

# Africanisation of the European – vulnerability and de-colonisation

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## Abstract

*Drawing on my art practice-based research, I present two works on the subject of portraiture that have one thing in common: the “Africanisation” of the European sitter. I describe two experiments, one artistically and the other scientifically motivated, which were created within 28 years in the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire, as well as the first official portrait of a European monarch made by an African artist (Mohamud 2019). My project, StillePost (1999), corresponds with an experiment conducted by the German anthropologist Hans Himmelheber (1908–2003). Instead of adopting the historical perspective, with white Europeans depicting African subjects, this gaze is reversed in both works. Here, the Europeans are either the representational subject of African artists (Himmelheber), or both subject and object of representation (Boeck) contributing to the endeavour of reverse anthropology. The dominant direction of the gaze is similarly challenged in an earlier work, the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II commissioned by the colonial government from the Nigerian artist Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917–1994) to commemorate the monarch’s visit in 1956 to Nigeria, which was then preparing for independence in 1960. This event coincides with the beginning of decolonisation theories, as Bea Gassmann de Sousa (2018) notes. Although created with different intentions and under other conditions, both works question the traditional positions of artists/researchers/interpreters concerning intercultural confrontation, inspiring decolonising endeavours. By highlighting the commonalities between these works in my subsequent discussion, I show differently evidenced and viable possibilities from the artist’s perspective. I argue that our interpretation always depends on the time and perspective from which we view work.*

## Keywords

*Portraiture, Africanisation, StillePost (1999), Hans Himmelheber (1908–2003), Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917–1994), intercultural confrontation, vulnerability, de-colonisation, Western gaze, reverse anthropology*

## Angelika Boeck: *StillePost*

In 1999, I initiated a contributive art practice-based research project titled *StillePost*, a project which contributes to the tradition of reverse anthropology<sup>1</sup>. I use the term “contributive” to indicate that the contribution of project participants is crucial to this work. Collaborative projects are conceived and realised by several artists or by artists and non-artists. In contrast, participatory projects react to a specific context or situation, are often socially engaged, and usually involve non-artists. In *StillePost*<sup>2</sup> I was solely responsible for initiating and developing the artistic concept and bringing together the material resulting from interaction with project participants into an artwork. The same applies to all the other projects I have used my *StillePost*-based method, *Portrait as dialogue*, which I summarise under the same name. It would go beyond the scope of this contribution to go into detail about these projects. I have described some of them as part of my thesis, *Decolonising the Western gaze: The portrait as a multi-sensory cultural practice* (2019a). However, it is essential to note that, contrary to my later *Portrait as dialogue* projects, which are concerned with cultural techniques and resulting forms of aesthetic representation that are not limited to people’s perception through the sense of sight, my first cross-cultural experiment focuses on vision. As previously mentioned (Boeck 2013; 2019a), the starting point and research hypothesis of *StillePost* was that our facial features determine the way we perceive and represent others, as Oscar Wilde asserts in his work *The portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890):

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion.

Since I based my concept on an ongoing copying process, I approached African colleagues from a living woodcarving tradition. On the one hand, I was fascinated by the fundamentally different understanding of “copy” in the contexts of European and African art: copy as forgery and copy to preserve meaning.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, I had chosen the bust format, one of the basic European

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1 The tradition of reverse or inverse anthropology concerns ‘the reversal of perspective that makes the observer and ethnographer the object of observation of the ethnographed’ (Behrend quoted in Profalla, 2021). According to Heike Behrend, an anthropologist working in this tradition, it ‘is already found in Herder, it is also found to a limited extent in Franz Boas; and it is taken up in different ways by Julius Lips and Hans Himmelheber up to Michael Harbsmeier and Fritz Kramer’, as well as ‘in France in Montesquieu, Michel Leiris and Jean Rouch’ (ibid.).

2 *StillePost* (Chinese whispers in English) is a game in which one person whispers a word or message to another, and this is passed on through a number of people until the last player announces a result, which is usually amusingly different from what the first player had said.

3 To a Western audience, “copy” was often a synonym for “forgery”, since the modern perception of an artwork as a genuine product created by an inspired individual (a concept outdated by conceptual art) developed in European art from the Enlightenment onwards. In traditional African art, however, “copying” should not be understood as a form of “forgery”,

forms of sculptural representation, which hardly occurs in traditional African art.

In Boundiali, I commissioned the sculptor Dramane Kolo-Zié Coulibaly to make a portrait bust of me. Following the principle of “Chinese whispers”, a game often used as a metaphor for cumulative errors, I asked four other sculptors – one after the other and in different places – to copy the life-size wooden bust, carved in the Senoufo tradition.

Dramane’s bust served as a model for the second sculpture by Amadou Coulibaly, also a Senoufo artist from Mandine. His copy, in turn, served as a model for the third and fourth sculptures made by Dosso N’Gouamué in Biankouma and Gboungué Louna Pascal in Kabakouma, both committed to the Yoruba tradition. Much earlier than I had expected, the series was completed – with the final bust created in Abidjan by Bidjie Goure, a Gouro artist.

The artwork *StillePost* juxtaposes my portrait photographs of the sculptors and their busts of me. In this way, both the metamorphosis of my portrait and the reflection of the African sculptors in them can be traced. In my opinion, the installation confirms Wilde’s claim since the artists, presumably unconsciously, incorporated their facial features into their copies.

Anthropologist and philosopher Thiemo Breyer recently wrote, in his essay *Multimodale Repräsentation und Identität* (Multimodal representation and identity) (2020), that *StillePost* demonstrates impressively how notions of exact reproduction vary. The mimetic standard for the portrait established in the European tradition is only one of many culturally and historically determined ways of understanding art. Before I come to the second experiment, (see the section on Hans Himmelheber’s Mask portraits below), here are a few words on the different functions and ways of understanding individual representation in European and African art.

In pre-modern times, mimesis, based on the similarity of facial features, determined European conventions of portraiture. This tradition goes back to individual Roman representations of the deceased. In these representations, likeness, recognition of persons, and association with known lineages were of enormous importance (Walker and Bierbrier 1997), as is apparent in emperors’ visually legitimising their authority through fictionalised resemblance to their predeces-

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as Ben-Amos argues (1980). It was customary in a sub-Saharan context that sculptors were asked to replace an old sculpture, the new artefact taking charge of the old object’s ritual significance. Among the Dan of Côte d’Ivoire, however, the cultural anthropologist Vandenhoute noticed in 1938/39 that existing masks that inspire new ones may only be observed by the sculptor during their performance. He found no evidence of models of masks being used (Vangheluwe 2001), as is the case in the production of tradition-inspired African artefacts for the international tourist market. The reuse of existing artistic elements (for example, in the form of a copy of existing works) to create a new work, which Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) defines as a recent movement in contemporary art, thus is nothing new when viewed in a traditional African context.



Figure 1: A Boeck, *StillePost* (1999). Busts (from right to left) by Dramane Kolo-Zié Coulibaly (Senoufo), Amadou Coulibaly (Senoufo), Dosso N'Gouamué (Yoruba), Gboungué Louna Pascal (Yoruba) and Bidije Goure (Guoro). Photo: Wilfried Petzi.



Figure 2: *StillePost* (1999). Photo portraits (from left to right) of Dramane Kolo-Zié Coulibaly, Amadou Coulibaly, Dosso N'Gouamué, Gboungué Louna Pascal and Bidije Goure. Photo: Wilfried Petzi.

sors. Tiberius (r. 14–37 AD), for example, took the portrait of Augustus (r. 27 BC–14 AD) as the model for his public portrait, and Caligula (r. 37–41 AD) had the facial features of his portrait adapted to those of Tiberius to underpin his position as successor (Trentinella 2003). The significance of resemblance can be seen particularly well in the context of the funeral service of King Edward II of England in 1327, when an effigy, a doll-like double made of wood and/or wax, dressed in the clothes of the deceased, was used for the first time. The life-sized puppet, representing the three bodies of the king – natural, political, and sacred (Marek 2009) – lay on the coffin during the funeral and was then placed next to or on the grave. The effigy symbolically represented royal power until the new king was crowned (Giesey 1960). Similarly, criminals sentenced to death in absentia could be officially executed symbolically ‘in effigia’ (London Encyclopaedia 1829).

Since its invention, the photographic technique, the daguerreotype (sometimes called the mirror with memory), set visual art free from representational responsibility. The portrait was no longer about the representation of mere physical likeness. Contemporary artists have expanded the genre in distinctive ways: a portrait may consist of documentation of a woman’s clothes, a listing of names and dates relating to private, political, social, and cultural events that have influenced the sitter, or a series of psychological assessments.<sup>4</sup>

Such portraits have something in common with representative African artworks. In African art, the literal naturalism of many Euro-American portraits is only one option among many, and other options are used much more frequently (Wendl 2004). Using traditional Benin art as an example, Sweet Ufumwen Ebeigbe (2013) argues that African artists value the representation of an idealised beauty more than the representation of physiognomic resemblance. Moreover, in line with cultural ideas, social rather than personal identity is often emphasised. The generalised subject is individually defined through other identifying elements such as the use of emblems, insignia, and symbols, or names, costumes, poses, hairstyles, or cultural traits, and emphasis on the environment. Another way is to evoke social exchanges between individually identified ancestors (masquerades) and their living companions (the titled elders) (Borgatti 1990). A generalised anthropomorphic sculpture on a family altar may evoke the sitter’s profession, social position, achievements, prestige, and success (Ebeigbe 2013). According to Ebeigbe, the goal of depicting and remembering people is as crucial an impetus for the emergence of portraiture in Africa as it has been worldwide.

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4 For example, Cuban artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1956–1996) symbolically depicted his late partner Ross Laycock with a 175-pound (Ross’s ideal body weight) pile of candy in his work *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991). German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann inventoried all the dresses of a woman in his work *Alle Kleider einer Frau* (1974). French artist Sophie Calle asked her mother to hire a detective to secretly report on her daily activities in order, as she remarked, to ‘provide photographic evidence of my existence’ (Calle 2003).

## Hans Himmelheber: Mask portraits – a self-experiment

In the early 1970s, Hans Himmelheber (1908–2003), an expert on African art, tried to prove, through an experiment, that portraiture is a part of African art. His view contradicted the opinion of the majority of African art experts at the time, as can be seen by claims such as those made by Douglas Fraser in his work *Die Kunst der Naturvölker (The art of primitive peoples)* (1962):

However, some researchers continue to insist that sculptors of primitive tribes could create naturalistic portraits if they only wanted to. One could just as well insist that elephants can fly and that the only reason they don't is because they don't want to (Fraser, as quoted in Himmelheber 1972: 305).

For his self-experiment, Himmelheber commissioned four artists from various carving traditions (Senoufo, Baule and Dan) in the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire; each was to carve a mask of Himmelheber, a sculptural format he chose for two reasons: The stylised form of the mask made the portrait less likely to be apparent, while on the other hand, the artists were able to concentrate on the most critical bearer of likeness (seen from a European perspective), the face (Himmelheber 1972; 2004). The result was four very different masks in which the African viewers, in contrast to the European viewers, had no difficulty recognising the anthropologist.

Himmelheber described his experiment in his essay, *Das Porträt in der Negerkunst – Bericht über eine Versuchsreihe* (The Portrait in Negro Art – Report on a Series of Experiments) (Himmelheber 1972). I only got to know about it after *StillePost* was made, and it was first publicly displayed at the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde (since 2014 Museum Fünf Kontinente) in Munich



Figure 3: Hans Himmelheber next to the four masks depicting him, made by (from left to right) Dje Abou Coulibaly (Senoufo), Ase Kouakou (Baule-Atutu), Tano Ndri (Baule Sa), and Jean Don Gba (Dan). Photo: Eberhard Fischer.

in 2004 in combination with *StillePost*, after being initially shown in a joint exhibition at Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth (2004).

## **Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu: Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II**

In 1956, the Onitsha-Igbo Nigerian artist Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917–1994), often called Ben Enwonwu, was commissioned to create the official portrait of Queen Elizabeth II<sup>5</sup>. It included a bust and a seated full-body sculpture (referencing both European and African forms of portraiture), for which she sat at Buckingham Palace and the Maida Vale Studio of Sir William Reid-Dick. At this point in his career, Enwonwu had attained international repute while Nigeria was still a colony of the British Empire.<sup>6</sup> Awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) for his contribution to the arts, he was, as the colonial government’s Art Supervisor, the ‘nation’s official artist and ambassador’ (Nzegwu 1998: 48). The commission signified ‘a shift in power relations between the British Empire and its Nigerian colony’ (Ogbechie 2008: 132). The idea for the commission came from Enwonwu, who saw it as ‘a means of attaining historical recognition as a modern artist’ (Ogbechie 2008: 132) and as a ‘rite of liberation’ (Nzegwu 1998: 53). The artist suggested the idea to Alan Lennox-Boyd, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, as a way ‘to commemorate her [Majesty’s] visit to Nigeria in January and February 1956’ (Ogbechie 2008: 132). Enwonwu’s clay model was cast in bronze by Giulio Galicie from a plaster cast made by Mark Mancini (Nzegwu 1998). A copy was made in painted epoxy, and a bronze bust was cast for the Queen’s private collection (Ogbechie 2008). The artworks were shown at the annual Royal Society of British Artists’ exhibition and the Tate Gallery in 1957 before being shipped to the House of Representatives in Lagos. As part of the 1960 Nigerian independence preparations, they installed the seated full-figure in the

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5 An image of the sculpture can be viewed on the website of The Ben Enwonwu Foundation (BEF) in the section ‘Works in Public’. <https://benenwonwufoundation.org/ben-enwonwu-works-in-public/>

6 Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994) began his studies at Umuahia, Port Harcourt and Government College, Ibadan under Kenneth C Murray (1903–1972), continuing at the Slade School of Art and obtaining a Master of Arts degree in Social Anthropology at University College, London. Among other important honours (the Enwonwu crater on the planet Mercury is named after him), he was elected Fellow of the Royal Anthropology Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (FRAI) and appointed cultural advisor to the Federal Government of Nigeria (Ben Enwonwu Foundation 2020). As well as working as an international artist he was a visiting Professor in African Studies at Howard University, Washington DC and Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, Nigeria.



Figure 4: 1974 – Ben Enwonwu at work on his figure of the Queen, in Sir William Reid Dick’s studio. The statue is one-hand-a-half times life size. © Keystone Pictures USA/ZUMAPRESS.com/Alamy Live News

courtyard and the bust in the House. The statue now stands at the entrance to the Parliament Buildings in Lagos.

Enwonwu received high praise and fierce attacks for his portrait of the monarch. This was because the artist described the Queen as a ‘shy yet charming woman’ and infused her features ‘with the serene expression of his work *Head of Yoruba Girl* (1950)’ (Ogbechie 2008: 133).

The media accused him of ‘imposing African features on the queen and thus producing a sculpture that undermined the dignity of British royalty’ (Ogbechie 2008: 138).<sup>7</sup> The Queen was unimpressed by this criticism and commissioned the artist to create a portrait of Prince Charles. Subsequently, the Royal Society of British Artists awarded Enwonwu the Bennet Prize. The following year the Royal Institute of Art, Commerce and Agriculture presented him with a Commonwealth certificate for his contribution to the arts. He became a senior member of the Royal Society of British Artists.

However, art historian and philosopher Nkiru Nzegwu argues in her work *The Africanised Queen: Metonymic site of transformation* (1998) that Enwonwu was pursuing anti-colonial objectives of cultural freedom through visual representation. She wrote:

In modelling the features of the young Queen, Enwonwu had taken liberties with the royal lips. Widening them, he gave them a fuller, sensuous, more becoming pout. In so doing, he boldly inscribed an African aesthetic ideal of womanhood on the Queen’s visage, the fountainhead of British imperial rule ... what many then, and now, have failed to grasp in responding to this portrait of the Queen is the subversive metaphysical message which Enwonwu expressed ... this was merely a physical protest against aesthetic imperialism (Nzegwu 1998: 52).

## Serving and subverting the Western gaze

Apart from the apparent commonality of the Africanisation of European sitters, the reversal of the dominant axis of representation and the reference to a larger historical and/or political context interests me.<sup>8</sup> Critically following historical anthropometric studies, that is, systematic cross-cultural measurement, photographic mapping, or moulding of human bodies, in *StillePost* I fixed the external appearance of the project participants through photographic portraits; they presented their observations of me in the form of a bust and its copies, both adopting a vulnerable research position. By combining the material resulting from the intersubjective encounters – their sculptures and my photographs – in my contributive artwork, I simultaneously subverted and reinforced the Western gaze. On the other hand, the presentation and mediation of my work in contested sites

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7 ‘Africanisation of the Queen’, ‘the Queen in African eyes’, ‘Africanised Queen’ were reactions to Enwonwu’s portrait of the Queen in the West and were expressed in the *Daily Telegraph* (London) and the *Otago Daily Times* (New Zealand) (Akpang 2016: 199).

8 The topicality of the issue discussed here is well demonstrated by the “colourblind casting” practice for the Netflix series *Bridgerton* (2020). In contrast to Hans Burgkmair’s painting *Exotic tribe* (1508), which depicts “blackened whites”, i.e. Africans modelled after whites (Mudimbe 1988), in *Bridgerton* non-white actors embody English aristocrats in the early nineteenth century (Hildebrand 2021).

of representation – especially the anthropological museum – make an essential contribution to the mental decolonisation called for by theorists and curators such as Kebede (2004) and Hansen and Nielsen (2011). *StillePost* and subsequent *Portrait as dialogue* projects show ‘a white, European female, not typically represented in European anthropological collections. Moreover, one not viewed from a non-Western perspective’ (Boeck 2019a: 115), thereby ‘mediating to a Western audience what it feels like to be evaluated and represented according to different cultural modalities and criteria’ (Boeck 2019b: 270).

Himmelheber was questioning canonisation and exploring the interdependence of seeing and images, of worlds of seeing and images by employing a vulnerable position to challenge the dominance of the Western gaze. According to Wendl (2004), Himmelheber, with his reflection on portraits, anticipated a series of insights that Jean Borgatti later systematically elaborated in her treatises *African portraits* (1990).

In Enwonwu’s portrait, the Queen uses her vulnerability to mark a gesture of equality between the two nations she and Enwonwo represent in an action that emphasises the power of her position. The artist, however, succeeded remarkably in supporting this gesture of reconciliation while subtly undermining it on a highly charged political terrain. Through ‘the reverse-imposition of modern Africanised art language on Western subjects’ (Akpang 2016: 200), Enwonwu negotiated his unique position as an artist ‘in relation to the Western claim that the African culture was inferior’ (Gassmann de Sousa 2018). He committed himself, by allowing for Western influences, to the African understanding of art – just as modern European artists did in reverse as a matter of course.<sup>9</sup> This is expressed in his writing (1956):

The epochs of high artistic achievements of any country have been those of comparative political stability, and of great national pride. It is in such a period in the life of a country that art assumes its role of great national importance. Then the artist is able to devote his energy freely, to the creation of national art, to the glory of his country. The political function of art can therefore be determined by the subject matter of art ... every true artist is bound to express the political aspirations of his time. And for expressions to be true, they must be an embodiment of the struggle of self-preservation and expression ... (Enwonwu 1956: 29, quoted in Akpang 2016: 202).

In the eyes of Enwonwu, the English word “art” lacked a precise conceptual focus as it was applied to a whole range of unrelated and inartistic activities. In Igbo cosmology, on the other hand, *Nka* (the Igbo word for art, creativity, and creative expression), assigns a “practical purpose” to art, namely to ‘chan-

<sup>9</sup> Malefakis (2009) explains that the African sculptures and masks that served the painters of the early twentieth century as sources of inspiration, catalysts or templates became the symbol and index of “real” African art, which, so he argues, must therefore be understood, to a great degree, as a European projection.

nel its spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form’ (Akpang 2016: 181). In this concept, ‘art, as a visual symbolisation and localisation of the spiritual world, is strongly connected to and channels it for the benefit of society’ (ibid.). Therefore, as Nzegwu (1998) argues, from the artist’s point of view, the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II should not be understood as a mere physical commentary. In her eyes, the work carries a subversive, metaphysical message. However, this was deliberately not revealed by Enwonwu: a ‘first stage in the rite of transubstantiation that alters the imperial objective by transforming the face/spirit of the British Empire’ (Nzegwu 1998: 52). If one argues that the Queen’s portrait has a performative role and a symbiotic relationship with ritual, it should, in my opinion, be associated with the artist’s portrait of Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–1996)<sup>10</sup>. He was the first Nigerian president and one of the most influential figures in West Africa during the transitional period from colonialism to independence. Commissioned by Azikime, the statue was created in 1962 and installed in the Azikime Circle in Onitsha, Enwonwu’s birthplace.

With this contribution, I have tried to point out that the interpretation of a work that seems evident in retrospect does not always emerge clearly. In my practice, it is sometimes only later, when I look at a work retrospectively, that I recognise its references and contexts of meaning. For example, it was not until I was writing my thesis (2019a), twenty years after completing *StillePost* (1999), that I realised that my research method, *Portrait as Dialogue*, both reinforces and subverts the Western gaze, as does Himmelheber in his experiment; thus validating Patti Lather’s argument that practices that attempt to give voice to the voiceless are often ‘entangled in layers of returns and reversals and cannot be considered as innocent counter-practice’ (Lather 2015: 7).

The historical shifts and divergent evaluations I address here are particularly evident in Himmelheber’s choice of title for an essay about his experiment, *Das Porträt in der Negerkunst – Bericht über eine Versuchsreihe* (The Portrait in Negro Art – Report on a Series of Experiments) (1972), which seems inappropriate from today’s perspective and was irritating even at the time of publication; not, however, because of the use of the term “Negro”, but because it implied that Africans made “art”.<sup>11</sup> And, although I am more than happy to follow Nzegwu’s reasoning, it is also conceivable that in 1956, when Enwonwu put his idea of portraying Queen Elizabeth II into practice, his effort to equate the significance of the modernist movement in African art (and thus his achievements) with European art, was more important than the conceptual connection to a liberating

10 An image of the sculpture can be viewed on the website of The Ben Enwonwu Foundation (BEF) in the section ‘Works in Public’. <https://benenwonwufoundation.org/ben-enwonwu-works-in-public/>

11 Clara Himmelheber drew attention to this fact at the Africa Conference ‘Hans and Ulrike Himmelheber’ at the Munich State Museum of Ethnology (30 May – 1 June 2008).

ritual that a postcolonial perspective recognises more easily that I have expanded. Following Ebeigbe's elaborations on the portrait in African art (2013), one could even argue that he sought to emphasise the beauty of the Queen for a predominantly African audience. Artistic action is not always consciously thought through in every aspect but is often highly intuitive, which is, in my opinion, one of its strengths. Being 'definitely provisional' (Boeck 2005: 185), the consequent relative vagueness fosters alternative and changing approaches. Just as different viewers (including the artist) come to varying interpretations of a work, the same viewer can receive new impressions on repeated viewing – our memory recomposes itself through our experiences, allowing for further evaluations. For me, it is becoming more and more important to look not only at the results, but also at the way they were achieved and to pay attention to alternative readings and one's own subsequent personal, culturally and historically conditioned, changes. For me, it is precisely art's ability to oscillate between layers of meaning that is the special contribution it can make as a research practice and to gaining knowledge. I firmly believe that this process can be especially fruitful for such a complex topic as intercultural confrontation.

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