
***Encounters with Civilization:
From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa***

(A collection of essays on Albania, Egypt, the United Kingdom and India written
between 1993 and 2006 selected by Gaston Roberge)

By Gëzim Alpion

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Strangers with human faces?

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The last paragraph of the foreword by Gaston Roberge perhaps foregrounds and becomes the running theme of the book under review. Gëzim Alpion is a foreigner 'encountering' diverse life styles,

ideologies and processes. He is positioned in Britain but typifies the deep-seated pathos of the foreigner, experienced universally down the ages. He remains the perpetual onlooker, desirous of inclusion, but is subject to 'social closure'. However, the work does not end on a pessimistic note, rather it foregrounds the essentiality of definitive faith in the human person, and it is this that ultimately underlines continuity of civilizations.

Encounters with Civilizations: From Alexander the Great to Mother Teresa spans centuries and cultures, but despite the apparent impossibility of encapsulating within a slim volume the extreme diversity of cultures chronologically quite distinct from each other, there is a running theme that provides the link. It is a work on Albanians as the 'other' in different locales encountering different cultures, and Gëzim is the distant Albanian onlooker recounting the varieties of 'social closure' encountered /negotiated or even pulverized by his compatriots in different time periods.

The locales visited are Albania, Egypt, Britain, and India and the styles of narration adopted are equally varied. They range from the dialogue style of drama, imaginary conversations with a ghost, to the mournful cry narrated by a native on seeing his land being vilified in the name of progress. The reader has a vast repertoire of narrative styles to engage with.

Two important behavioural traits appear throughout the book and the author has taken considerable pains to weave the manifestations of these traits in each of the locales presented in the book. These are 'foreigner complex' and 'social closure'.

The saga of Mohammed Ali is not very well known. Generally referred to as 'the founder of modern Egypt', Ali was an Albanian and had been registered with the Sultan of Turkey's army. He was deputed to Egypt, then under the Turkish Sultanate, to restore the authority of the Porte to a chaotic Egypt. The country had been reeling under waves of alien rule since centuries: the Ptolemaic Pharaohs who originated from Greece; the subsequent Roman suzerainty; the Mamluk overlordship; the Ottomans; the French; and finally British rule. So there were ample historical records to almost institutionalize Egypt's 'foreigner complex'. It was Mohammed Ali who set in motion the reverse process, initiating the military, economic and cultural rebirth of the country. The Albanian veneration for cultural antiquity was used to re-impose the concept of worth for one's own culture and national pride.

Foreigner complex is actually a double-edged behavioural trait. It may develop both within the foreign ruler towards the subject 'other', or among the subjects towards the alien ruler. Ruth Phillips Martinez believes that an average human being's inner reaction to 'foreigners' is the same as that of canines, both bare their teeth at each other. This is a primitive instinct borne of distrust and animosity. Foreigners in different lands to a large extent carry their 'national' gods with them. To what extent blind adherence of the same is resorted to by the foreign ruler or to what extent such influences are sought to be curbed, depends on the motivation of the ruler. On the other hand, the perception of inferiority, in lifestyles and speech may inbreed rebelliousness among the subject people, which eventually can have different outlets, revivals of ancient cultural traits being one form. The north-eastern tribal communities of India effected a backlash against

monolithic Christianizing processes and near total denigration of their past. There has been a tremendous surge towards rewriting their history through indigenous lenses today; this is coupled with even state sponsored 'revivals' of ritualistic cultural practices.

The Kosovars of Albania, on the other hand, are unfortunate indeed in not having experienced the largesse of a ruler such as Mohammed Ali. They remain under foreign occupation denuded totally of any hopes for total autonomy or even of peace. The treatment meted to Albania by the European occupation is in keeping with, as Gëzim explains in a different section altogether, the imagery of the 'backward' and 'strangest' state in Europe, in the British media.

Racial prejudice towards the Balkans is not new but goes back to the period of Octavius Caesar, who crowned himself King of Egypt in 32 BC; since then the West has relentlessly pursued the looting and plundering of 'inferior' cultures and civilizations. In order to retain its political and subsequent economic dominance over the eastern parts of Europe, the continuous maligning of the 'infidel' became a routine exercise. Gëzim notes with some emotion, the maligning that enters fiction, particularly children's fiction. J. K. Rowling, the creator of the famous Harry Potter series, in at least three of her novels posits Albania as the hapless area, housing the evil 'darklord' Voldemort; Agatha Christie, and Herge, the creator of the Tintin series, have equally typified the Balkans as harbouring evil, mystery, ignorance, set apart from the civilized sophistication achieved by the West. There have also been instances where the Balkans have appeared in writings of authors who have never visited the area, setting the trend for what is referred to by K. E. Fleming as 'fictional Balkan worlds'.

A content analysis of British newspapers published between 2001 and 2006 shows a spate of articles showing Albania's skewed presence, all of them at a time when 'Albania had experienced political stability, law and order... (was) maintained across the country, and many Albanians (had) seen an increase in their savings and a significant improvement in their living standards' (p. 109). The implication here is that there is a deliberateness manifested in, and through the media to retain the imagery of Eastern Europe's confused chaotic state vis-a-vis the progress and sophistication of Western Europe.

Social closure is the other significant issue dealt with, in the book. Even though British Home Office statistics reveal that asylum seekers constitute 2-3 per cent of the population, recent polls have shown a vastly inflated figure: such people constitute 23 per cent of the country's population. It can be argued, according to the author, that the tabloid press is largely responsible for the reported and unreported racial tensions in recent years. The almost paranoid reaction to such reporting can well be imagined, since the tabloid readers often read hardly 'anything else'. A report in *The Guardian* perhaps best sums up the extent of 'social closure' in vogue in Britain against immigrant skilled/unskilled labour: 'More than half of university staff is employed on short-term contracts. Those requiring work permits have no right to stay in the country once the contract expires...It is hard to imagine a more effective way of keeping your workforce passive and afraid' (*The Guardian*, 23/7/2003).

Gëzim does not disclose personal experiences of immigrant university professors; perhaps it is an extremely delicate issue. However, his slim

volume contains a scene from a remarkable play that he authored. *If Only the Dead Could Listen* has been staged in the UK to packed audiences. This perhaps brings out most significantly the piteous state of the outsider, when confronting another similarly positioned on foreign soil.

The Indian component in the book has portions on Mother Teresa, the Albanian in Indian soil. Most of it refers to passages from his earlier work *Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?* with some additional information provided by the editor.

The book has important messages for those wishing to seek their futures on foreign soil, though Indians' wishing to relocate in their pursuit of the elusive 'better futures' do not officially categorize as asylum seekers, yet, they become equally subject to behavioural traits such as foreigner complex and social closure in the areas supposed to furbish such futures.

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