The Last Samurai

The Last Samurai: A Cultural Review

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**Background**

*The Last Samurai* (2003), was directed by Edward Zwick and starred Tom Cruise and Ken Watanabe, describes the relationship that forms between Captain Nathan Algren (Cruise) and the *samurai* warlord Katsumoto (Watanabe) after Algren is captured by Katsumoto’s *samurai* in a skirmish against the Japanese National Army, whom Algren has been hired to train.

The movie takes place in Japan beginning in 1876 and conceivably into 1878, in the period of Japanese history known as the Meiji Restoration, named for the emperor who sought to modernize Japan. Historically, these years also served as both the height of *samurai* influence in the direction of Japanese culture and their final years of existence as a social class in the Japanese hierarchy. The story of the film seems based on a mélange of historical fact and folklore, and it could be argued that Katsumoto, who rebels against the Emperor in an attempt to save Japan from potential damage done by the encroach of Western influence, is based on the actual rebellion led by *samurai* Saigo Takamori, who served the Meiji Emperor and advised him on the path to take throughout the Restoration (Keirstead, 2004). There are some elements of the movie, particularly Algren’s cultural transition toward something more like the Japanese, which are reminiscent of *Shogun*. The era is a hotbed of change for Japan, and the film captures the social uncertainty and even fear that must have existed at the time.

**PCD and the way of the Samurai**

To begin, it is important that we define the concepts to be discussed. The term “*perceived cultural difference* (or PCD) underscores diversity in features illustrated by differences in world view, values, thought process, customs, appearance, expectations, communicator style, verbal behavior, nonverbal behavior” (Dodd, 1998, 5). There movie provides many examples of PCDs, because the centerpiece of the story of the movie is the friendship that develops between two such different men: Algren is a failed American Army captain, who suffers from a combination of what would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress
Disorder for his actions during the American containment of the American Indian tribes of the Midwest, as well as alcoholism. Katsumoto is a part of Japan’s crumbling cultural elite, one of the last remaining nobility who clings to the old ways even as the emperor he serves and taught embraces the new.

It could be argued that there are three separate types of PCD outlined in the film: (1) American mainstream against Japanese mainstream, (2) American mainstream against the Samurai microculture, and (3) Japanese mainstream against the Samurai microculture.

The PCDs that cause conflict and misperception between members of the American and Japanese mainstream cultures appear rapidly, and taint the interactions between most of the Japanese and American characters. In the meal where Algren is hired to train the newly-formed and modernized Japanese Army, Colonel Bagley describes the plight of Ambassador Omura as Japan’s attempt to become a “civilized” country and needing “white” assistance to train their Army to a fighting standard. Moments later, after Algren brashly delivers an ultimatum to increase the already exorbitant salary offer, Omura confers with his unnamed associate and says, “They are like that. A land of cheap traders.” The Japanese are offering money, which is perceived to be the thing Americans love most, whereas the Americans are getting a chance to show off their technical know-how and military prowess to a “lesser” power.

Much of the conflict that arises from PCDs between the American mainstream and the Samurai microculture revolve around the concept of honor and suicide, which are a part of the Japanese mainstream culture as well, but not to the extreme that the concepts dictated behavior and response among the Samurai. Captain Algren has been dragged from the battleground on horseback, and has watched the defeated General Hasegawa, commander of the Japanese army, commit seppuku, the ritual suicide used to restore lost honor, with assistance from Katsumoto. Algren expects to be murdered, and is surprised when he is allowed not only to live, but roam the village in a manner not unlike that of a “stray dog,” as he says in the film. While he thinks about his current circumstances, the Samurai discuss his fate. Ujio, one of Katsumoto’s lieutenants,
demands that Algren be killed in an effort to support the *samurai* code that demands suicide as penance for defeat and capture during a military campaign (Ikegami, 2003). It is Katsumoto who is able to overcome the difference between the two cultures and state that Algren will live. But then, Katsumoto wants to learn more about his enemy, a desire that had once been mirrored by Algren.

Another honor-related PCD occurs when Algren learns more about his living arrangement. He is moved from his position on horseback into the home of Taka and her family. He is shocked to learn that Taka is the wife of the last *samurai* that he kills during the brief battle between the *samurai* and the Japanese Army. What he does not know is that Taka is herself struggling with the arrangement. Not long after Algren’s arrival, she asks Katsumoto’s permission to commit suicide to overcome the shame of having her husband’s killer in her home. Unlike Katsumoto, Taka does not see her husband’s death in battle as a good or honorable thing. While this issue is diminished in time, ending with Algren in some ways taking the place of the man he killed in battle, the relationship that forms between Algren and Taka is strained by the how each perceives how honor applies to the situation.

The third type of PCD, those that caused conflict between the Japanese mainstream with the more traditional view of the *samurai*, are often subtle, and are generally left toward the end of the movie. Much of *The Last Samurai* hints at the cultural poisoning that was being done to Japan in that era. The Meiji emperor was leading a cultural shift, away from the feudal traditions of Japan toward a more modern, Western approach to life. It also hints at the social anxiety that must have been present at the time of such change.

It is not until the end of the scene of the final battle between the Imperial army and the *samurai* that we, and the members of the Japanese mainstream, realize how conflicted they had become. The *samurai* had been ruthlessly slaughtered by the power of the gattling gun, which roars on throughout the “pause” moment until it runs out of ammunition. Beginning with a lieutenant, the members of the Imperial army come to a collective decision that what they have
done was a horrible thing. Nearly as one, they turn to the field of battle and fall to their knees, in what could be taken as a gesture of respect for their fallen enemy. In the background, you can hear Ambassador Omura shouting at them to keep firing, even though only a few of the samurai army, including Katsumoto and Algren, who are alive. The traditional Japanese view is that it is a glorious thing to die in battle (Ikegami, 2003), but in this case, the Japanese had not given their opponent a true fighting chance. This scene represents one of two places in the movie where the samurai and the Japanese mainstream cultures were able to reconcile their difference.

The second occasion is the final scene of the movie, when Algren arrives to influence the emperor’s decision regarding the trade agreement with the United States. The emperor sends the American ambassador away with his treaty unsigned before turning on Ambassador Omura, who does not realize what is in store for him. The ambassador argues with the emperor, which certainly was not a traditional Japanese cultural trait for dealing with the emperor. Omura accuses the Meiji emperor of bringing shame to his family when he is threatened with having his family’s assets seized and given to the people as a gift. In response, the emperor offers Omura the sword that had once been worn by Katsumoto. The shame for Omura was apparently not able to be born, as he declines the emperor’s offer. Again, the Japanese mainstream culture, now tainted by exposure to Western cultures has had to reconcile their traditions with what they have become. It saved Japan from further internal strife, although it did not necessarily solve or improve the problems the Japanese would have when dealing with Westerners.

**The PCDs That Might Have Been**

While the film is a virtual treasure trove of examples of perceived cultural differences during intercultural communication, until Algren’s capture by Katsumoto, it is also filled with examples of situations which should have caused PCD issues because of the differences that failed to do so, perhaps because the film was created by and for a largely American audience. The firing range scene, replete with American back slapping and other forms of social touching
that would be considered rude in Japanese culture, is one such example. Algren also creates havoc during the training session by ordering one of the rank-and-file soldiers to shoot him or be shot in an attempt to prove to Algren’s superiors that the conscripted army is not yet ready for real combat. During the scene, Algren touches this soldier twice socially: first to praise, and then to soothe and apologize for the disturbance he created. Algren does this without knowledge or consideration of the Japanese cultural love of order and harmony, which can be said to often clash with the more aggressive tendencies of the American cultural norm. He is also ignorant of the East Asian taboo against casual physical contact. The Japanese are “far less physically expressive in greetings and farewells, touch their companions far less,” (Ishii et. al, 1991) than Americans. Both the emotional outburst and the social touching are taken in stride, even though the scene would have likely caused embarrassment for witnesses in both the American and the Japanese culture. In a real world intercultural exchange between an American and Japanese stranger, the Japanese party would likely have gone away insulted, and it would have damaged, if not destroyed future relationship-building between the two.

**Sealing the Breach: Crossing the Cultural Divide**

Despite the tremendous potential for conflict in this movie, Algren and Katsumoto are able to find a common ground and allow for an open flow of communication between them. In the final battle scene, Algren is able to help his friend perform *seppuku* once it is apparent that the *samurai* have lost their battle. From that point, Algren recovers from his wounds and arrive to speak to the Meiji emperor in time to stop him from signing the trade agreement that would allow the United States almost complete economic control of Japan. His pleas to the emperor are approached from a *samurai* perspective, and Algren offers his life if the emperor believes that Algren has wrong him. It is sufficient enough for the emperor to realize that perhaps a more Western approach to things is not in the interests of Japan.
References


