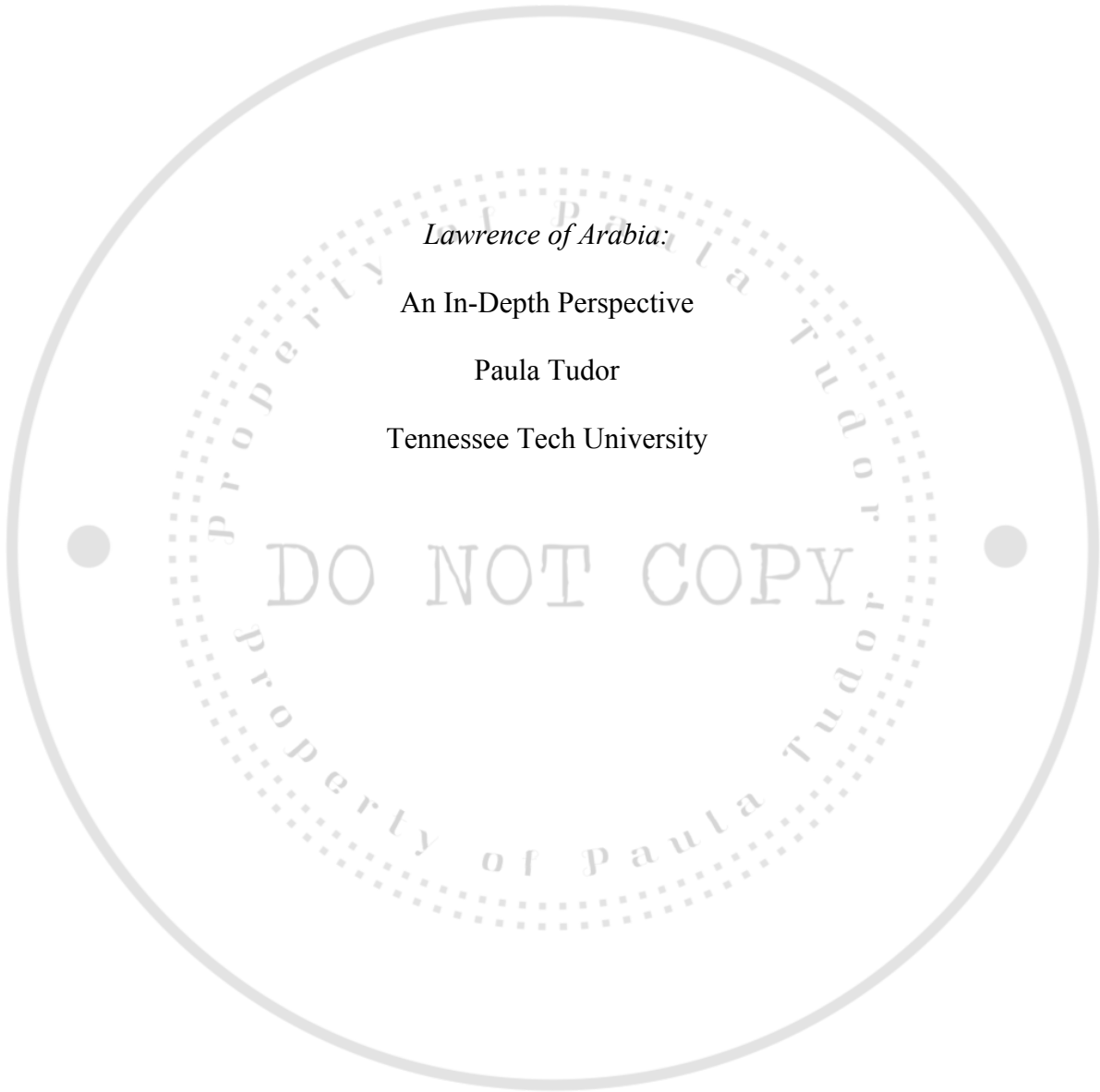


Running head: LAWRENCE OF ARABIA



The film *Lawrence of Arabia*, depicts British army officer T.E. Lawrence's leadership in the Arabian revolt against the Turkish Empire. Stationed in Cairo during World War I, Lieutenant Lawrence is asked to travel to Arabia and make contact with Prince Feisal in an effort to look after British interests in Arabia. The movie makes it clear early on that Lawrence is well educated, particularly in the Arabian culture. He is able to effectively communicate with the guide he meets in Yenbo and later with Prince Feisal, relying on little more than common courtesy and his knowledge of Arabian tribes and the Koran. At first it seems as though this education will be enough to communicate with everyone from this culture, however he soon finds out that "there is no single person that completely fits everything one can learn about a culture." (Hall, 2005, p.21) While with his guide in Yenbo, he meets Sharif Ali, one of Prince Feisal's men from the Harith tribe. Ali shoots the guide because he is from a rival tribe and drinks from his well, a clear violation of tribal law. Lawrence's horrified reaction to this event is telling of his own culture and immediately puts him at odds with Ali. The two men separate and Lawrence continues on his journey to find Prince Feisal (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

Lawrence's meeting with the prince does not go as intended, as he ignores instructions to remain quiet while his superior discusses the Arab revolt with the prince. Lawrence impresses him with his knowledge of the Koran and plans for a successful revolt. These plans are in opposition to the British military and include taking Feisal's men across the Nefud Desert to Aqaba to seize control. The series of events that follow shows Lawrence becoming increasingly immersed into the Arabian culture, which only seems to improve his communication within that culture. After all "culture is something that [people] learn; [they] are not born with it." (Hall, 2005, p. 12) Although it is evident that Lawrence already possesses a vast amount of knowledge

on this culture, the movie makes it clear that “no research can completely cover every possible exception or possible nuance of meaning that exists within a culture.” (Hall, 2005, p.20) It is only out of necessity and being exposed to this particular culture over a period of time that Lawrence really begins to gain meaningful insights into the people that make up this culture. They, in turn, gain insights into him as well (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

Lawrence, along with Feisal’s army and two orphaned teenage servants, make their way across the Nefud Desert toward Aqaba. Just before reaching a place where they can rest and drink water, it is discovered that one of the men, Gasim, has fallen off of his camel in the middle of the night. Without hesitation, Lawrence decides to turn back and find him, which is met with much resistance from Ali, who believes that Gasim was fated to die on this journey. The disagreement between these two men in this situation is indicative of their native cultures. Their “communication, or the meanings generated in any given interaction, is always to a certain degree influenced by the situation.” (Hall, 2005, p. 19) This particular situation, however, proves to be the turning point in their communication problems, as Lawrence turns back to find Gasim, and both men reach a sort of unspoken understanding and acceptance about each other. This acceptance is made even clearer, when Lawrence returns with Gasim and Ali presents him with the robes of a Sharif from the Harith tribe, an obvious symbol of acceptance (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

Immediately after receiving these robes, Lawrence meets Auda Abu Tayi, of the Howeitat tribe, another rival of the Harith tribe. It is in the exchange with this tribal leader over the Harith drinking from his wells that Lawrence speaks in a style that is consistent with the way that Ali spoke to him when they first met. This is a subtle indication of Lawrence’s assimilation

into his newfound culture. It is only after Auda agrees to put aside tribal differences to join them in seizing Aqaba that the true ramifications of this assimilation begin to be revealed. The first of these ramifications begins after Gasim kills a member of the Howeitat tribe and Lawrence is forced to kill Gasim to prevent fighting from escalating among the two tribes. The film depicts this action as having nothing to do with Lawrence's native culture and having everything to do with his new culture through the contrast of Lawrence's reaction to killing Gasim and the tribes. To the tribes this was a necessary means to an end, the only way the Arab revolt could continue. And while Lawrence knew that killing Gasim was necessary for the revolt, he still took a life, something of which he was not accustomed (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

By the time the army successfully seizes Aqaba, the film suggests that Lawrence has taken many more lives and is becoming increasingly comfortable with the ways of his new culture. Lawrence's actions when he returns to Cairo to inform his superiors that Aqaba has been seized are evidence of this fact. He returns to Cairo with one of the orphans, after the other was killed in quicksand, and ignores all attempts by his fellow officers to throw the boy out. He also continues to wear the Harith robes after he is told to change back into his military uniform. The conversations he has with his superiors about the plans for a post-revolt Arabia also suggest that he is, at this point, caught between two cultures, and that he is now perhaps engaging in more successful communication within his new culture. And because "culture is always open to change," (Hall, 2005, p.8) it stands to reason that this successful communication within his new culture is the direct result of having been surrounded by it for an extended period of time (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

By the time Lawrence rejoins his army with plans to destroy the Turkish railways, he is beloved and respected as a leader by both tribes, he is wanted by Turkish officials, and his British superiors are questioning his loyalty. As he and Ali travel to Deraa, per his general's orders, the film suggests that Lawrence may have, in fact, forgotten that he is not a true native of the Arabian culture. This proves to be quite possible when Ali is forced to remind him that he cannot blend in undetected there. Lawrence is only brought back to reality when he is captured and tortured by Turkish officials. Upon being released, he decides to go to Jerusalem and reunite with the British military, and abandon the revolt altogether. He returns wearing his military uniform, in complete contrast to the robes he wore the last time he returned. Taking into account this wardrobe change alone one could almost assume that he was only ever loyal to the British military, but upon further examination it is apparent that he is still very much loyal to the Arabian culture and their revolt. The film makes it clear that any of his protests to the contrary are but futile attempts to return to his native culture completely unchanged. His apparent inability to fit in with his native culture at this point, is not altogether unlike what happens when "immigrants try to freeze their culture in an effort not to lose it in a new land, [a] practice that invariably leads to surprise and often disappointment when they get a chance to return to their homeland years later." (Hall, 2005, p. 8) In spite of this internal conflict, or perhaps because of it, Lawrence decides to rejoin the revolt especially after learning of an agreement between France and England to divide up the Turkish Empire at the end of the war. He is ordered to lead the Arabian revolt to Damascus, which he plans to give to the Arabian people once it is seized. To ensure a sizable army, Lawrence offers to pay people to fight. Many accepted this payment, but others did not, presumably because they perceived it as dishonorable. Even though these

men were arguably from the same culture, this difference in perception proves that “no one person is a perfect representation of a whole culture.” (Hall, 2005, p. 21) This point becomes even more evident as they journey toward Damascus (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

On the way to Damascus, Lawrence and his men come across a village of people who have been slaughtered by Turkish soldiers. Upon spying these soldiers, one of Lawrence’s men who happened to be from that village, encourages retaliation. Ali, fearing they will not make it to Damascus if they retaliate, discourages Lawrence from seeking revenge, but when given orders to retaliate he is forced to comply. Ali makes several attempts in vain to stop the battle, and makes his disapproval known once the battle is over. Ali’s strong opposition to this battle, even after having killed someone for drinking out of his well, proves that “cultures have discernible patterns, but they also have an open texture to them that allows for dynamic and situational adjustments based on human needs and communication.” (Hall, 2005, p. 57) This ‘open texture’ explains why Lawrence is still having communication problems within this culture even after almost completely immersing himself in it. This proves that while surrounding yourself in another culture helps facilitate successful communication, it does not guarantee it (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

For Lawrence, any difficulties in communication proved to be of little consequence, as he was able to lead the Arabian revolt to Damascus before the British army and secure it for the Arabian people. He briefly organizes an Arab National Council of sorts, but it is only a matter of time before old tribal conflicts begin to appear, and the council falls apart after failed attempts to gain access to water and electricity in the city. After the dissolution of the council, Prince Feisal, along with several British officials discuss the settlement of the war, as Lawrence is promoted

and sent home. As he is being driven out of the desert in his military uniform he pauses to glance at people on camels, and as the driver mentions the fact that he is going home, Lawrence's expression suggests that he is no longer sure where home is (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

This film leaves the impression that in order for Lawrence to be completely successful in his communication with people in the Arabian culture, he had to become a part of that culture, almost to the point of being unable to communicate with his native culture. People, however, "belong to many different cultural communities, [and] these shared memberships are not static in nature." (Hall, 2005, p. 8) Perhaps this is the reason the film leaves the impression that Lawrence is no longer sure where home is. He assimilated himself into the Arabian culture to the point of practically belonging to it, yet he still has to maintain a sense of belonging to his native culture (Hall, 2005)(Spiegel & Lean, 1962).

## References

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