

This is the first chapter of *Curious about Culture*
by Gaiti Rabbani.

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CURIOUS **about** **CULTURE**

**Refocus your lens on culture to
cultivate cross-cultural understanding**

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Curiosity

To be curious is to seek knowledge. Curiosity is a quality related to inquisitive thinking, exploration and learning. It arises when we notice a gap in our knowledge and understanding. I sincerely hope that the insights in *Curious about Culture* will go some way in quenching your thirst for that knowledge.

PREFACE

If you have picked up this book, chances are that you are curious about culture. Whether you travel abroad or stay at home, whether you work and live in the northern hemisphere or in the south, the likelihood of interacting with someone of a different cultural background is very high. Those probabilities are multiplied a few fold here in the richly diverse peoplescope of Australia.

What does culture mean to you? How would you describe the characteristics of your culture? When we speak of culture most people think of ethnicity and nationality. In reality, however, culture transcends racial and geographical boundaries. It is not only about where we were born, who we were born to and where we live. Gender, generation and language among other factors also contribute to how we interact with the social landscape around us.

We are all members of more than one culture. We identify with several cultures through our personal and professional selves – family, community, national and organisational just to name a few. We may act differently depending on which cultural dimension we wish to express or which cultural group we are interacting with at any given time. I may think of myself as a woman, a business entrepreneur, a teacher, an English speaker or a global citizen.

Our expression in life, at work and at play, is honed through our uniquely personal culture. Each one of us is shaped by multiple and complex layers of culture to form our cultural identities. There are many dimensions that construct our individual identities and define what is intrinsically important to us, shaping our perception of the world around us.

With the acknowledgement that culture is stratified, the purpose of this book is to help you peel back the multi-faceted layers of culture. Through the chapters of this book, we will deconstruct the broad-brush approach that has become synonymous with the word 'culture'. I will encourage you to be curious, to expand your cultural awareness and to develop cultural sensitivity. Often the fear of saying the 'wrong' thing or offending someone can be stifling. I will offer suggestions on how to frame your curiosity and initiate cross-cultural dialogue with confidence.

Are you looking to uncover your own cultural drivers? Are you seeking to connect with cultural strangers? Are you looking for tools to navigate a multicultural landscape? Whatever your motivation for reading this book, it will lead you to some deep and valuable insights.

Cross-cultural encounters

On any given day we interact with people across a spectrum of cultures. Allow me to share a slice of my everyday life as a frame of reference.

On a typical morning I wake to a host of messages from family, friends and clients across the time zones: a rushed WhatsApp note from a client in Dubai whose inflated sense of urgency makes everything appear a matter of life or death; a cheery email

from a client across the harbour in Sydney (I'm convinced I'm the first person she talks to every morning and the last person she messages at night!); hurried messages from my sister in the north of England, carrying updates of my mum who is struggling to adapt to her new care home; a series of endearing emoticons as substitute hugs from friends in Istanbul; and a spirited Facebook message from my early bird daughter in Queensland boasting about a new beachside café she has discovered on her sunrise walk, and reminding me to check my Insta account.

Invigorated by my L'Occitane verbena-infused shower I attempt to respond to all incoming communications, urgent or not, whether the recipients are awake or not. In the background, I hear my Sri Lankan partner asking if I've seen his spectacles. I can't help but giggle. 'Spectacles' – really?

My morning continues with a ritual-esque stroll to my local café, Garçon. Sam the manager greets me with a welcoming smile and a nod of the head that says, 'I know what you want...'. A couple of taps on his iPad and my order is magically transmitted to the trusted hands of my barista, Kelvin, who hails from Indonesia.

How many cultures have I encountered, all before the first sip of my Colombian deep-roasted blend?

I am straddling the obvious diversity that resides across national borders – England, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. My story alludes to a European influence with my penchant for French brands. I find myself navigating the digital divide across all possible messaging media that I can keep up with, appeasing my daughter via Facebook (after checking Insta!) and my clients via email and WhatsApp. My style changes from the professional 'down-to-business' to the friendly and relaxed, in response to the tone of my clients. I find my partner's

spectacles and I hand them back with a reminder that no-one uses that colonial term anymore!

From generation to gender to language, I have effectively circumvented any potential cultural collisions and I am ready to savour my morning coffee.

I can't pretend that I fully understand the beliefs, the attitudes, the values or the norms that each of these cultural groups holds dear. What I have come to learn is that sensitivity to the cultural orientations of others plays a big part in my own success at fostering meaningful relationships.

How many cross-cultural interactions feature in your daily encounters – at home, at work and in your day to day life? Your daily interactions may not traverse national boundaries or international time zones; however, you don't have to cross geographical borders to face a culturally nuanced situation: Australia's domestic population is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse in the world. A country of immigrants, Australia's people come from over 190 nations, and more than 75 per cent of the nation identifies with an ancestry other than Australian. A third of Australia's population was born overseas. Through the 7.5 million migrants living in Australia, every single country from around the world was represented in Australia's population in 2019. Over 300 separately identified languages are spoken in Australian homes while more than one-fifth of Australians speak a language other than English at home. We also have four to five generations in the workplace.

How's that for cultural diversity?

About this book

The ease with which we connect and maintain personal and professional relationships is influenced by the lens through which we view others. To connect across cultures with people of diverse backgrounds, we first need to understand the values that mould our own lens of the world. To improve interpersonal effectiveness in any sphere of our lives we need to look within, understand ourselves and venture into the deeper subconscious patterns of our minds.

In an era of instant gratification our minds seek quick fixes and ready-made solutions – ‘just tell me how to do it’. In reality, each situation is unique; every one of us is different; every cross-cultural encounter is underpinned by different dynamics. To be prescriptive would not do justice to the cultural nuances that sway our thinking and behaviour.

The cover of this book features kaleidoscopic glasses – for good reason. You might recall being mesmerised with the colourful images returned through the lens of a kaleidoscope in your childhood days. Much time can be spent entertained by the continuously changing patterns reflected through this simple device. The designs seen through the lens are unique to the viewer. The phenomenon is merely a play of light through angled mirrors reflecting, typically, on a collection of ordinary beads or glass pieces. By rotating the lens, the images seamlessly merge and transform into new and intriguing shapes.

You may be wondering what this has to do with culture. The way we view culture is unique to each of us. The filters that we are about to discover in *Curious about Culture* act as the mirrors. For the viewer who peers through the kaleidoscope, there are

several ways to interpret what is seen. Often our vision is blurred through preconceptions informed by our own experience of culture. Culture is not static; like the ever-changing images seen through a kaleidoscope, it is dynamic.

Ultimately, we all view the world differently. We view people differently. We perceive cultural identities differently. We can learn to appreciate this uniqueness. It is fitting that the word ‘kaleidoscope’ comes from the Greek language and literally means ‘observer of beautiful things’.

To sum it up, I use the words of Henry David Thoreau:

The question is not what you look at, but what you see.

Based on my experience as a cultural specialist, a teacher and a coach, this book brings together many parts of my own professional life. I am passionate about facilitating self-awareness among the people I work with, helping them be the best versions of themselves. Consequently, the tone of this book assumes a coaching mindset – one that continuously inspires introspection. I encourage you to reflect on the perspectives offered and consider how they may apply to you. I believe that delivering insights that have personal relevance will be more powerful than ‘telling’ you what to do.

Curious about Culture offers opportunities to reflect through introspective questions and, where appropriate, provides you with some suggestions to facilitate cross-cultural connection. *Curious about Culture* is designed to be digestible yet impactful. Each main chapter concludes with a ‘Be curious’ section, offering questions for self-reflection or suggestions to frame your curiosity. Through a series of intentional questions, you can boost your awareness, enhance your personal effectiveness and cultivate your confidence

to start meaningful cross-cultural conversations. To access all the 'Be curious' sections in a single worksheet, refer to the exclusive online toolkit at: rabbanicollective.com/curiousaboutculture. Please use the password 'I am curious' when prompted.

Part I of this book will help you to build awareness of your own cultural outlook. By uncovering the beliefs and assumptions that are held in your subconscious mind you can deepen your understanding of yourself and how you express yourself in the world. You will start to recognise the invisible lines that have potential to create rifts in multicultural interactions.

In **part II** we examine six themes of culture: gender, generation, faith, education, language and nationality. Each of these cultural filters shapes cultural identities and influences our behaviour. Once you start to understand the principles that distinguish you and those around you, you can begin to shine a light on your blind spots and recognise the impact of bias on judgements when engaging across cultures. You can choose to dive beyond the apparent cues and clues when interacting with diverse people. You can become clearer about where you are projecting your own values and recognise where you could be more understanding of those who seem to differ.

It would be unreasonable to expect you to master all possible cultural nuances that influence your own outlook and that of others. In truth, you don't need to. In **part III** of *Curious about Culture*, I will provide you with a values framework that will help you determine your personal culture orientations against six key dimensions: identity, authority, expression, communication, rules and achievement. As a certified professional with the Cultural Intelligence Center, I draw upon their model to help you decipher the cultural conditioning that may be influencing your

perspectives and interactions with others. Learning to navigate these six cultural dimensions will empower you to build stronger connections and bridge previously obscure differences with those of different cultural backgrounds.

Part IV of *Curious about Culture* wraps up with some actionable suggestions on how you might apply this refined lens on cultural understanding. With the intention of boosting your cross-cultural effectiveness, you can learn how to identify and address cultural themes in your workplace.

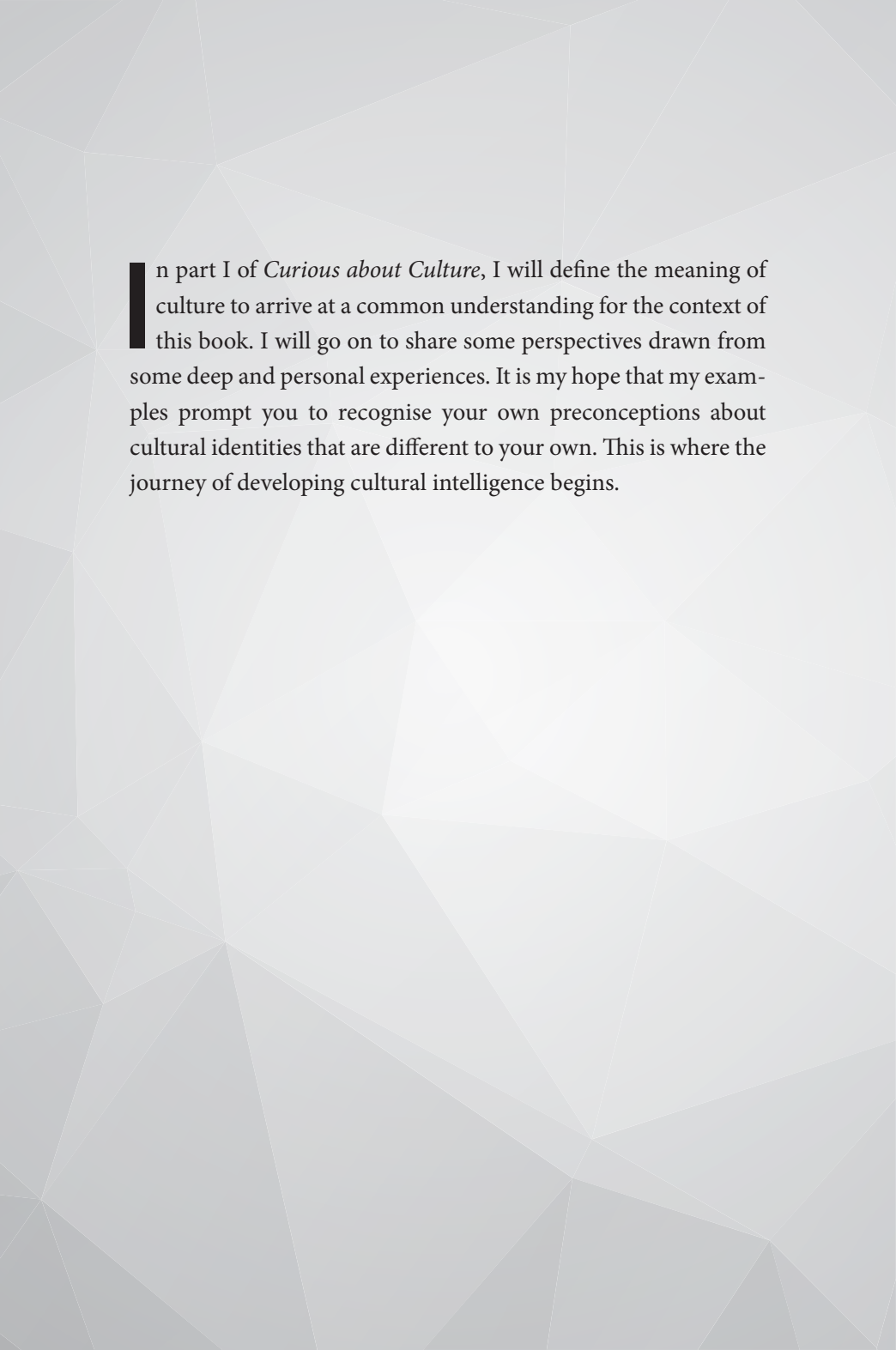
Now that you have reached the end of this preface, you have already started your journey of cross-cultural reflection. If you wish to expand your knowledge further you can do so by downloading an exclusive resource of templates available only to readers of this book from the online toolkit (please see details on page 141).



PART I

CULTURE

- 1. The cultural quotient**
- 2. The cultural mirror**
- 3. The cultural perspective**



In part I of *Curious about Culture*, I will define the meaning of culture to arrive at a common understanding for the context of this book. I will go on to share some perspectives drawn from some deep and personal experiences. It is my hope that my examples prompt you to recognise your own preconceptions about cultural identities that are different to your own. This is where the journey of developing cultural intelligence begins.



THE CULTURAL QUOTIENT

In this book, I use the phrase ‘cultural quotient’ to describe our cultural perceptiveness. In academic circles, and now increasingly so in the business world, CQ¹ is the term used to describe cultural intelligence. As with other forms of intelligence, namely IQ and EQ (emotional intelligence), CQ is measurable and can be developed over time.

What is culture?

Culture can be ubiquitous yet simultaneously abstract. We come across the word ‘culture’ several times a day in different contexts. Let’s start by defining it for the setting of this book.

Earlier I walked you through the start of my day, embracing the urban coffee culture as well as the diversity of cultures I frequently navigate. Culture is a multifaceted concept that essentially influences every aspect of our lives – both consciously

1 The abbreviation CQ™ is a registered trademark of the Cultural Intelligence Center.

and subconsciously. In its broadest sense culture is a cultivated behaviour.

Social psychologist Geert Hofstede defined culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from another’. In a nutshell, then, culture is the shared beliefs, traditions, values and identities of a group. Culture is a group phenomenon – one that is learned and experienced through the norms and expectations of a group.

Think about the last time you joined a new organisation or partnered with a company that was proud to take you on an orientation of the business. As you familiarised yourself with the organisational culture you would have gained an understanding of the underlying principles that guide the behaviours of team members with one another, and with the outside world. Essentially, they were communicating their terms of engagement: ‘this is the way we do things around here’.

When you pick up a guidebook to plan a holiday, it outlines social norms and customary practices in your destination of choice – religion, dress, language, law, music, arts, holidays and so on. That’s simply the way they do things there, as defined by their local culture.

In retail training programs, I occasionally introduce an exercise called ‘welcoming someone into your home’. This sets up a conversation about how we greet customers as they enter a boutique environment, compared to how we receive guests at home. The comparison usually opens up an unintended but interesting cross-cultural dialogue. Some participants believe that it is customary to show guests around their house. Some feel that it is an invasion of privacy, and would neither show nor expect to be

shown around. Others would do so only if their guest is staying overnight.

What is socially acceptable in one cultural group may not be in another. When someone does something differently to what we may be used to, it appears strange to us – but it is perfectly normal to them. These social norms become cultural quirks that often distinguish one group from another.

A cultural group traverses national borderlines. Christians and Buddhists are cultural groups. Corporations and academia have separate cultural identities. Roles within these organisations such as teachers and leaders have distinctive cultural traits. Sliced differently, gender defines cultural groupings. In collectivist cultures, family is the strongest unit; in individualist cultures, the personal culture prevails.

Personal culture is shaped by factors beyond nationality and the environment in which we live, but also by family and communities. Our cultural narratives start taking form during childhood, from the multiple layers of culture we experience in society. We learn the norms of the cultures we are exposed to, and these learned ideas become integral to our personal value system.

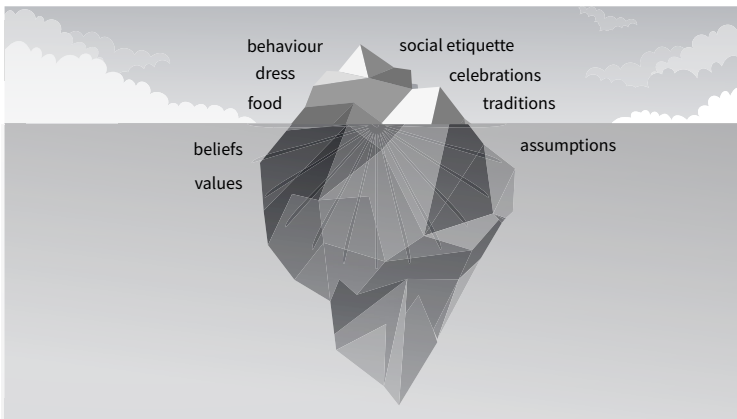
The culture iceberg

We often refer to the iceberg analogy to illustrate the concept of culture. Developed by anthropologist Edward T Hall in the 1970s, the model showcases the depth and breadth of culture – likening the complexity of culture to an iceberg. You can see the top 10 per cent of an iceberg while 90 per cent of its mass sits below the waterline, out of sight. Culture is much the same; the visible layer is a very thin slice.

The proverbial tip of the iceberg accounts for a small part of the cultural mass and represents features that can be expressed and observed easily when we first interact with a new culture – food, dress, social etiquette, traditions, celebrations and behaviour.

If you have ever lived or worked in a different culture, you will know that adapting to local customs, embracing local tastes and observing social etiquette is enriching. These characteristics are an important expression of culture, but can also be adopted without fundamentally compromising people’s intrinsic cultural identity.

The remaining 90 per cent of the culture iceberg is submerged below the surface and comprises deep-rooted ideas such as values, beliefs and assumptions. It’s like a subliminal framework of rules. Sitting in the subconscious mind, these learned ideas become our cultural conditioning – what is right or wrong, acceptable or not – and dictate the way we behave and communicate, and the choices we make. These core values are difficult to change. They are a fundamental element of our cultural DNA – the multiple dimensions of our unique cultural identities – and asking someone to act outside of their belief system will create a great deal of conflict.



Initially, when two people from different cultures come together, they observe the visible features of culture. In some cultures, including Australia, it is a sign of respect to look someone in the eye when they speak to you. It demonstrates active listening and assures the speaker that you are engaged and interested. In return, if the other person holds eye contact it signals confidence in what is being said. In many Asian cultures, however, it is polite to hold eye contact only briefly – especially in situations where the listener may be of a higher social status. Sporadic meeting of the eyes indicates respect rather than a lack of interest.

Consider a cross-cultural business negotiation. If each person relies only on the observable behaviour – in this case, eye contact – it will most likely trigger mutual feelings of mistrust or a question of respect. While different cultural groups may share the same underlying values such as respect and trust, with this example we can see that the expression of these values can differ.

The iceberg model highlights why we cannot judge a new culture purely on what we see. Instinctively we know there's more to a situation than we initially perceive. Take a moment to consider what happens when someone's behaviour goes against your cultural norms. Did you perceive the other person's behaviour as unacceptable? Disrespectful? Was your perception true? It is essential to take time to uncover the beliefs that underlie the behaviour.

The word 'culture' derives from a French term, which in turn derives from the Latin *colere*, which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivate and nurture. I encourage you to cultivate your curiosity and discover how your cultural lens on the world can influence your interactions with people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Why does it matter?

We are living in an increasingly diverse global community. More often, we are being called on to work, learn and teach in situations where there is more than one culture at play. Research demonstrates that cultural intelligence may easily be the single greatest difference between thriving in the 21st-century world and becoming obsolete.

Acquiring the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to manoeuvre effectively in multicultural environments is increasingly important. Our social landscape comprises diverse societies. Riddled with religious, ethical and language complexities, our complex ecosystem calls for cultural sensitivity. Navigating our interconnected world without collision is key.

People with strong cultural awareness can adapt to others who might perceive the world differently. Developing your cultural sensitivity offers the pathway to navigating confusing situations and making appropriate adjustments to connect with others of different cultures.

Let's go back to the example of eye contact. There's a tendency to confuse cultural preferences with personality traits. Could the person holding direct eye contact be perceived as rude and intimidating in Asian culture? Could the person consciously offering a fleeting glance be seen as untruthful or lacking confidence to an Australian?

Our cultural looking glasses are accustomed to our own societal rules and definitions of what is normal and what is not. When someone behaves differently to our own social codes, we can be quick to judge their behaviour as abnormal.

Recognising cultural expression as a learned behaviour separate from personality promotes a deeper level of understanding. Adapting to accommodate others' orientations fosters a rich connection. In the context of this book, it helps to think about your lens on culture helping you to understand yourself in relation to the different cultural groups around you.

Cultures are not static. Societies and communities are ever changing in response to social, economic, environmental and global shifts. Cultures are continually being renewed and reshaped.

Encountering another culture and respecting and accepting the similarities and differences from your own is a much-valued skill as our vast world shrinks into a global village. You cannot develop this level of empathy without sharpening your own self-awareness and recognising your personal cultural lens.