

# **A Brief Outline of Cross-Cultural Exchanges from Antiquity to Modern Times**

by

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This research paper deals with some of the ‘forgotten’ aspects of cross-cultural activities or exchanges in ancient times beginning with Alexander the Great, the Indo-Greek Empire, the Roman Empire, the British Empire, the impact of the Oriental Renaissance in European history and how each has enhanced our understanding of other civilizations.

Before embarking on our journey of today’s presentation of Universalization of Education, let us briefly analyze the meaning of the word Education and its connotation. The word education according to the definition in Wikipedia.com is derived from the Latin, which we will develop later on, ‘educare’ meaning ‘to raise’, ‘to bring up’, ‘to train’, ‘to rear’ via ‘educatio-nis’, ‘bringing up’, ‘raising’. Education must not be static and secluded. It must expand, blossom and get in touch with other cultures or civilizations if it wants to be productive.

From an historical perspective, ‘Education’ or reaching out towards new fields of thought initiated, from a Western perspective, from the time when Alexander the Great began his long triumphant march across Asia to way beyond the Indus River in India. This undertaking, more than 2,300 years ago, may have been the beginning, the basis of modern educational or ‘expansionistic endeavor’ that the Western world had ever ventured into. In other words, Alexander may have unknowingly introduced a systematic, **and** perhaps, warlike, enterprise widening our horizons far beyond the spheres of the Western or of the Greek world of the time.

Must we credit Alexander, his generals, his army and his followers for having given us the opportunity to get in touch with other domains of intellectual property? Have we inherited this kind of education since 323 BC? Or is our understanding of human nature or cultures engraved in our collective unconscious? Is this sort of human enterprise of reaching far out into unknown mysterious horizons related to our modern research and quest into space?

The cosmos, for example, and our endless search through the infinity of this universe either through telescopes or through man-made satellites searching farther and farther as time passes by into space is perhaps a proof of man's voracious appetite to discover for himself new frontiers either in the physical or metaphysical realm. Let us not forget that the universe is expanding and so is our forward march through this phenomenal world.

Thanks to Alexander's expedition a first link of utmost importance was thus created joining both Eastern and Western cultures. The eminent historian W. W. Tarn (1972) says on this subject that "He greatly enlarged the bounds of knowledge and of human endeavour, and gave to Greek science and Greek civilization a scope and an opportunity such as they had never yet possessed," (p. 145). Knowledge or education had reached new spheres of authority. A unifying force, a clash, a melting down of both Eastern and Western thought or philosophies eventually lead to a synthesis, in the Hegelian sense of the term, of a particular art form known today as the start of the Ghandaran Greco-Buddhist art and the formation of the Indo-Greek kingdom of Menander 1, which we shall discuss later on, and who, as is well known among oriental historians, subsequently converted to Buddhism.

It is said that while conquering Asia, Aristotle, philosophers and men of learning followed Alexander wherever he laid foot. Daniels and Hyslop (2003) state that "In the process they spread Hellenistic thought throughout the Mediterranean and Western Asia," (p. 95). Isn't this approach, even if it seems a bit challenging to our modern view, a first encounter with maybe a far more, and I'm not saying superior, but perhaps older and wiser culture or cultures than the one he knew of?

The Greeks, during their conquest of Asia, had come face to face with two great unknown religions of the time: Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion in which the prophet was Zoroaster, and Buddhism, which reigned in Central Asia. This contact had to a great extent indisputably transformed the Greek religious and philosophical perspective. Greek religion and mythology as well as Zoroastrianism believed in a pantheon of superior and lesser gods, such as Zeus or Jupiter, for example, being at the zenith of the pyramidal structure.

Buddhism, contrary to warlike Alexander's philosophy, preached non-violence and detachment from this phenomenal world or questions on the meaning of life and an understanding of man's cravings or desires imbedded in his psyche since the creation of time.

Unfortunately, due to many reasons which we will not go into, Alexander didn't have the strength nor moral support to go beyond the Indus and discover for himself another grand religion, that of Brahmanism or Hinduism of today. Let us stop for a while and witness for ourselves the changes brought about by this astonishingly rich and vibrant religion.

En passant and briefly speaking, Hinduism, in the modern sense of the term, came out on the surface of the globe not long ago, maybe 40 years or so thanks to the late George Harrison's spiritual venture into meditation which subsequently brought about hundreds of young travelers on the road to India during the 'hippie' revolution of the sixties.

Zoroastrianism believed in two forces of nature-good and evil-fighting each other for supremacy. The end result would always be the victory of good over evil. Buddhism preached the futility of existence. The world is non-existent but Nirvana could be reached within one's lifetime. One Buddhist sage once told Alexander that he had better conquer his inner self rather than conquer the world.

This last thought might have perplexed Alexander's outlook on life and the surrounding world he was living in, for he was the conqueror of Asia. Unfortunately, he missed his chance and for some unknown reason he finally succumbed at the age of 33 leaving behind one of the greatest 'civilized' empires on earth. Is this extract of ancient history 'Education' in the sense of learning from other cultures and becoming oneself more in tune with other spheres of knowledge?

Alexander's kingdom didn't end with his death. On the contrary, 150 years later, his empire, although divided among his Greek generals was still the predominant reign in Central Asia and much further as is known today. Daniels and Hyslop (2003) say that "After his death his generals divided the realm into three portions, which became the Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Empires," (p. 73). Strabo, a Greek historian born circa 63 said "Those who came after Alexander went to the Ganges and Pataliputra," (p. 12). An Indo-Greek king by the name of Menander 1, and who ruled a vast territory in Bactria, which extended from modern day Afghanistan to the Punjab in northwest India and maybe as far as Mathura in northern India, had converted to Buddhism.

If we are to speak of cross-cultural influences, then, Menander 1 was most likely the first Indo-Greek ruler to have represented on his coins the goddess Athena as savior of the people. According to the *Milinda Panha* (100BCE), a well-known classical Buddhist text relating the philosophical discussion between Menander and the Buddhist sage Nagasena (150 BCE), indicates that Menander 1 adopted the Buddhist faith. And here is a quotation from the text "May the venerable Nagasena accept me as a supporter of the faith, as a true convert from today onwards as long as life shall last." (Rhys Davids, 1890, p. 11).

Let us remind our audience that at the time of his conversion there were more or less 30,000 Greek monks who were directly influenced by and even converted to Buddhism. The gigantic statue of Buddha in Bamayan, Afghanistan, dating back into the 6<sup>th</sup> century

and which I have personally seen in 1974 was a place of pilgrimage and worship with a hundred man-made caves where Buddhist monks dwelt in meditation. Unfortunately, because of a heinous and treacherous act we know of today, a parcel of Indo-European history has been lost forever.

Lastly, Menander may also have contributed to the expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia.” On this matter McEvelley (2002) comments that” ...the spread of Gandhari Buddhism may have been stimulated by Menander’s patronage, as may have the development and spread of Gandaran sculpture, which seems to have accompanied it,”(p. 378). Scholars also believe that had it not been for these same Indo-Greek rulers, Mahayana Buddhism or the Great Vehicle which began around the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC on the north-western Indian subcontinent, as opposed to Hinayana, the Small Vehicle, would not have seen its outer expansion into Central Asia.

On a personal basis, simply as a parallel study of what the Greeks had been going through with my practical experience of the Orient, I would like to point out, if I may do so, that way back in 1974-75 I had undertaken, as a young traveler and seeker of ‘Knowledge’ an overland journey across Asia: First, from Istanbul to India and Nepal; second, from Myanmar or Burma to Bali in Indonesia to the Far East.

Till the age of 24 or 25 I had no knowledge of what it was to travel and experience the ‘Orient’. I had a rather Judeo-Christian Western outlook of the world! But after 6 months of enduring travels I came into contact with other great civilization of our times: Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. My mind, if I may recall, had swept through numerous ordeals: physical and mental which lead to a greater understanding of humanity. This, to my personal conviction and belief, is an ‘expansionistic’ theory of education or knowledge. Reaching out to other civilization either in the past or in the future, as of today in knowing our infinite boundless universe through satellites and updated telescopes has lead humanity to a better understanding of itself, hence handing down and passing over to a younger generation all of our knowledge and education.

With the decline of the Greek civilization and with the migratory wave from Greece to the southern parts of Italy and finally to Rome, Rome began to assimilate Greek thought molding it to its own field of influence. Everything that was Greek was synonymous of intelligence be it in the arts or philosophical pursuit. The Greek gods had migrated and established themselves in a new territory. And this new terrain came to be known as the Roman Empire.

At this point, let us remind our readers that while ancient Egyptian civilization had animals personifying gods, Greek and Roman civilization had humans depicting various natural, supernatural and emotional forces of our universe. Yes, education, and knowledge had achieved a great leap forward. Gods became humans and humans became gods. Man had a possibility of reaching into heavenly worlds.

Is the term Universalization of Education related with ‘expansionism’ as we have just seen? Haven’t the ancient Romans gone too far outside their realms of influence in search

of new lands and conquest though perhaps not as far and wide as the Greeks had ruled, but maybe of longer duration?

Let us not forget that the Roman Empire, the so-called 'Pax Romana,' had lasted for 500 years. And up to our present era no other culture or civilization has ever surpassed the greatness of Rome. Rome had links throughout the known European world of the time. Rome had built innumerable roads throughout its vast empire from England in the north, to Morocco in the south and as far as Egypt to Syria in Africa. Daniels and Hyslop (2003) say that "At its largest, in the second century A.D., the Roman world stretched from England to the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea...Fifty thousand miles of hard-surfaced roads tied the empire together,"(p. 82 ).

Its entire empire and infrastructure enveloped all of the then known Western civilization thus once more expanding both in territorial or physical boundaries as well as intellectual properties. In other words, whatever knowledge or information was brought back to Rome, this ultimately was added to its culture and education. Rome knew of the Druids in Gaul as well as the priests of Egypt. Yet Rome was reluctant to acknowledge other cultures. Rome was foremost and refused, to a certain extent, any foreign thought other than its own civilization.

It is a known fact today, among modern oriental scholars, that Rome had commercial ties with India and as far as China. Pliny the Elder (23-79AD) writing about silkworm states that: "The Seres (Chinese) are famous for the wool that is found in their forests;... So manifold is the labour, and so distant are the regions which are thus ransacked to supply a dress through which our ladies may in public display their charms." (Pliny, 6.20, p. 1). Rome had gold; India had all the spices that the Romans sought, consequently, contributing to an improvement of commerce as well as knowledge.

One of the greatest gifts, or legacy, handed down to human kind by the Romans was its Latin or Roman alphabet. No other writing system in the world today has ever had such a tremendous impact in time and space. The alphabet, having taken its roots from Phoenician, Greek and Etruscan sources, grew far and wide with the Roman Empire.

While the Western part of the Roman Empire spoke Latin, its eastern counterpart spoke Greek as a lingua franca. With the spread of Christianity in northern Europe, the Latin alphabet had annihilated off the globe Celtic and other Germanic tongues. Up till today, the Latin alphabet is used worldwide reaching millions and billions from Europe, America, Australia, Asia, and Africa to the Pacific islands. Vietnam, under French imperialism adopted Latin, and in 1970 the People's Republic of China transliterated Mandarin Chinese into Latin, called Pinyin for educational and tourist purposes.

To sum up this chapter I would like to add a quotation from Mortimer Chambers in his book 'The Classical Period.' Chambers says that "The fall of the Empire was really nothing but its transformation into the states of medieval and this modern Europe, and our languages, laws and customs descend from the Empire in a surprisingly straightforward tradition. We need history to learn where we have been and where we

came from, and we came from the Roman Empire,” (In Feder, 1968, p. 46). Finally, Edward Gibbon, a British historian, acknowledged that the Roman Empire was a “... period in the history of the world during which condition of the human race was most prosperous,” (In Daniels & Hyslop, 2003, p. 84).

If we are to take into consideration the nature or effect of expansionism or to 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘imperialism, in a positive way, which we will discuss in this chapter, then one must absolutely regard Britain or the British Empire as one of the greatest achievements in our contemporary world.

Let us here at this point, pause for a moment, and give our readers a brief account of the positive stance of British India from a purely scholarly and intellectual perception, known to oriental scholars as the ‘Oriental Renaissance’, which occurred throughout Asia, or to former British colonies during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. But again, due to its colossal amount of work, we will limit ourselves to India and British India.

Since its first settlement in Calcutta, Bengal, India, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the East India Company, Britain first began its colonization trading in the state of Bengal: “The British first established a territorial foothold in the Indian subcontinent when Company-funded soldiers commanded by Robert Clive defeated the Bengali Nawab Siraj Ud Daulah at the battle of Plassey in 1757. Bengal became a British protectorate directly under the rule of the East India Company,” (British India, p. 1).

Because of the length of this particular topic we will be discussing, at this point, what is of particular concern, that is: its cultural know-how, decipherment and translation work during the course of its colonization.

As we have observed previously with the Indo-Greeks in northern India, adapting and blending with the existent culture and religions of the time, Britain, on the contrary, to a certain extent, apart from the butchery for its dominion, which we will not go into, had enormously come to help in translating works from ancient Sanskrit and Persian back into English, thus giving European scholars and intellectuals a broader vision of ancient Asian civilizations.

Since the beginning of time, these religious works were left behind unwritten and passed over to successive generation through oral transmission. And only with the passage of time were they written down somewhere around 1,600 to 1,200 B.C.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, British erudite scholars, to name but a few, such as Sir William Jones, Brian Haughton Hodgson, Henry Thomas Colebrooke and Sir Charles Wilkins soon began their monumental task of implementing their roots with the study of Sanskrit and other Indo-Aryan languages in order to decipher and bring back to life, ancient cultures and civilizations which were buried and long-forgotten into our long distant past. Thanks to their incessant research on manuscripts pertaining to early Buddhism, Brahmanism, Indo-Aryan and Indo-European studies, a link of immense importance was thus found. But the real discoverer of Indian or Indo-European studies was a French oriental scholar by the name of Anquetil-Duperron.

Briefly speaking, Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), member of the prestigious Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, left France for India on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1755, with one goal in mind: to decipher the literary works of Zoroastrianism, the Avesta and India's Upanishads. At the time, from the unknown past up to Anquetil-Duperron, a number of oriental scholars had tried to unveil the mystery of the oriental religions and languages, such as Egypt, Assyria, Persia, China and India. Unfortunately, none were fruitful until Anquetil-Duperron's discovery of the Avesta. The history of Indo-European civilization, before his research and translation work, had been lost in the distant past. The Bible never mentioned India nor has it ever depicted the dissemination of ancient tribes in the East. Knowledge accumulated throughout the centuries was restricted to Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and Islamic civilizations.

After Anquetil-Duperron's death, Eugene Burnouf, leading Sanskrit professor at the College de France, in Paris, had found, while looking over Duperron's translation of the Avesta with his own translation of the Vedas, a striking resemblance between the Old Persian and the Sanskrit language, thus revealing the existence, far into the past, of a common language, later called: Indo-European. Prior to this discovery, the whole lot of European studies was centered on the Bible but there weren't any links between the Hebrew language and Latin. This ultimately led to new fields of thought rising on the surface, such as comparative philology, comparative religion and comparative mythology, in which all ancient Persian and Indian Vedic gods were related to Greco-Roman gods. Anquetil-Duperron is considered today as the founder of Indian studies in the West and his contribution to mankind is that he linked both East and West.

During our research in linguistics and historical studies concerning the extension and influence of the long overseas' reign of the British Empire, the British, for a number of reasons, had used , incorporated and amalgamated a colossal amount of foreign words throughout its vast empire into its own English language, be it of African, European, Asian, Chinese or Australasian origin. Britain had adopted such an incalculable amount of foreign words that modern linguists themselves have yet to ascertain what the actual quantity of foreign words is in number. Also, due to its ever expanding flexibility in accommodating foreign words, don't you think that English, as well as being of prime importance throughout the world might, one day, lose its own originality, I might ask, changing or metamorphosing maybe into other languages which only the future might reveal.

En passant, before ending this session, I would like to enunciate a matter of concern that I've come across with the definition of English being Latin or Germanic language. Has English become a Romance or Latin language throughout the course of time? English has always been considered as an Anglo-Saxon or a Germanic language. Now why do we consider it so when scholars and linguists themselves will admit that 76% of English words are Latin? Others will argue that 83% are both Latin and Greek. I quote here a passage from a British linguist, Viney (2003), who says that '... about eighty-five per cent of the Old English vocabulary has been replaced in Modern English with words from Latin or Greek.' (p. 11).

So, in other words, can we really state, as British linguist scholars have been saying over the years, since the discovery of Indo-European languages, that English is a Germanic language? Is it really the case when they themselves admit to the fact that English has more Latin and French words than English itself or that both Latin and Greek would add up as said previously to 85% of all words? That is up to the public to decide.

And, last but not least, if we are to discuss the nature of education or cross-cultural exchanges as a means of scattering or embracing this or that particular knowledge, in that case we have to deal with the feature of language. In other terms, if we are to gain a scientific or literary knowledge, then as we have seen throughout this historical perspective, a predominant language comes into focus. Whether Greek, Roman or Persian followed by French in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or again English in our contemporary world, the world or less influential nations through complex and intricate economic rules and laws, sooner or later will have to submit to this new challenge and abide by these same laws that govern us all and gain knowledge of the language in use if that particular nation has any desire to evolve or gain status in the hierarchy of ‘most knowledgeable’ nations and compete for supremacy not in warlike figures, if I may insist and if I may be misunderstood, but in the sharing of valuable facts and information in our ever expanding universe.

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