

Essay

# Ethical assessment of the culture clash as a universal occurrence

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**Abstract:** The debate on culture clash necessitates a theoretical framework, and three perspectives that merit attention are homogenization, polarization, and hybridization theories. These intersecting paths lead to the hypothesis that all civilizations could assimilate into the Western model as it is currently conceived. Culture clash is approached from multiple angles due to the widely held belief that rejecting culturally novel concepts is unethical. However, imposing new rules and customs will inevitably encounter innate resistance, as evidenced by numerous examples. The exchange of behavioral models does exist, with one of globalization's main tenets being the universality of values – including the uprooting of what we refer to as primitive manners. Nevertheless, anthropology and cultural research have witnessed intergenerational and long-term survival of elements that contemporary civilization believed it had overcome or at least suppressed deep within the subconscious mind. This article will offer an essayistic approach to certain forms of culture clash.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Culture Clash, Colonialism, Unethical, Globalization**How to cite this paper:**

Gentian, V. (2024). Ethical assessment of the culture clash as a universal occurrence. *Journal of Art and Design*, 4(1), 1–5. Retrieved from <https://www.scipublications.com/journal/index.php/jad/article/view/862>

**Received:** December 20, 2023**Revised:** January 19, 2024**Accepted:** January 22, 2024**Published:** January 23, 2024

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## 1. Introduction

Normal part of colonialism (here including cultural colonialism) was the modulation of native people behaviors, a mission granted to *educated* persons [1]. Injecting culture and why not, religious beliefs, to primitive beings was the mission of the *Kulturträger* (bearer of culture) as incarnated from Odysseus, while cunningly offering wine to his unhappy host: Polyphemus [2].

The long-term presence of dominant, affluent, and governing outsiders will inevitably exert a profound influence on society as a whole, including its social stratification and even the living environment. There exist numerous approaches to instigate, incite or attempt cultural transformations, or at least to modulate deeply ingrained behaviors that have persisted for centuries. Therefore, we aim to contribute our perspective on three ways in which an enduring impact can be made on the lives of indigenous populations.

- Concrete buildings and infrastructural interventions [3].
- Gestures, verbal and non-verbal schemata, here including music and literature, so far unfamiliar to another people, meant to become part of the everyday life.
- More sophisticated and long-term interventions such as curricula changes or academic pressure provided there would be fertile soil for reflection.

## 2. Concrete concreteness: can bridges divide people?

The Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić in his *“The Bridge on the Drina”* meditates a lot over the unusual setting of a remote Bosnian town, at that time part of the Ottoman

Empire. Locals perceived the building of a new bridge as a hostile construction, when the opposite would have made more sense.

The words of a villager that tried to blow up the fundamentals, while in custody and tortured from Turkish soldiers before being impaled, condensate the general feeling of the public toward the bridge itself (*textbox, left in original language; right in a translated version*) [4, 5].

Šejtan, jakako, onaj koji je i vas  
nagovorio da dođete  
ovde i da zidate ćupriju.

Seljak je govorio tiho, ali tvrdo i  
određeno.

The devil. Certainly, the same devil  
who made you come here and build  
the bridge.

The peasant spoke softly, but clearly  
and decisively.

With an interesting approach, James Reith peruses the issue of a bridge being unethical [6]. The author, along with many sources, acknowledge the immense importance of the architectural work of Robert Moses as a master builder of New York City [7, 8]. However, Reith suggests that he purposely made bridges over the parkway too low for buses, thus making very difficult for black Americans (who largely relied on public transport) to access the beach [6].

The somber historical significance of the bridge over Drina, as eloquently portrayed by Andrić in his novel, continues to haunt the Balkan region even decades after the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The construction of the new Pelješac Bridge, an architecturally magnificent and vast structure located within Croatian territory, has effectively severed Bosnia's already limited access to the Adriatic Sea. This development has sparked a diplomatic dispute in a region rife with misunderstandings and hostilities [9].

### 3. Culture clash: xenophobic, therefore unethical?

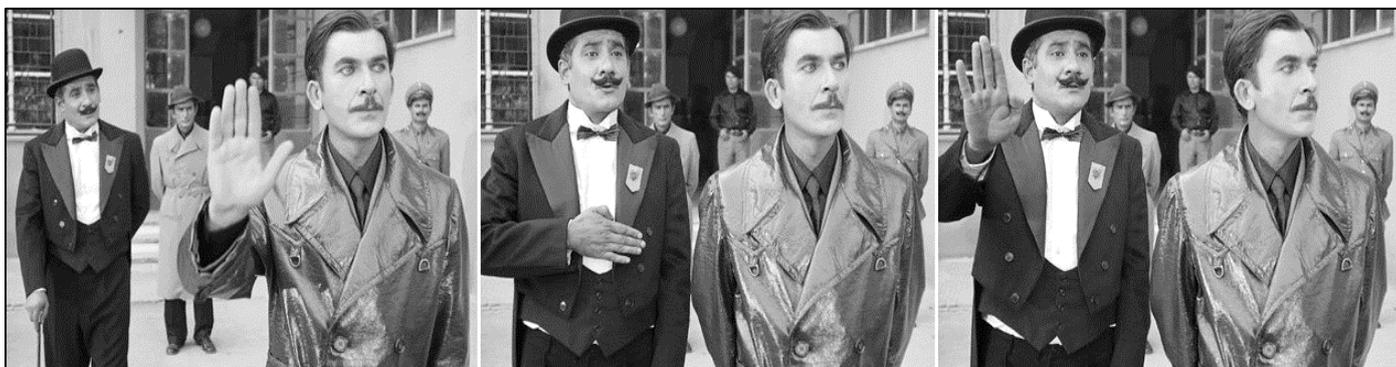
Italians and westerners re-discovered Albania after 1990, when the iron curtain broke down all over Eastern Europe. Prior to that time, Albanian cinematography had produced important movies, some of which misinterpreted as anti-Italian [10].

While considering the country as of a second-hand society (culturally speaking), Italian and other westerners, in the shoes of disguised colonizers, get stocked into a reluctant reality. Taken for granted the Ottoman heritage, after half a millennium of occupation, only but a few of newcomers were able to inject novelties in the models of behavior and thinking.

For clear propagandistic purposes, the communist regime (1944-1991) highlighted the resistance of native people toward previous foreigner arrivals, particularly those of the period preceding WWII and war itself, during the fascist occupation. While doing so, the ethical stand was overplayed.

Careful viewers might catch the culture clash in particular scenes of popular movies, produced in abundance during the second half of last century, commissioned and financed lavishly from the regime. Ways of behavior were simplified, into unwillingness or refusal of adopting others' form of behaving, gestures and salutes. This was inasmuch true for the Roman salute, for example, a gesture dating back at the beginning of fascism or even before, which apparently Italians were trying to impose to Albanians, widely unaware of the secret meaning of the gesture. More than of a symbolic value, the occurrence separates two forms of greeting: the one with the right hand over the

precordial (heart) region, the other up above the head. Details in the composed *Figure 1* here below will display the happening.



**Figure 1. (composed).** **Left inset**, an Italian music merchant decrying the local Albanian workers for refusing the Roman salute. **Middle and right inset**, the Albanian prefect of the city trying to convince people that there was no big difference between the Albanian customary salute (hand over the heart) with the Roman salute [Images from the movie *The General Gramophone* (1978), courtesy of Albanian State Central Film Archive, Tirana] (11).

The culture clash might become politically a speculation, as it really happened with the moviemakers of the above-mentioned episode. However, such a culture clash was true, and standing. The changes between the Roman salute, a predilection for the fascists' militants of the twentieth century, and the hand-over-the-heart salute (obviously not strictly Albanian) has deep historical roots, and obviously not negligible (*Figure 1*).

The Homeric origin of the hand-over-heart salute can be debatable, but are worth mentioning. Odysseus in his famous saga, beats his breast trying to control emotions while facing the insolence of his wife' pretenders, convinced that he would not be back home never again [12]. In another episode of his epic, while encountering the Cyclopes, so proud for not bending their knees to Zeus and other recent Gods, he witnesses what the giants meant: "we are older" [13]. Older, therefore bigger and stronger: this is the intrinsic advantage of deeply enrooted customs inside natives' cultures, of whatever region or origin.



**Figure 2. (composed).** **Left inset**, an Italian music teacher training the children chorus of an orphanage, under the supervision of a callous guardian [back stage], to learn and sing "*Il piccolo Balilla*" [see text for explanations]. **Right inset**, the cook disrupts twice the rehearsal in the canteen while singing simultaneously, apparently unmindful, an Albanian folk hit dedicated to

a local anti-Ottoman hero. [Images from the movie *Red poppies on the wall* (1976), courtesy of Albanian State Central Film Archive, Tirana] (14).

The culture clash has been staged resolutely also in other Albanian artworks. The young Italian female music teacher, which hardly understands where she is living and what she's dealing with, is filmed during a rehearsal inside an orphanage in Tirana, during the WWII fascist occupation (Figure 2). Trying to teach Albanian youngsters an Italian hit dedicated to a national Italian hero (also entitled as "*Fischia il sasso*") legendary for his resistance against then-Austrian occupation, the rehearsal is disrupted twice from the background noise [15]. The cook of the canteen, maybe purposefully, sings another hit – this time dedicated to a local hero who resisted fiercely against Ottoman invaders in the XIX century [16]. Albeit seemingly a backstage episode, the confrontation between different folk songs and their symbolic cultural value is remarkable. Ethically disputable remains only the rehearsal disruption, as acted in the fictional plot; detailed descriptions of the film are available [17].

#### 4. Discussion

Of course, culture clash needs consideration from a certain hermeneutic perspective, and the definition of culture itself is multifaceted. *Five hundred definitions of culture* might or do exist; apart from numbering those definitions, we should accept that defining such a concept is not an easy work [18]. Furthermore, cultural *diversity* is and cannot be a synonym of culture clash, inasmuch the diversity might pave the way for a *universal ethics* [19].

Conserving one's customs and behaviors while resisting in front of new, maybe imported concepts, needs also an ethical discussion. "*The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural...*" assumed Samuel Huntington some thirty years ago [20]. He was clearly right.

There are ways, however, to inject external cultural substance into another terrain, since cultures develop while dialoguing with each other, and this will even permit the communication of ethics between cultures [21]. The risk of *ethics dumping* has been formulated, when local agents are not involved or somehow, not a part of the process [22]. Here again, the two-folded risk of accepting something new at face value, or rejecting it straightforward, concisely formulates the dilemma.

The likelihood of a clash of cultures being eliminated from global ethics is a primary concern for enthusiastic advocates [23]. The potential cause for such clashes could be attributed to undue Western influence, aligning with the polarization thesis that assumes local identities are shaped along distinct civilizational lines [24]. Homogenization, polarization, and hybridization theories represent pivotal intersections leading fragmentarily to the hypothesis that all civilizations could eventually assimilate into the Western model [25]. Although remote, this possibility still requires empirical evidence over time.

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