

It's the people that clash ...

....and not the cultures, says Nihal Adler, who teaches English at Nelson Mandela State International School in Berlin.

by Nihal Adler

Coming from Egypt to Germany years ago she has had her own set of striking encounters with cultural barriers. Understanding through communication is the solution she offers to create a diverse but united culture.

who in turn pass them on to their children and so on. It almost resembles a genetic coding of sorts.

The term "culture clash", or "culture conflict" was coined by anthropologists almost a 100 years before the publication of Samuel P. Huntington's famous article „The Clash of Civilizations“ in 1993. He was the one who made the term presentable to a more wider public.

What is "culture clash"?

On a more general level, culture clash is a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that can even occur within the same culture. Examine, for example, the subculture clashes in a society between the young and the old, the rich and the poor, youth of the same generation, men and women, or groups with dissimilar political or sexual preferences.

On a more specific level, culture clash, implies the meeting of two or more cultures and their difficulties in reconciling their differing characteristics within the framework in which they are obliged to coexist. What happened to the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh is an extreme example of how cultures can clash. Van Gogh was brutally murdered by a 26-year-old Dutch Moroccan named Mohammed Bouyeri in 2004 because Van Gogh had accused Muslims of bestiality in shocking terms and had directed a provocative film about women in Islam. Fortunately, most cultural clashes are not as severe not as severe. Unfortunately though, they can have a negative impact on the people involved in the conflicts if not dealt with carefully. Many words and phrases we use, acknowledge cultural clashes, like culture shock, interculturalism, multiculturalism, cultural differences, tolerance, diversity, sub-cultures, dominant culture, exclusion, inclusion, ostracism, misunderstandings, conflicts, discrimination, racism, different life experiences and perceptions, personal space, taboos, fringe culture etc.



Her husband comes from Germany, her parents from Egypt. For Nihal Adler, daily life is culture clash.
Foto: Daniela Aue

For me personally, culture clash, is when your husband wants to listen to Mozart, you want to listen to Arabic pop music and your kids want to listen to Eminem!

With Egyptian Muslim parents, a Christian German husband, an American sister-in-law, and friends and students that come from India, Jamaica, New Zealand, the USA, Kuwait, Singapore, Ghana, China, Brazil, France etc., such clashes that are pre-destined. Couple this with the cultural conflict depicted in the film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding", between a Greek woman, her family, her white American male friend and his parents. Exchange the word "Greek" for the word "Egyptian", and you will most certainly understand my dilemma.

Culture is when a group of people share the same customs, traditions, values, symbols, norms, rituals, styles of communication, dress, gestures, language and religion. These are then passed on to the children of that group,

AUDIO



bereaved | Hinterbliebene(r)

chaperone | Aufsichts-/Begleitperson

doleful moaning | klagendes Weinen, Jammern

fringe culture | Randkultur

marquee | Festzelt

molested | sexuell belästigt werden

ostracism | Ausgrenzung, Verbannung

partialities | Vorlieben

pious | streng religiös

profusely | viel

prying eyes | durchdringender, vorwitziger Blick

reconcile | versöhnen

strewn | be-/verstreut

trinkets | kleine Schmuckstücke

Personal culture and “other” culture

My first impressions of life in Berlin and Germany were in the winter of 1983 and of snow. It was a very cold winter and Christmas was at the doorstep. For many Germans, it was going to be a “really white” Christmas. One of the most vivid memories of my life at that time, was my first long walk in a forest in Berlin with my friend, and future husband.

There was a pathway that one could clearly follow because it had been cleared from the snow and strewn with salt to keep it from freezing over again. My friend though, who is naturally more “adventurous” than myself, insisted that we leave the pathway. For a woman raised in Egypt and brought up to follow clear rules, leaving the pathway felt unsafe. Further, the sensation of my feet sinking into deep snow, the depth of which I could not really estimate, made me feel uneasy. My friend was having a grand time; snow was his best friend. I on the other hand was not enjoying this new rather “foreign” experience at all.

When one is aware of the lush forests, nature parks and beautiful lakes, and the many cafes and restaurants all over Berlin, one is not at all surprised that walking and bicycling through this beautiful bustling city are almost like national sports.

These activities are rarely practised in Cairo. Aside from the fact that Egyptians practically live in the desert and have very high pollution levels in the cities, women walking alone, or bicycling on the streets of Cairo might be perceived as being provocative and might even be molested for being so daring.

So it was after some resistance on my part that I finally agreed to go on my first, and what proved to be my very last, bicycle tour of Berlin. The first question I posed to my fiancée was, “When are we going to have a nice cup of coffee?” anticipating that my fiancée was taking me to a restaurant.

When a fiancée asks a woman out in Egypt, the woman usually expects to be invited to a restaurant with her chaperone (brother or sister), or to go for a refreshing walk down the Nile. That is allowed in our moral index code and is perceived as being “romantic”. The prospect of a four-hour bicycle ride up and down the Havel, sweating profusely, and being out of breath most of the time, where my words were turning into angry grunts was, sadly, none of these things for me.

Flowers in Germany symbolise love, friendship and caring. They are used as gifts for many different occasions, e.g. birthdays, weddings, paying an ill friend a visit, cheering someone up etc. You can get a bunch of flowers in all sizes and colours skilfully and artistically bound. In Egypt, however, flowers are primarily used for funerals and weddings. We only have a limited range on sale, and these are

often bound in an uninspiring fashion. It is quite unusual to take flowers on a visit to a friend, and you should try and avoid it if you can as this might be interpreted negatively as a bad omen. Chocolate, fruits and gold trinkets on the other hand are regarded as acceptable gifts.

The manner of greeting someone can also often prove quite controversial amongst people of different cultures. The first time my future husband visited me in Cairo, he was introduced to my female cousin. Not thinking twice, he embraced her and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek as was common for him in his culture. The look of pure embarrassment on my cousin’s face and tell-tale red cheeks betrayed her feeling. In the Egyptian society, it is not customary for men to shake hands with women let alone kiss them on the cheek. That is strictly taboo. A certain distance between men and women who are not related is expected at all times.



Symbol of Islam:
Between 1830 and 1848 the Alabaster or Mohammed Ali Mosque was built in Cairo. The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was the model.

Foto: Ingrid Ruthe

Having grown up in a Muslim society, any form of intimacy towards the opposite sex in public is strictly dealt with. I remember my father always letting go of my hand when we were in public. I was only 10 years old then. A few years ago in Alexandria, my husband and I went out for an evening walk along the beach close to our house. We were rudely stopped however by a prudish coastal guard on suspicion of immoral behaviour! It seems that the beach was a popular meeting point for young lovers and the like. We eventually managed to convince the guard that we were married, but I can’t begin to imagine the problems we may have had to face, had he not taken our word for it.

Ironically enough, kissing and hugging amongst men is acceptable in public in Egypt, and nobody would give it a second thought. In Germany, however this is not the case. German men prefer shaking hands, or hugging, as kissing another man may be interpreted as being to effeminate. Imagine my friend’s discomfiture on having to hug and kiss all the bearded, elderly sweaty men in my family!

My first time in hospital after having lost my first baby, was spent waiting patiently for my friends to come and condole and console me. After a couple of days of waiting, and many a tearful discussion with my husband, I realized that no one was going to come after all. Of course I had received lots of flowers and letters of condolences from my friends, but still, for me that wasn't the same as being there in person.

In Germany by not encroaching on one's privacy one is indeed "being considerate". Death and grief are taboo themes that one tries to avoid; both have to be borne by the bereaved quietly, with dignity, and seemingly alone.

colleague had to learn tolerance the hard way: through experience.

Conclusion

Some may argue that cultures cannot clash. That is true, to some extent. It is not the culture that clashes but the people that belong to that culture that clash. It is also, however, true to say that where there is culture, there have always been clashes.

Can we ever prevent people of different cultures from clashing with one another? Assimilation of cultures has been suggested as an answer. The word reminds me of "Captain Picard" and "the Borg" in "Star Trek"! The "Borg's" main task in space was to assimilate all existing cultures as successfully and as rapidly as possible in order to make use of their knowledge and technology. No! Assimilation of cultures into a homogeneous culture is not what we should be looking for at a time of globalization. Assimilation has quite a few threatening connotations that to my mind can only bring strife.

The answer to clashing cultures lies in truly understanding "the other's" perception. Just imagine two people looking at an apple from different angles. One sees a rotten apple and the "other" a perfect apple. What these people don't realize is that they are both looking at the same apple from two different angles and that both of their perceptions are true.

Undeniably, it is only understanding "the other" through experience based on honest communication that strives to comprehend and to "see" the other's perceptions that will help us avoid clashes and support us in the creation of a culture of respect and trust based on the knowledge that the other's culture can enrich my own: hence unity through diversity. ■



They came from all over the planet to unite in Berlin. Kids at Nelson Mandela School have their roots in 46 countries.
Foto: Daniela Aue

In Egypt, on the other hand, death and grief are public affairs to be shared with friends, neighbours and other people. What is more, displaying one's emotions publicly in the form of doleful moaning or wailing is an acceptable form of grief. For this occasion, a huge marquee in colourful Islamic motifs, where black coffee is served profusely, is set up with hundreds of chairs for the mourning men. The women mourners however, come together in the intimacy of the home of the bereaved, far from the prying eyes of strangers.

Culture clash on the job

On a professional level collisions at the school where I teach and people from over 40 different countries encounter each other daily are frequent occurrences. One of the funniest of these was an incident that occurred between one of our international teachers who happens to come from Jamaica and two of our students. My colleague, who also happened to be a very pious Christian, caught two of our German students kissing quietly and tenderly in a corner. In a German school, with a seventh grade class, this intimate show of emotion is not regarded as offensive at all. The German colleagues would probably look knowingly with a big grin on their faces. For my colleague, unfortunately, who had probably experienced it differently in his culture, it was scandalous. If it had been up to him, both of the students would have been expelled on the spot. Of course they were not, and my

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SUMMARY

Wer in Ägypten Händchen haltend am Strand erwischt wird, riskiert eine Anzeige, auch wenn es sich bei den Ertappten um ein Ehepaar handelt. Und wer gar Blumen zum Geburtstag verschenkt, könnte leicht anecken. Denn diese werden im Land der Pharaonen eher zu Hochzeiten oder Beerdigungen überreicht. Was *culture clash* heißt, hat Nihal Adler in zahlreichen Momenten hautnah zu spüren bekommen – ob im Zusammenleben mit ihrem deutschen Ehemann oder in ihrem Job als Lehrerin an der internationalen Nelson Mandela Schule in Berlin. Kultur – das ist das Teilen von Sprache, Gewohnheiten oder Traditionen. Zum *clash* kommt es, wenn diese innerhalb eines sozialen Rahmens aufeinander prallen. Die Lösung: Verständnis durch Kommunikation. Denn nur damit kann die Vielfalt der Kulturen innerhalb einer Gesellschaft eine Einheit ergeben. ■