

The Lowenfeld Mosaic Test in the Study of Cultural Differences

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Through looking at two sets of mosaics from two cultural groups, one from Malayan Chinese subjects, the other from mainly Tanzanian Moslems, this paper attempts to identify common features in the mosaics that distinguish the groups from each other and to relate these to known cultural elements within each group. In so doing it shows the value of the Lowenfeld mosaic test in cross cultural studies.

It is common knowledge that culture, and cultural differences exist. Indeed, it seems obvious. People dress differently: they prepare food differently, they have different social customs, they have distinctive styles of architecture and plan their towns from different perspectives, they place different values on the various aspects of life, in fact, they hold different views of the world and the meaning of life.

The difference in costume, is it merely a matter of climate and the caprice of fashion? If so, why do cultures of similar climate produce costumes which are distinct from each other? Why do certain designs which form a basic theme in that culture's history of dress design never appear in other cultures except as minor features of fashion? Does dress design express and reflect something more than the human need for covering?

The difference in culinary styles and attitude to food, is that also merely a product of agricultural history or something more? What is it which gives a town this intangible atmosphere which tells us we are abroad or at home? And the difference in attitude to relationships, is that an accident of social history or does it reflect a deeply held difference in social value? How has the human race, given the same imperatives,

arrived at so many different solutions to similar problems?

The over-riding question perhaps is: are these differences superficial, that is something to be delighted in and simply accepted or are they of the order of significance which has real consequences for human intercourse?

How can we begin to answer such a question? Since the subject of culture is such a pervasive and protean phenomenon, how can we elicit material in a form would enable us to study the differences? What instrument could we use to examine the material? How can we make any interpretation of the meaning of the material?

When Margaret Lowenfeld was using her Mosaic Test in her individual psychological work with children and adults, mainly England, colleagues in the field of anthropology were making collections of Mosaics from a number of communities round the globe. So here is an instrument, a projective method, the Lowenfeld Mosaic Test, which might bear on the question of culture. Furthermore, it is a tool which surmounts verbal barriers, where the result, the product does not require academic sophistication and specialist knowledge to use, only careful attention. For, the important point to emphasise concerning the Lowenfeld Mosaics as a projective tool, is the concept of the Total Response. This concept embraces the whole process of the making of the Mosaic; the attitude and aim of the maker of the Mosaic, the manner and style of the process, the cultural background—ground of both the maker and the observer, as well as the completed design.

The Lowenfeld Mosaic Test consists of a box of 456 pieces of mosaics and a tray. The mosaics are arranged in rows standing on their edges in the box, grouped by shape and displaying all the colours in each shape. There are five shapes, all bearing a mathematical relation to each other. The basic shape is a square from which the isosceles, equilateral and scalene triangles are derived; the sides of the diamond are the same length as the square (30 mm.). Each shape is available in red, blue, yellow, black, green and white and arranged in the box in this order. This box is presented alongside the tray (fitted with plain white paper) the dimensions of which were chosen so that complete edged patterns could be made. A

half set could be used and is most likely to be used by field research workers.

I should like to comment on two collections, taken by colleagues of Dr. Lowenfeld, sometime before 1960, of which only the Mosaics with some brief notes by the observer are extant. One set is taken from mainly Moslem subjects in Tanganyika (present day Tanzania), the other is from Chinese subjects in Malaya.

The Tanganyikan subjects were made up of 102 males, aged between 7 - 55, and 33 females aged between 8 — 45. Proportionately, more males have had some form of education and their occupations are listed, for females, only their marital status is noted instead of occupation. The subjects are mainly Muslim, although there are a few Christians among the men. It is not known where in Tanganyika the subjects came from, but under 'comment and environment' are names such as Yao, Bweni, Zigua, Pangani and occasionally the word 'coastal'; from the occupations list, the area is likely to have been suburban.

The Malayan Chinese Mosaics are taken from an entirely male population of 109 subjects aged between 10 - 26. In this collection, a distinction had been made between subjects coming from a rural or a suburban/urban area.

The rural group had 20 boys, aged between 10 — 14, all attending an 'Estate School' and the 39 remaining men, aged between 17 — 26, worked mainly as tappers on the plantation. The urban group, 31 of them, were all at school; 15, aged between 10 — 13, at Primary School and 16, aged between 17 — 20, at High School. A further 19, aged between 18 — 24, were soldiers. No religion was given but Chinese provincial origin was mentioned, e.g. Canton, Hakka, Hokkien, Teochow, Kongsai, Halinan.

A sample from each collection, all from male subjects under 26 years old, have been reproduced here. I am going to comment on only two aspects of the differences between the collections and shall make no references to the use of colours or shapes. The two salient features which immediately strike one, even at first glance, are the structure of the Mosaics and the Mosaic itself. In terms of numbers, the Tanganyikan collection consists entirely, with only one exception, of abstract designs: that is of a

total of 138 (3 subjects produced a second Mosaic) only one was 'representational,' and of the other 137, 56 contained a complete hexagon in the design. Considering the infinite number of possible configurations, to have nearly half the collection containing one particular design, is, to say the least, remarkable. In the Malayan collection from Chinese subjects, however, 99 out of a total of 109 are 'representational' designs. Such a contrast suggests at least that there might be a genuine difference between the collections.

The second feature of note is the whole structure of the Mosaics: 'compact' for the Chinese and 'loose' for the mainly Muslim subjects. Whereas the Mosaics from Malayan Chinese subjects tend to be very structured and use the tray space as a background to the design, the Tanganyikan subjects seem to treat the spaces as integral with the mosaic pieces and the tray space as well as the Mosaic forms the total design.

What can we hypothesise about these differences. One way of approaching this question is to find similar expressive forms within each culture which reveal a similar difference. Are there such forms?

Of Islamic art, Professor Nash, in his Foreword to Keith Critchlow's (1976) book on Islamic patterns, says that it is 'an aniconic art wherein the spiritual world is reflected in the sensible world not through various iconic forms but through geometry and rhythm'. Further on he says 'the circle becomes the archetypal governing basis for all the geometric shapes that unfold within it.... The circle primary quality is one of sixness'. So the basis of pattern comes from 'the circle and the hexagonal arrangement of a group of tangential circles of the same radius surrounding it'.

This attitude towards artistic representation is borne out in the Tanganyikan collection of Mosaics, by the absolute predominance of abstract pattern over representational design and by the large proportion of hexagonal arrangements occurring in the patterns. A related feature is the dynamic quality, the fluidity in the use of the Mosaic pieces which give the patterns a looseness of structure, and an Am— type, quality, which Dr. Lowenfeld defined as (1) using the tray space as an active ingredient and (2) interest in movement and colour balance. Thus, the Tanganyikan

Mosaics reflect and accord well with the notion of Islamic artistic representation as manifest through 'sixness' and 'geometry and rhythm' which can be seen as distinctive qualities in this collection.

In contrast, the very structured, static 'representational' designs from the Chinese subjects are more like the 'Eu—type' and remind one of another expressive medium in Chinese culture, its language. Chinese words or characters are built up through pictorial representation of objects. As, for example, one of the words for Light, Brightness or Understanding is made up of the formalised characters for sun and moon placed side by side. Similarly, the abstract noun for 'good' is formed by placing the characters for woman and child side by side. The character for woman can also mean daughter; the character for child can also mean son or Master (as in Confucius). So that the form a Chinese word takes says something about the assumptions behind the word. The Chinese written language developed in the way it did through their belief that meaning could be found in the pattern (as against a causal chain) of events and the natural arrangement of things. The Chinese mind operates on what Jung (1969) has described as a synchronised principle which means that, when something happens, they tend to look at the timing of the event (i.e. Simultaneity) for an explanation rather than the time order of the event or a causal explanation. So, the written language accords with the basic cultural outlook. Looking through the Mosaics made by the Chinese subjects in the Malayan collection, one can see an undoubted similarity in expression between these Mosaics and the Chinese written word. The Mosaic expressing this relationship most directly was that of a farmhouse, made almost exactly like the Chinese character for farm. A person from a different culture making that Mosaic and calling it a farmhouse would certainly require a very different explanation.

These two collections came into my possession with the minimum of background notes and there was no information at all on the manner of making Mosaics by the subjects; nor was there any information on the persons who made the collections. When Dr. Lowenfeld made the discovery that there are differences between the American and European approaches to the Mosaics, she also came across its corollary, that it's that the cultural background of the Observer affects what

is being observed and the subsequent description of the process apart from the actual reproduction of the finished Mosaic. Dr. Lowenfeld (1954) contrasted, in her definitive book on the Mosaics, Madeline Kerr's (a European) record of Mosaics from Jamaican children, with Leonora Schwartz's (an American) account of the responses made by the people of the Manus tribe on the Admiralty Islands. From these notes she concluded (p.323). 'The eye of the American Observer looks for movement and colour and tends to miss structure. The eye of the European focuses upon the structure in regard to form and colour and would not think of following the colour movement and colour balance.

And so it is not unexpected that it was left to an American anthropologist, Dr. Rhoda Metraux, to demonstrate the possible importance of the mode and order of the making of a Mosaic. She had gone, in the early 1970s', to Tambanum village, in the East Sepik District of Papua New Guinea to see what changes had occurred since Gregory Bateson had visited in the 1930s'. It was this very factor, the observation of the movement, the process of the making of the Mosaic which enabled her not only to note that the younger generation tended to make more naturalistic designs and the older generation, more traditional designs, but also to notice one thread of cultural continually underlying the enormous cultural changes which had taken place: a kind of weaving motion involving colour balance with which the designs were created. I quote from her article in *Ethos* (Metraux, 1975): 'In contrast to the products, the final designs which differed in relation to age and individual orientation to past and present, the process by which individuals achieved their designs was common to the whole group, adolescents and adults, girls and women as well as boys and men. Two basic principles guided their constructions: the principles of symmetry and complimentary'. (These terms are used and explained in detail by Gregory Bateson (1958) in his book 'Naven').

The Lowenfeld Mosaic is a familiar instrument for eliciting the individuality of a person's response, but the Mosaics from these two collections show more than this: they show common factors for each group which suggest that the Mosaic is not simply the product of individual experience and thought, but is also profoundly affected by the culture which he inherits, is born into and brought up; that cultural difference is an important dimension of human personality. The natural corollary is that the Mosaic is

one of the instruments of choice for cross-cultural studies and in particular for comparative research in this area.

The question, however, remains to be asked - how could the knowledge and understanding of these differences have application within society as a whole? It is perhaps self-evident that having an understanding of cultural differences could alter one's sensitivity in intercommunication because of one's knowledge of the potential for misunderstanding, however fluent the medium of communication might seem. But for the helping professionals, such as in medicine, psychology, education, in social and family work and in marriage guidance, it may be essential for the success of their work to have and to use the knowledge that individual psychology is inextricably shot through with cultural assumptions. This knowledge could enhance industrial relations and open new ways of looking at educational difficulties; it might help makers of social policy to seek out areas of similarity rather than emphasizing differences, without devaluing the differences and thus produce a more positive response from all sections of the community. This is perhaps a Utopian aim but not necessarily one which should not be attempted at all.

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