequences or arrangements of care that are so well integrated into the culture, that they seem to require no justification." They appear to be self-evident common-sense solutions to everyday problems.
00:24:03	Yvonne	For example, this research found that Dutch parents very carefully regulated their children's schedule to give them routine and make sleep time very important. And researchers found that Dutch babies were sleeping on average two hours more than the American babies they studied.
00:24:21	Joseph	Which was amazing to me because I would have thought that the amount of sleep that babies need is simply biological, and that parenting shouldn't matter. But clearly it does.
00:24:32	Yvonne	And Dutch parents assumed that they should regulate their baby's sleep. Whereas American parents assumed that babies regulate their own sleep and that parents simply had to adapt to it.
00:24:44	Joseph	Well, and that seems to reflect another difference. They found that American parents focus on special time, they feel that children need individual attention and stimulation to develop. Whereas Dutch parents tended to talk about the importance of routinely spending time together.
00:25:02	Yvonne	It's our quality time moments. And when I was young, we always had all meals together and we discussed the day. And of course also coffee time and tea time. We enjoyed that together.
00:25:14	Joseph	Well, something else that fascinated me with this research was cultural differences in what parents said when asked to describe your child.
00:25:24	Yvonne	Yes, for example, American parents seem to look at their children in terms of mental or intellectual development. They talked about their



		children being intelligent or cognitively advanced or independent. Italian parents on the other hand focused on social quality saying that their baby is easy or even tempered, or <i>simpatico</i> .
00:25:47	Joseph	And that really fits the assumption that Italian parents expressed in this research that in order to develop children need lots of social attention to be with other people. Whereas Dutch parents describe their children as agreeable or having a long attention span, which fits this emphasis on regularity. And you know, this also interests me because these deep cultural patterns are passed on. You know, some of these patterns run very deep. Individualism, for example, runs through American society at a very deep level. And it just continues on through generations.
00:26:25	Yvonne	And on this podcast, we have talked about cultural differences in cognition, in thinking styles, that it can be measured and can be traced back to thought traditions that are thousands of years old, like how Confucianism has influenced Chinese societies, or how Western thought traditions can be traced back to Greek philosophers. And that comes from the work of Richard Nisbett.
00:26:50	Joseph	Yes. You know, I have this image in my mind of Socrates whispering in my ear when I was growing up and, and Confucius whispering in the ears of Chinese people growing up.
00:27:03	Yvonne	And Nisbett also talks about child rearing. And we talked about this already in one of the previous podcasts. And he describes how Western children grow up in a world that seems to consist of nouns, naming objects, for example: “ What's that? It's a doggy “
00:27:20	Joseph	Well, and that's just like a show and tell.
00:27:23	Yvonne	Yes. And, Asian children, they grow up in world of verbs. Social interaction verbs.
00:27:30	Joseph	Well. I have certainly seen Japanese parents playing a kind of give and take game saying: “Oh, can I have it? Oh, thank you. Here you go.”
00:27:40	Yvonne	<laugh> and researchers also identify cultural parents related to how we form our identity. For example, Japanese children sleeping with their parents that reflects what Shinobu Kitayama calls an interdependent self, a sense of self focused on relationships and community.
00:28:00	Joseph	And that is such an interesting area in and of itself. This idea that how we experience the self depends on culture. And in fact, we're going to dedicate the next podcast episode to that.
00:28:13	Yvonne	Indeed. And maybe by now, it's also time we close this episode. So Joseph, before we do that, what's your takeaways from all this?
00:28:23	Joseph	Well, I guess it's a reminder for me that human beings are cultural by nature. That internalizing cultural patterns is an integral part of being human, just like acquiring our first language. So culture runs deep, but we don't notice it because it's so natural to us. And how about you Yvonne?
00:28:47	Yvonne	Yeah. Well, for me, I think again, it's the power of the unconscious. And just as Edward T. Hall expressed, it's frequently the most obvious and

		taken for granted aspects of culture that influence behavior in the deepest and most subtle ways.
00:29:04	Joseph	And so now before we close, we should mention this work that we've been referring to, as you said, Edward T. Hall these quotes came from his book <i>Beyond Culture</i> . We also have been referring to <i>Themes and variations, parental ethno-theories in Western cultures</i> by Harkness and Super, and that can be found in <i>Parenting beliefs, behaviors, and parent child relations across cultural perspective</i> . You also might want to check out <i>Three Dutch parenting pillars that make some parents and happy children</i> . And that is from the <i>A mother far from home blog</i> by Rachel Norman. We have been referring to the work of Richard Nisbett and his book, <i>the Geography of thought</i> . And finally, also the work of Marcus and Kitayama, the article <i>Culture and the self implications for cognition, emotion and motivation</i> .
00:30:06	Joseph	The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan intercultural Institute and NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII. We have the JII learning circle where intercultural educators get together to share best practices, to find out more, just do a web search for the Japan intercultural Institute. And if you liked today's episode, please recommend us on social media and you can reach us at DC podcast @ Japan, <a href="http://intercultural.org">intercultural.org</a> , a special thanks to Ishita Ray for sharing her <i>Kapadi</i> story. And as usual, thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz podcast, team members, Zeina Matar and Daniel Glinz and everyone at JII. And of course, Yvonne, thanks to you for sharing this time with me today.
00:31:00	Yvonne	Well, thank you, Joseph. And thanks all listeners for being with us today again.