# National stereotypes or cosmopolitanism? The 23rd World Scout Jamboree as a site for intercultural learning

The World Organization of Scout Movements (WOSM) is unique in its dedication to youth, education and global citizenship. In its current mission statement, WOSM declares that the aim of scouting is to ”contribute to the education of young people, through a value system based on the Scout Promise and Law, to help build a better world where people are self-fulfilled as individuals and play a constructive role in society" (WOSM n.d.). Ongoing projects such as Messengers of Peace and the Scout of the World Award encourage youth to become involved in community service, acting locally to addresses global issues such as Peace, Development and Climate Change. Focusing on the international dimension of scouting, the current paper asks to what extent a scout camp may function as a site for intercultural learning.

The paper relies on a conceptual framework that combines theories of intercultural learning/communication and international education. Central to this is the idea of cosmopolitanism, defined by Rizvi (2006, 21) as ”a mode of learning about, and ethically engaging with, new cultural formations”. Rizvi’s idea of ”engaging” with other cultures takes us beyond the concern with understanding (national) culturel differences that has characterised much research in intercultural communication, suggesting that one creates in education a space where learners can exchange cultural perspectives and experiences regardless of national origins or present location (Marginson & Sawir 2011). Arguably, an international scout camp such as the jamboree has the potential to become such a site of intercultural learning. However, because scouting is organised nationally, the intercultural encounters realised at a world jamboree will frequently involve a display of national culture. This can take the form of objects, performances or texts, and, arguably, such exhibitions may strengthen perceptions of cultural difference rather than stimulate participants’ sense of global citizenship. To explore this theme, theories of nationalism, stereotypes and ’Othering’ will be used (e.g. Billig 1995, Said 1977), suggesting a critical reading of the world jamboree as a venue that ’exoticises’ culture rather than facilitates cultural exchange.

The research was carried out at the 23rd World Scout Jamboree, where the author participated as a unit leader for a Danish troop. During the jamboree observations were made of the display of ’culture’ at unit camps, in the exhibitions tents organised by national scout organisations and world organisations such as WOSM, and during jamboree ’festivals’ such as The Interreligious Ceremony and The Cultural Exchange Day. Observations were jotted down in log book kep throughout the jamboree. Field notes have been supplemented by photos as well as jamboree artefacts such as national contingent badges, scarves, T-shirts and gifts. The data was analysed thematically, grouping objects and events into the thematic categories of national, global and hybrid culture.

*National culture*A world jamboree may be characterised as a festival of national cultures. This reflects the national organisation of scouting, which is manifest in symbols such as the national flags displayed on the scouts’ uniforms. Specific jamboree events celebrate this idea of national diversity, e.g. at the Opening Ceremony where the national flags of all contingents are welcomed. In addition to symbols such as flags, culture is celebrated in ways that, depending on one’s theoretical lens, may be labelled ”banal nationalism” or ”orientalism”. One example is the Cultural Exchange Day where scouts prepare national dishes such as Indonesian curry, don national costumes such as the Scottish kilt or perform a Sudanese song.

*Global culture*The jamboree is the key event for the world scout movement, inviting youth to partake in a camp that is truly international. No national contigent may send more than ten per cent of all scouts which means that units experience life in a global village, surrounded by scouts from other parts of the world. The idea of global scouting is represented by common symbols such as the WOSM badge or the colour purple. In addition, the idea of scouting as a global movement is marked at ceremonies, e.g. the Jamboree Opening when all scouts renew the scout promise. Interestingly enough, the hoisting of the world flag rather than the welcoming of the contigent flags marks the formal opening of the jamboree, which suggests that global culture of scouting is meant to take precedence here.

*Hybrid culture:*  
Hybrid culture builds on intercultural dialogue and learning, which are both core values in the global citizenship idea promoted by the world scout movement. One example of hybridity is the fusion of cultures on artefacts such as national contingent badges or T-shirts. If we look at the badges designed by the national scout organisations for the 2015 jamboree two forms of hybridity recur: One form is to acknowledge the jamboree hosts by creating a badge that combines symbols from the scouts’ home country with Japanese such as the flag, the red sun or origami cranes (e.g. UK, The Netherlands). A second type highlights the global dimension of scouting by mixing of national symbols with global images in the form of the WOSM badge or the official jamboree logo (e.g. Uganda, Malaysia).

Undoubtedly, the global village that scouts inhabit during the jamboree will increase their awareness of and possible willingness to engage with other cultures. The scouts will learn what it means to be members of one global movement with common symbols, rituals and practices. This offers a potential platform for cosmopolitanism of the kind imagined by Rizvi. At the same time the scout movement will need to accept the risk attached to its celebration of national culture, which may fuel processes of ’banal nationalism’ and ’Othering’ rather than facilitate intercultural dialogue and learning.

**References**

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