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It's a matter of culture: analyzing worldbuilding in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

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## 1. Introduction

This dissertation is going to analyze culture in media and the role it plays in worldbuilding, taking into account one of the most-loved franchises in western animation, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The concept of worldbuilding in fictional universes is not new and can be dated back to the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy, with J.R.R. Tolkien often credited as the father of modern fantasy storytelling (Sur, 2021). It is not a coincidence: what Tolkien created with his trilogies set the tone for fantasy storytelling to come. This paper poses the questions of why and how: why does worldbuilding matter in storytelling and how does it influence it?

Moreover, it wants to provide a different perspective on culture, posing the focus on the products consumed by many on a daily basis. Since opinions are shared more easily and frequently through the internet, the public is becoming more aware of the relevance worldbuilding plays in storytelling and what happens when it's lacking.

First of all, this dissertation will start by trying to give "culture" itself a definition, focusing on two works of literature from which it will draw its analysis related to worldbuilding: Agar's cultures in comparison and Hofstede's model of culture. These are going to be key concepts in this analysis, because they explain the subjectivity of culture itself and why it matters, both when defining culture and in storytelling. Then, it will move on to the concept of worldbuilding – what we define as worldbuilding, and how it mixes with culture. We will comment on how worldbuilding has gotten more attention with growing online communities and how it could make or break a franchise, with the example of the *Divergent* saga. Finally, it will move on to the main case study, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (which, from now on will be also referred to as ATLA): it will analyze it from a cultural standpoint, underlining the role worldbuilding plays in it, and there will be a focus on nonverbal communication in animated media.

## 2. Defining culture: is it possible?

When talking about culture, the first challenge is to try and understand what culture is, since the concept itself has varied through time. Its evolution could be divided into three phases: high culture, evolutionary culture, and cultural relativism.

The first one, introduced by Arnold in his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), defined culture as the collection of artistic products, which would be defined today as "high culture" (as opposed to "popular culture"); this theory describes it as something that societies should aspire to have to better themselves and implies that not everyone has it. The second phase, evolutionary culture, begins with Tylor and shifts the view on culture once again, by defining culture as something that can be acquired and is not inherently possessed. In his book *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (1871), Tylor defines culture as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.1). This theory defines culture as something that we already

possess. Both of these theories overlap and they try to define culture starting from a set of limited individuals to something that encompasses a larger group, and we find the biggest difference in which group they are referring to. Tylor talks about subjects outside Victorian society, while Arnold includes it (Logan, 2012). Theories like Tylor and Arnold's were, in fact, not unusual for the nineteenth century and various theorists of that time often included schemes of cultural evolution: they included stages of savagery, barbarism, and then civilization, and all societies were compared to Europe; furthermore, many of these theories were based on biological assumptions about race.

These first discussions about culture lead to another challenge: the double meaning of the word itself. Other than referring to culture as the sum of traditions, meanings, values, and costumes it also refers to arts and sciences, creating ambiguity (Arato, 1997). And, of course, these two concepts can be related to one another: for centuries, civilizations have represented their traditions and beliefs in various art forms, and the latter have become representative of what a civilization leaves behind once it ends. This idea of arts and sciences as complementary to culture will be further analyzed in this paper, applying it to the fictional universe of ATLA and to the representation – or lack thereof – of leaders in artworks in the different domains. This double meaning partly explains the difficulty in giving culture a definition and constricting it into a specific set of categories: apart from a few exceptions, the discussion around culture as we mean it now only started during the 1990s, and even then, anthropologists could not agree on a single meaning.

The third and last phase shifted the discussion around culture and its definition because these ethnocentric and racist views were first challenged: Franz Boas is among the first theorist of this new line of thought. He is credited as the father of American anthropology. Boas first introduced the concept of “cultural relativism”, a key step to the view of culture we have today; he and many influential students started rejecting evolutionary schemes that went along with this image of culture and started discussing how there is common humanity and the differences that exist are given by cultural traditions and not racial differences, stressing the concept of cultural relativism as a new tool to study *cultures* and not *culture* through a historical and scientific lens as well (Davies, 2008).

Due to its long and complicated history, giving it a definition is a challenge itself. One could try and describe it as a language, even: it is spoken differently according to an individual's place of birth, age, background knowledge, and life experience. Even if language itself is a part of the culture, this metaphor could help give an overview of some relevant characteristics of culture that will be carried during this analysis: its relativity and the fact that is subjective. These two aspects of culture are going to be crucial to this analysis on the influence of the former on worldbuilding. The literature on culture is vast and varied: for their relevance to the topic and how it can be related to worldbuilding, Agar's theory of culture in comparison and Hofstede's model of culture will be used as the main sources.

## 2.1 Hofstede's model of culture

Hofstede (2010) offers models to analyze a given country's culture. It was originally designed to be used by companies who wish to expand their business in other countries to better understand the target country. This chapter is going to explain Hofstede's model of culture, how it is defined throughout this analysis and how it can be applied to worldbuilding and fictional universes.

The analysis starts by acknowledging the ambiguous meaning of the word "culture" in itself: what Arnold (1867) originally defined as "high culture" is here described as *culture one*, while from an anthropological perspective way culture is described as *culture two*. With regard to the latter, he adds that culture two includes "the ordinary and menial things in life: greeting, eating, showing or not showing feelings, keeping a certain physical distance from others, making love, or maintaining body hygiene" (Hofstede, 2010, p.7). This allows us to better understand the modern approach to culture, which recognizes that culture is – in fact – everywhere. Moreover, Hofstede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another", underlining its subjectivity and relativity. This last definition introduces another characteristic of culture in this model: culture is learned and not inherited, because it derives from one's social environment.

As Boas (1904) first theorized, Hofstede (2010) also agrees that culture is relative, and there are no standards that allow one culture to be defined as superior or inferior to another. Each one is different and these differences are manifested through different levels described through an "onion diagram": symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. Symbols are "words, gestures, pictures or objects that carry a particular meaning which is only recognized by those who share the culture", language, jargon, aesthetics, and flags belong to this category. Heroes are "persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess highly prized characteristics in a culture, and who thus serve as models for behavior". Finally, rituals are "collective activities, technically superfluous in reaching desired ends, but which, within a culture, are considered as socially essential: they are therefore carried out for their own sake"; greetings and ways of paying respects belong to these categories. All these three aspects are labeled as "practices", while values represent the core of the onion. Values are "broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others" and "feelings with an arrow to it: they have a plus and a minus side"; not only they are the core in the visual aspect but they are also the core of culture: they concern notions as good vs. bad, ugly vs. beautiful, natural vs. unnatural and so on. They are among the first notions children learn implicitly, and are ingrained before the age of 10: they are easy to dismantle, and since they are learned unconsciously, the majority of people cannot recognize one's own (p.8-9).

Hofstede (2010) also affirms that culture is layered, and these layers equal the various mental programming an individual has, because "almost everyone belongs to several different groups and categories of people at the same time" (p.18). There are six layers: national, regional, gender, generational, social class, and organizational. The national level refers to one's country, while regional (also defined as ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic) concerns a smaller dimension since many countries have different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups.

Gender level concerns if one is born a boy or a girl, while generational concerns the age and social class refer to one's educational possibility and employment. The last one, the organizational level, concerns people who are employed and refers to the socialization of employees in a company or workplace.

Lastly, Hofstede (2010) points out five "dimensions of culture": power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism.

Power distance concerns "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p.61). A given country can have a small or large power distance. For example, if the power distance is small, the inequity gap should be small as well, children and parents treat each other as equals just like teachers and students do. On the other hand, if the power distance is large, inequality among individuals is normal and expected, centralization is popular and the wage gap between higher-ups and other employees is wide.

Individualism "pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after themselves and their immediate family" (p.92) and collectivism is its opposite. For example, children are taught to think in terms of "we" in a collectivist society, trespassing leads to shame from the whole group and relationships prevail over tasks. The opposite happens in an individualist society: the identity of an individual is not based on the group and individuality is prioritized, speaking one's mind is a praised characteristic linked to honesty.

In a masculine society "emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life" (p.140). For example, a masculine society holds as core values success and progress, gender roles are strictly defined and work prevails over everything. Its opposite is a feminine society, in which gender roles are not that strict and every individual is expected to be caring and tender, both mother and father are expected to care for the family, and equity, solidarity, and quality of work-life are highly valued.

Uncertainty avoidance represents "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations and try to avoid such situations" (p.191). If a society has a weak uncertainty avoidance level, it is generally perceived as low stress and well-being is prioritized, uncertainty is accepted and there are no more rules than the ones that are perceived as necessary. On the other hand, if society falls on the high uncertainty avoidance level, familiar risks are accepted and ambiguous avoided, time is considered money, and uncertainty is shamed.

Confucian dynamism was added later and concerns long vs. short orientation in life. If a society is long-term oriented, the emphasis is on a strong sense of shame and perseverance. A short-term-oriented society values "not losing face", respect for tradition, and personal steadiness and stability.

Even if this model is not aimed at storytelling in any way, it still offers tools through which any country (real or fictitious) can be analyzed and categorized: employing a scale model applied to real countries allows us to compare them to fictional ones, thus understanding how “real” a fictional country is. Being able to place a fictional country on the Power Dynamic dimension, for example, tells us that enough details have been given in order for us to be able to draw that conclusion. Moreover, this model allows easy comparisons between countries, as Hofstede’s website offers the possibility of comparing two countries on cultural dimensions. For this reason, it is going to be useful in this analysis to better understand a viewer’s perception of a fictional culture: is it easy to place this fictional country on this scale? Is it even possible?

## 2.2 Cultural clashes and cultures in comparison

The other literature that will be taken into account during this analysis is Agar’s theory of cultures in comparison. This chapter is going to reference his lecture *Culture: Can You Take It Anywhere?* (2006) in which he explores the difficulties in the use of the concept itself in contemporary research and the different problems ethnography tries to address; moreover, how this theory relates to worldbuilding.

The first issue addressed in the lecture is how the concept of culture is “widely (mis)used” in the contemporary vocabulary and in anthropology “runs from a desperate clinging to the past to a political critique of the field’s colonial roots to a struggle with a concept that still works but doesn’t really”. One of the first challenges comes when we think about markers that are now commonly addressed as culture: generation, gender, religion, region, language, and occupation; the old concept of culture does not include them since it mainly refers to patterns and behaviors. Moreover, this old concept of culture assumed that it was a “closed, coherent system of meaning and action in which an individual always and only participated”: if one came from a small and isolated place, the main thing that was assumed is that all the people who lived there were the same as far as culture went. This also means that the box was closed in time and culture was traditional and did not change from generation to generation. This led us to think that what “people did could be described, explained, and generalized by their membership in that single, shared culture”. According to the modern concept of culture, the markers mentioned before work inside a society and across different ones as well, and they do not hold the same weight for every single person: these markers mix and change, and at the same time they can all be part of a bigger unit called national culture. The example Agar introduces is that of *national* American culture, defining it as a *partial* culture: it has a given set of rules that concern healthcare, housing, education, taxes, and more, and this set of rules changes once you step outside its borders – this can be applied to any *national* culture.

The second issue addressed in the lecture is how is it possible to recognize when culture is at play. To better understand this issue, it is important to define two concepts coined by Agar himself: languaculture and rich points (Agar, 2006). Languaculture refers to the fact that using any language “involves all manner of background knowledge and local information” and not only its grammar and vocabulary. When two languacultures meet, people can come in contact

with rich points: they are those “surprises”, “departures from an outsider’s expectations” which alert that there is a difference between the two languacultures. When thinking that something cultural is at play, it is usually because people did something that others did not understand, creating the aforementioned rich point – but, not everything that causes surprise or confusion is necessarily related to culture: it could just be a mistake. When a rich point is first encountered then it must be observed further and a pattern must be found, among different people of the same culture, to determine that it is a rich point and not just a coincidence.

Once assumed that a rich point is something cultural, Agar asks what does that mean for the concept of culture itself: something is at play, capable of enabling communication between two people in certain kinds of situations and that something is not understandable for an outsider. This means that culture is relational: it links two languacultures, and it is not possible to talk about “culture of X” without specifying that it is “culture of X for Y”: culture is visible only to the outsider; consequently, there could be different combinations of culture of X for Y, and those lead to different rich points. Moreover, rich points are not always major, but can also be subtle: a major rich point is due to a massive gap between source and target languaculture, while a subtle one means that the two languacultures already share some common characteristics.

Furthermore, culture is not only relational but is also partial: a rich point does not involve just one culture, but *cultures* that an individual possesses, concerning the aforementioned markers such as generation and gender. Therefore, Agar states that we should always refer to culture as plural. This means that we should accept that multiple cultures are at play with one individual, and then hypothesize how these cultures might mix in a given situation. What this hypothesis leads to are six main issues: hegemony, coupling, density, attitude, integration, and volatility. *Hegemony* concerns how much a culture is relevant to an individual compared to the others that they possess, while *coupling* talks about what a culture drags with itself once it is at play (usually, generation is the one that overrides everything else). *Density* concerns how pervasive a culture is and how much situational relevance it has, as opposed to *attitude* which concerns the feelings of an individual towards one of their cultures. *Integration* concerns how well people can mix all of their cultures and, lastly, *volatility* concerns how fast a culture is changing and evolving.

Agar’s theory helps us better understand how nuanced worldbuilding inside a fictional universe can be, especially when the given universe creates subcultures inside itself as well. In this regard, one of the first examples that could come to mind is the clash between the elvish population and the hobbits in *Lord of The Rings*: thanks to the clashes the viewer can observe during that meeting, they can understand that some characteristics (for example, the tradition of the second breakfast) pertain only to one population and not all of those involved. Consequently, that becomes a rich point and we can tell that culture is at play. Lastly, applying his theory to worldbuilding permits to analyze cultural details and the different interactions between fictional cultures, giving us tools to determine how detailed they are and how they interact with the worldbuilding at play.



### 3. Defining worldbuilding: key elements

Even though the modern concept of worldbuilding is strictly linked to science fiction and fantasy novels, this has not always been the case. The earliest use of the word was found in 1805, in *The Literary Magazine; or, Monthly Epitome of British Literature*, and it was employed by geologists to try and explain geologic formations. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, then, the concept had evolved to indicate the imaginary realm created by poets and artists; in *Under the Trees and Elsewhere* (1891), Hamilton Wright Mabie writes “to this world-building all the great poetic minds are driven” (p.178), and in *The Novels of Henry James* (1905), Elizabeth Luther Cary affirms that “all of us, even if we are not artists, have to a certain degree this world-building” (p.145). Moving on to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to find a more constricted use of the term, referring to the author’s imagination and their ability to create a whole new world (Merriam-Webster). This shift is mainly due to the rise in popularity of authors such as Terry Pratchett and Ursula K. Le Guin, in whose book series the worldbuilding has been as relevant as the plot itself. To point out some examples of fictional worlds that do not include the case study mentioned in this paper: *Earthsea* in Le Guin’s saga, Pratchett’s Discworld, *Arda* in Tolkien’s works, and Arrakis in the *Dune* universe. However, the concept is not restricted to just one form of media: we can find examples of worldbuilding in the campaign settings in *Dungeons and Dragons* and videogames, such as the continent of Tamriel in the *Elder Scrolls* series.

As mentioned before, the modern discussion about worldbuilding rose thanks to the works of writers such as Le Guin and Pratchett (Merriam-Webster) and the newfound interest in worldbuilding from the public as well. This newfound interest also brought with it greater awareness, and one of the biggest examples of this is the reception and the public critiques received by the *Divergent* saga, written by Veronica Roth. In an article written in the blog “Writer’s Rumpus” titled *World-Building Errors, As Illustrated By Divergent* (2014), the author affirms that “in too many places the story contradicts its own invented world”, while an article by Vox, *Why Divergent fails at everything it sets out to do* (2016), says “in both the books and the movies, *Divergent* borrows heavily, and poorly, from other YA franchises, and this is its Achilles' heel”. Lastly, an article found in a Wiki called “Keepers of Lost Cities” says that “the worldbuilding in *Divergent* is amateur and disappointing...” This proves that the public, which consumes these media daily, is becoming more aware and demanding when it comes to worldbuilding, and they do not expect it to be just a background character, but the main focus.

As Tolkien himself said, the aim of worldbuilding is not to simply create a context to set the story in, but it is to “enchant” (Tolkien, 1983). The author creates a world to help the reader feel more “at home” in the story, and there are three key elements in worldbuilding that aid in this quest: physics or magic, geography, and culture.

The contraposition between physics and magic classifies science fiction as opposed to fantasy novels because the former tends to rely more on real-world physics while the latter on magic. In science fiction novels it is usually possible to observe a high presence of technological elements, and these novels can decide to bend or break real physics laws, and faster-than-light travel is a big example of this; on the other hand, fantasy novels build magic systems, which

can be classified as soft or hard (Schult, 2017) – this last point is going to be further analyzed in the following part of this chapter. There are examples of worlds that mix physics and magic, such as the *Star Wars* universe.

Geography involves the construction of a fictional map of the world, and it is important because it lays out basic terrain features and the civilizations present. It is also a useful tool to design weather patterns and biomes such as mountains, deserts, and forests. Moreover, a map can contain important trade routes, key cities, and borders between the different civilizations that inhabit the world: this contributes to the story not only by giving it a sense of realism, but also helps define plot points as territorial wars (Long, 2002). Today, it is not rare to find a map of the fictional world printed in the book itself, oftentimes as the first element.

Culture is the main focus of this work and is key to worldbuilding. Writers can develop not only one culture but also countercultures that exist in the same universe, such as the elves and the hobbits in the *Lord of the Rings* series. In some cases, inspiration for cultures can be drawn from pre-existing ones, often employing ancient civilizations as the blueprint. Culture is a crucial element of worldbuilding since the reader or viewer believes that anything inside a given fictional world will behave as it does in the real world unless it is specified otherwise. Besides giving context and adding layers to the story, one thing culture does is point out those things that do not behave as they normally would.

### **3.1. Soft Worldbuilding and Hard Worldbuilding in magic systems**

This section is going to focus on magic as opposed to physics, given the fact that the case study of this dissertation possesses a magic system. Firstly, we will discuss the difference between a soft magic system and a hard one and then we will conclude by analyzing what role a magic system plays in worldbuilding.

The popularization of the terms “hard” and “soft” in relation to magic systems is due to Brandon Sanderson (Hickson, 2019, p. 107), author of the *Mistborn* series, whose principles are highly relevant to hard magic systems in particular. The main difference between a soft and a hard magic system is the set of rules that apply to each: the former possesses a loose set of rules and limitations, and mythologies commonly fall in this spectrum; on the other hand, a hard magic system has a strict set of rules, consequences, and limitation to its magic and what it can or cannot do. However, it is possible that a series chooses to employ both: for example, the case study of this dissertation has a mixture of both, even though it leans more to the hard side.

Sanderson’s second principle affirms that “limitations are more important than powers” (Sanderson, 2011) when it comes to a hard magic system. This happens because it revolves mainly around limitations, weaknesses, and costs. Limitations concern what your magic cannot do: sometimes this inability is defined by limits of strength, other times by the practitioner's lack of training or acumen. On some occasions, they are limited by

environmental factors as well: in ATLA, the firebenders are unable to bend<sup>1</sup> fire during an eclipse<sup>2</sup>.

When talking about weaknesses, we are referring to those that come into play when using magical power. The biggest example of this is the One Ring in *Lord of the Rings*: on one hand, the ring allows you to cross the threshold between realms, on the other, it makes its possessor a target for evil creatures and – if it is a mortal – makes them develop an obsessive attachment to it.

In this kind of magic system, costs are what it takes in order to create magic itself. This can be something physical or can refer to “energy” possessed by the practitioner. In the first case, what is needed is an object: as in Arakawa’s *Fullmetal Alchemist*, specific materials are required in order to transform metal X into metal Y. The second case is instead linked to the practitioner themselves: it accounts for their level of energy because magic oftentimes creates fatigue; this means that if magic is used too much and for too long, it could result in death. However, the cost could also refer to the “loss” of something: as mentioned before, the *One Ring* causes its wearer to slowly go insane – in this case, the cost of the magic is their own sanity. Another example can be found in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series: when the character of Beric Dondarrion is brought back to life many times, he never comes back the same, but as a more and more “alienated” version of himself every time he is resurrected. The cost, here, is a part of himself.

Lastly, the way magic systems interact with the world that was built is fundamental in order to add realism to the story and depth to worldbuilding. Taking into account *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, we know that the main magic system used is bending the four elements (air, water, fire, earth). The reason why the system works is not just because of its rules, but how it interacts with the world that was created: it appears normal that the Earth Kingdom – populated by earthbenders – is guarded by a wall of rocks; and it is not questioned when firebenders use their abilities in order to warm a pot of water. Moreover, bending also becomes a philosophy: the airbenders are also known as the “Air Nomads”, who chose to detach themselves from the rest of the world to find peace and freedom. Sure enough, their bending style is modeled after *baguazhang*, a martial art that focuses on evasion rather than attacking (Hickson, 2019).

Sanderson’s laws and Hickson’s analysis give key tools to better understand magic systems and the main differences between them, thus allowing further analysis and deeper comprehension of the implications each magic system carries with it. In conclusion, in order for a magic system to be used successfully, it is important that it lives in harmony with the world that was built in the universe: this allows the viewer to pick up on the logical consequences and effects the magic has on the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Bending is the ability to manipulate an element and is significant to many aspects of life in the world.

<sup>2</sup> Season 3, Episode 11: “The Day of The Black Sun: Part 2”.

### 3.2. Culture and worldbuilding in fantasy universes

As Hickson (2019) mentions, “culture is more like a complex six-laned, five-way intersection with pedestrian crossings and a chicken crossing the road” (p.133), meaning that the way magic plays with culture and worldbuilding is more complicated than one might think. First of all, it is not magic that impacts culture, but vice-versa: the cultural norms of society can affect how magic is used according to things such as gender and class. For example, in ATLA, the Northern Water Tribe is characterized by strict gender roles and for this reason, women are forbidden to practice waterbending<sup>3</sup> as warriors and can only use it for healing. Moreover, this also tells us that the society of the water-benders uses its abilities for two reasons: combat and healing. On the other hand, in the same universe, we have the Fire Nation: bending is mainly used for combat, and the meaning of this bending style has been always marked as anger – a tool then used to justify the Hundred Years War<sup>4</sup>. These little details about how bending is used differently by the different factions of the ATLA universe give us an insight into the cultural differences between them: according to Hofstede’s (2010) masculinity spectrum, we could place the Southern Water Tribe in the middle (leaning more to masculinity), while the Fire Nation is on the masculine end of the spectrum. Given the differences between the two societies, it is a logical step that there are differences in the way they use and perceive bending as well – this is a great example of how magic and worldbuilding fuse and then fall into culture: it is not enough to have a soft or hard magic system if the system itself does not change according to culture.

Culture permeates every aspect of society and is strongly influenced by personal factors such as social class and education, the form of government a given society adopts and religion. How magic systems and worldbuilding interact with culture are crucial elements to the development of fictional universes as a whole, and the lack thereof might affect it negatively, resulting in a universe that lacks logic and foundations. The role of culture in worldbuilding will be further analyzed in the following chapter, in relation to the case study: aspects such as government, religion, and gender roles will be taken into account, as well as nonverbal aspects of communication.

### 4. Case study: *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

*Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an animated television series produced for Nickelodeon by Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino, which aired on the network from 2005 to 2008. The series had a huge success even outside its original demographic (6-11 years old) and reached 5.6 million viewers on its best-rated showing. Moreover, critics have acclaimed the series too: in 2005, it won Best Action/Adventure TV Series and Best TV Series at the Pulcinella Awards, Best Animated Television Production for Children at the 36th Annie Awards, and a Peabody Award in 2009 for showing “unusually complex characters and healthy respect for the consequences of warfare”. Thanks to this success and love from the

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<sup>3</sup> Season 1, Episode 19: “The Siege of The North: Part 1”

<sup>4</sup> Season 3, Episode 13: “The Firebending Masters”.

public, a sequel, *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) was produced, and Netflix bought the rights for a live-action adaptation that began filming in 2021.

The universe in which the series takes place is a fantasy world populated by humans, spirits, and fantastical creatures alike. The human population is divided into four nations: the Northern and Southern Water Tribes, the Air Nomads, the Earth Kingdom, and the Fire Nation. Each nation is associated with a natural element, and there is a part of the population that possesses the ability to “bend” that given element<sup>5</sup>: the art of bending is defined as the innate power and ability to manipulate one of the four elements, and people who can practice it are called *benders*. Each bending art is associated with a given set of martial arts: waterbending is modeled after *tai chi*, airbending after *baguazhang*, earthbending after *hung gar*, and firebending after *Northern Shaolin*. A real martial arts master was brought in during the development of the animation sequences, and (as we will see in the next chapters) the chosen style reflects the philosophy of each nation.

There is an *Avatar* in each generation, who is a person capable of manipulating all of the four elements; when the Avatar dies, they are reincarnated in another person, thus generating the Avatar Cycle – the peculiarity about this is that the next Avatar is reincarnated in another nation, chosen according to a pattern that mirrors the cycle of the seasons: autumn for Air Nomads, winter for the Water Tribes, spring for the Earth Kingdom and summer for the Fire Nation. For example, during the events of ATLA, the Avatar was born into the Air Nomads tribe, and in the sequel, the Avatar belonged to one of the Water Tribes. The cycle of the seasons also calls back to a bit of folklore from the ATLA world: a legend states that the Avatar must learn to master every other bending form – starting from their native element – according to that sequence. Given the fact that the elements are drawn from classical mythology, each one of them has its opposite: fire and water are opposites just as air and water are – this is mirrored in the challenges the Avatar faces when it comes to mastering the element opposite to their native since it will be much harder to do so than the other remaining two. Lastly, the Avatar possesses a unique ability called the Avatar State: it is a mechanism of defense, through which the current Avatar gains the knowledge and abilities of their predecessors, and it is usually activated just when they are in great danger, even though one can learn how to use it at will. If the Avatar is killed while they are in this state, the cycle will cease to exist, thus ending the Avatar forever.

The series is composed of three seasons or “books”, named after the element the Avatar learns to master during the events: water, earth and fire.

During the events of Book One: Water (水), we first meet our main character, Aang. He is a twelve-year-old airbender who discovers he is the Avatar. His story starts 100 years before the events of the series when he first discovers his abilities: he learns that Fire Lord Sozin wants to conquer the four nations and is set out to kill the Avatar, since he is the only one who can stop him. Aang is afraid of the burden that is put on his shoulders, and decides to run

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<sup>5</sup> To this day, it is not known according to which criteria a person is or is not a bender, even though the most plausible hypothesis is that it is genetic.

away with his flying bison, Appa: they crash into the ocean during a storm, and Aang activates his Avatar State, imprisoning the both of them inside an iceberg.

He wakes up a hundred years later, discovered by a pair of siblings of the Southern Water Tribe, Katara and Sokka, and finds out that the Fire Nation started a war just after he ran away – the war has been going on for a hundred years, now continued by the new Fire Lord, Ozai. Moreover, he learns that the Fire Nation killed the Air Nomad tribe in hopes to eliminate the Avatar and let the Fire Lord move forward with his plan undisturbed – he is now the “last airbender” alive. The Fire Nation is moving forward with its plan to conquer the four nations, and Aang realizes he must accept his faith as Avatar and stop Ozai: he sets out to master the three remaining elements, water, earth, and fire. In order to master the first element, he goes to the Northern Water Tribe with Katara and Sokka to find a master. Once there, he discovers that Sozin’s Comet – a power source that Fire Lord Sozin used to start the Hundred Years War – will be returning during the summer, and will give the Fire Nation enough power to win the war. Aang comes to terms with the fact that he must master all elements before the Comet arrives, and throughout his journey to the North Pole (where the Northern Tribe is located), the banished Fire Prince Zuko continues to follow him and his companions in order to restore his honor.

Book Two: Earth (土) begins with Aang, Katara and Sokka leaving the North Pole once he learns to master waterbending. The group<sup>6</sup> starts traveling to the Earth Kingdom in order to find Aang an earthbending master: there, they meet Toph – the daughter of two aristocrats that secretly takes part in underground earthbending matches – who then becomes his teacher. They all find out about an upcoming solar eclipse that would leave the Fire Nation powerless and thus use this information to plan an invasion. But the plan fails because they discover that the Earth Kingdom is secretly controlled by the main military force – the *Dai Li* – whose main aim is to keep any news of the war out of the kingdom and its capital in order to keep control. The group struggles to reach the Earth King to deliver this news, while Zuko (psychologically tormented), Azula (his sister), and her friends (Ty-Lee and Mai) chase the group. Azula then organizes a coup in order to conquer the Earth Kingdom’s capital and defeat any chance of invading the Fire Nation.

In Book Three: Fire (火), the group has to deal with the consequences of the fall of Ba Sing Se. They recover and plan an invasion with a small group of warriors, which then fails. Meanwhile, Zuko decides to confront his father and finally stops trying to gain his validation; he turns over a new leaf and manages to gain the trust of the group, becoming Aang’s firebending teacher. Zuko and Aang embark on a quest to unlock the secrets of firebending, discovering that the first to practice it were the dragons (also called “Sun Warriors”). The day of Sozin’s Comet comes, and Ozai manages to harness its power and starts its bloody campaign to conquer the four nations and destroy his enemies; he proclaims himself “The Phoenix King”, while Azula is set to be crowned the new Fire Lord. The group (which now includes Zuko and Toph) splits up to face the threat: Zuko and Katara go on to face and defeat Azula before her coronation, while Aang faces Ozai. During the final battle, Aang goes into

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<sup>6</sup> Also called “Team Avatar”, or – by the fans – the “*gaang*”, a wordplay with the name of the main character.

Avatar State and manages to defeat the Phoenix King, deciding not to kill him: instead, he uses an ability that only the Avatar possesses – energybending, making him able to “bend” his life energy, and removing his ability to bend entirely. Once Ozai is defeated, Zuko becomes the new Fire Lord and vows to join forces with Aang and the group to help the world rebuild.

#### 4.1 Cultural analysis

This second part is going to analyze how culture is shown throughout the series, firstly focusing on all the four nations separately – by attempting to position them according to Hofstede’s model – and then proceeding to compare them. To conduct this analysis, examples will be drawn from episodes of the series and extracts from books published by the authors or the network itself.



Figure 1: Avatar's world map.

The Northern and Southern Water Tribes are located at the opposite ends of the continent (see Figure 1), respectively at the North and South Pole. Originally, the tribes were united and both were located at the North Pole: following a period of civil unrest after practices they could not agree on<sup>7</sup>, the tribes separated and are now both recognized as independent states. The capital of the Northern Tribe is Agna Qel'a, and the one of the Southern Tribe is Wolf Cove. Even though they currently live in peace, the differences between the tribes are still evident, starting with their form of government. The Northern Water Tribe is ruled by a hereditary monarchy chieftom, while the Southern Tribe is ruled by a federal parliamentary chieftom: this helps us place them on the power distance dimension; the Northern tribe leans more toward a large power distance, and the Southern one towards a small one. We see more examples of this throughout the series, especially in the scenes where Aang is firstly introduced to the Tribes. When he first meets the Southern Water Tribe<sup>8</sup>, he is introduced by Katara in a very informal way, in which she states “Aang, meet the entire village. Entire village, Aang” and points to the citizens. It is later understood that the person in charge is an elderly woman who steps up, and Katara introduces her as her grandmother; the woman herself, then, tells Aang to call her “Gran-Gran”. Meanwhile, when Aang, Katara and Sokka are invited to dinner with the chief, he introduces his daughter with her title, “Princess”<sup>9</sup> – it is a small detail, but this different use (or lack thereof) of honorifics when addressing the higher-ups of society lets the viewer know that the inequality is stronger in one than in the other. The differences between the tribes show even in the remaining dimensions, starting from individualism – which, in this case, appears to be linked to the power distance. The Southern Tribe is a collectivist society, where the whole village takes part in the politics and decision-making and everybody has an assigned task: in the series’ intro, Katara explains that her father and the men left to help the Earth Kingdom in the war, leaving him and Sokka to “look after” the tribe. Moreover, in that first

<sup>7</sup> *The Ultimate Pocket Guide*.

<sup>8</sup> Season 1, Episode 1. “The Boy In The Iceberg.”

<sup>9</sup> Season 1, Episode 18. “The Waterbending Master.”

episode, Gran-Gran tells Katara that she has chores to do, and we see Sokka teaching children. These instances tell the viewer that the chores are distributed, and they aim to help the whole tribe: the focus is the collective interest. On the other hand, the Northern tribe appears more individualist: as mentioned before, the chief sets up a formal dinner to greet the three, and we can see that only some people are invited to take part in that dinner, and it is implied that these are the one in charge. Moreover, we learn that the chief consults those people only and acts according to their advice when it comes to politics: therefore, their own individual interests become more relevant than the ones of the tribe itself. For what concerns the Masculinity dimension, the Southern Tribe falls in the middle of the index while the Northern leans toward the masculine. As shown in S1E1, the men of the Southern Tribe have gone off to fight the war while the women and children have stayed home, indicating strong gender roles. However, at the same time, the women left are in charge of ruling the tribe and administrating it: even though it may have happened out of necessity, this distribution still makes them lean towards the middle rather than the masculine. On the other hand, the Northern Tribe possesses strict gender roles: the women cannot learn waterbending for fighting purposes – as shown when Master Pakku refuses to teach Katara waterbending – and thus are homemakers, healers, or teachers. Katara is shown to be shocked at the news, remembering how her father Hakoda (chief of the Southern Tribe) had always encouraged her to practice waterbending and improve her skills. For what concerns the Uncertainty domain, it becomes much harder to place the two tribes: taking into account their differences in forms of government and placement in the masculinity index, it could be concluded that the Southern Tribe has a weaker uncertainty avoidance than the Northern.

For what concerns the onion diagram, we will start by discussing symbols. In Northern Tribe tradition, a betrothal necklace (Figure 2) is given to women of the tribe by the men who intend to marry them.

This symbol, in particular, is important in the series since Katara wears one as well: it belonged to her grandmother Kanna (“Gran-Gran”), and as soon as Master Pakku sees it recognizes that it is the same he made for the woman years ago, thus revealing the love story between Pakku and Kanna. For what concerns heroes, it appears that neither of the tribes possesses strong ones: the chiefs are admired, but not even in the monarchical society of the Northern tribe are considered “heroes” as Hofstede intends it – we could say that the “heroes” of the tribes are more subjective, especially for what concerns Sokka: Hakoda is a hero in the “Hofstedian” sense of way for him since he wishes to emulate his father. Lastly, rituals are shown in both tribes: the Northern Tribe’s necklace itself is a symbol, while the act of giving it can be considered a ritual. Regarding the Southern Tribe, the viewer becomes familiar with a coming-of-age rite of passage called *ice dodging*<sup>10</sup>: when a boy turns fourteen, his father takes him out to sea and challenges him to guide the boat through a path filled with ice blocks. If the boy succeeds and guides the boat out of the troubled waters, he then receives a



Figure 2. The betrothal necklace.

<sup>10</sup> Season 1, Episode 15. “Bato of The Water Tribe.”



ceremonial mark on his forehead: the Mark of the Brave is given for showing exceptional courage, and the Mark of the Trusted is given to those who have been steady and dependable.

The Air Nomads are one of the populations that are less known, since during the events of ATLA they are nearly extinct, but some information is present thanks to Aang's memories and what people belonging to the other nations say about them. They reside on the borders of the continent, and are located on mountain ranges (Figure 1): they live in the Air temples, the Northern and Southern Air Temples are home to the Air monks, while in the Eastern and Western live the Air nuns; they do not have a capital. Furthermore, they "detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom"<sup>11</sup>. For what concerns Hofstede's dimensions of culture, the Air Nomads are defined as a society with a small power distance: they are ruled by Four Councils of Elders (one for each temple), and they were chosen for their wisdom and capability. They believe that all people are created equal and all life is precious and must be respected, reject any form of conflict, and this is reflected in their way of living: masters and pupils are considered equals and it is not unusual for them to act as if they shared a family bond. An example of this is provided by Monk Gyatso: when teaching Aang airbending, he would employ a fun teaching method involving accurately blowing fruit pies at other monks' heads<sup>12</sup>. Moving on to Individualism, the Air Nomads are a collectivist society: as the name suggests, they do live following monastic tradition. They are a society whose economy is based on agriculture, any industry that they invested in was sustainable and naturally powered<sup>13</sup>, and everyone is expected to take part in those activities. Furthermore, they have a strong sense of community and the collective opinion is extremely relevant: since they praise a life of tranquility and peace, those airbenders who decided to stir away from those beliefs were shunned. They are a Feminine society: relationships with others are highly valued, and gender roles are not strict. They reject violence in any case, no matter if it is a male or a female who is practicing it, and both men and women are concerned with relationships: the biggest example of this in the series is the relationship between Aang and his mentor, Monk Gyatso, who acts as a father figure to him and gives him advice regarding emotions and how to process them. Lastly, they are a society with weak uncertainty avoidance: thanks to their philosophical beliefs, the Air Nomads are well balanced and tranquil, accepting of life even when it is inconvenient. Moreover, they emphasize well-being overall due to their connection to spirituality, and meditation is a fundamental part of their daily routine.<sup>14</sup>

Moving on to the Onion Diagram, the first and most important symbols of the Air Nomads are their arrow tattoos (Figure 3). They are blue and are present throughout the body of the airbender, who receives them as soon as they become airbending masters<sup>15</sup>, which happens once they pass the thirty-six levels of airbending or invent a new technique. For instance, Aang only passed thirty-five but



Figure 3. Aang's forehead tattoo.

<sup>11</sup> Season 2, Episode 9. "Bitter Work". Iroh to Zuko.

<sup>12</sup> Season 1, Episode 3. "The Southern Air Temple."

<sup>13</sup> "The Lost Scrolls: Air" in The Lost Scrolls Collection.

<sup>14</sup> Season 2, Episode 12. "The Serpent's Pass."

<sup>15</sup> Season 1, Episode 12. "The Storm."

received his tattoos anyways since he invented the air scooter. Being a society that strongly believes in equality for all and respect for every living creature, they do not possess “heroes”. However, they do possess rituals: the first example is the ceremony during which an airbender receives their tattoos, the *Airbending master anointing ceremony*. The ceremony is usually held in Air Temples adorned with banners with the Air Nomads’ national emblem (Figure 4), and during it, the new airbender must shave their head in order to be given their tattoos.



Figure 4. The Air Nomads emblem.

The Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation are particularly interesting to analyze, given the fact that they both are authoritarian regimes under political censorship, with their differences in government and the way the censorship is put forth.

The Earth Kingdom is the largest and most populated country in the world of ATLA, located in the northern hemisphere of the map (Figure 1). It is a monarchy under the rule of the Earth Monarch, and the capital is Ba Sing Se, where the king resides. They have a strong military force called the *Dai Li* and during the events of the Hundred Year War, the king was Kuei (52<sup>nd</sup> Earth King). Before starting the cultural analysis, it is important to dive deeper into the politics of the Earth Kingdom and its government, with a focus on the management of the war in the capital in order to better understand how censorship is brought forth in Ba Sing Se. As mentioned before, the Earth Kingdom is the largest of the four nations and the most densely populated: this made it the last stronghold against the Fire Nation troops, with the war turning conditions increasingly worse for the Earth Kingdom inhabitants. Its capital, Ba Sing Se, is described as the “unconquerable city”: the then-Crown-Prince Iroh<sup>16</sup> tried to conquer it at the beginning of the war but failed because his son was killed in battle, and only Princess Azula managed to take power in the capital with a *coup*. While the Fire Nation fought desperately to grab power in Ba Sing Se, the city was facing internal troubles: the central government was weak, and the vassals of the provinces managed to gain independence<sup>17</sup>. This created a vacuum of power, up for anyone to grab: after the 51<sup>st</sup> Earth King fell, Long Feng – chief of the Dai Li and grand secretariat – saw an opportunity to seize control, and took advantage of the fact that King Kuei was only a child at the time of his father’s death. Using his power as secretariat and chief, he managed to make Kuei his puppet and prevent the King and the whole city from ever learning about the war – in doing this, he managed to maintain a stable economy in the upper classes of the city, outlawing every mention of the war<sup>18</sup>. When Aang, Katara and Sokka first arrive in the Earth Kingdom to be received by Kuei – and ask him for help to defeat the Fire King – they are greeted by Joo Dee. Joo Dee is the official tour guide for important visitors to Ba Sing Se, and has been brainwashed to always be on her best behavior: when asked about the war, she answers that “There is no war in Ba Sing Se” and “You’re in Ba Sing Se now. Everyone is safe here”<sup>18</sup>. Moving on to Hofstede’s dimensions, it is possible to say that the Earth Kingdom possesses a large power distance: as mentioned before, people are treated differently outside the Upper Ring and the rest of the Kingdom, starting by their living conditions. There is a clear gap between the powerful and rich and

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<sup>16</sup> Brother of King Ozai, uncle of Zuko and Azula.

<sup>17</sup> Season 1, Episode 5. “The King of Omashu.”

<sup>18</sup> Season 2, Episode 14. “City of Walls and Secrets.”

common people, and the gap goes in favor of the former: citizens outside the Upper Ring were left to fend for themselves and survive on scraps<sup>19</sup>, while Team Avatar is escorted to a luxury house<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, people outside the Upper Ring were subject to police brutality and extortions by the military<sup>20</sup>. For what concerns Individualism, the Earth Kingdom mainly falls in the middle of the spectrum. On one hand, by keeping news of the war outside the walls of the Upper Ring, Long Feng managed to create a society with zero to no struggles. They live in harmony and that is always the main goal, as much as consensus is. Press is controlled by the state and private life and opinions are group matters: when Sokka asks a student of Ba Sing Se University<sup>21</sup> “which one of his professors he could ask about the war with the Fire Nation”, the student looks at Joo Dee who shakes her head no, and the boy quickly avoids the question and runs away. On the other hand, individualistic interests prevail over everything else: by keeping the war out of Ba Sing Se, Long Feng is depriving the other nations of their strongest ally against the Fire Nation. Even though not much is told about gender roles in the Earth Kingdom, we could still affirm that it tends more to be a Masculine society. This can be determined because they focus more on material success and progress – avoiding news of the war in order to prosper – figures of power are decisive and assertive and money and material possession are extremely important. Lastly, it has Strong Uncertainty Avoidance (SUA): due to their strong connection to their bending element, the earth, the people of the Earth Kingdom are described as “immovable”<sup>22</sup>. A SUA society tends to accept familiar risks and fear ambiguous situations, and this is shown with the management of the war: its consequences were unknown, so it was decided altogether to pretend it never existed. Political censorships also imply the “suppression of deviant ideas”, shown by what happens with the student questioned by Sokka, and reinforced by the brainwashing of all Joo Dees and those who oppose Long Feng<sup>18</sup>.

Concerning the onion diagram, the most prominent symbol throughout the Earth Kingdom is its emblem (Figure 5), also shown on the uniform of the Dai Li soldiers. The layers of the emblem are meant to symbolize the various depths of the Earth Kingdom itself: it represents the “immeasurable layers of deep rock and minerals which earthbenders manipulate to maintain their great cities” and “the inhabitants' commitment toward a peaceful and productive way of life”<sup>23</sup>. The Earth Kingdom does not appear to have figures they hold in high regard for what concerns heroes. Rituals, instead,



*Figure 5. Earth Kingdom emblem.*

are different: due to the vastity of the Kingdom, it is assumed that different cities have different traditions. For example, the viewer learns about a ritual called “The Avatar Day”<sup>19</sup>, celebrated in Chin Village: the villagers build effigies of various Avatars – in the episode, statues of Avatar Kyoshi, Roku and Aang himself are shown – and later burn them, screaming “down with the Avatar!”. This happens because the villagers hold Avatar Kyoshi (and thus,

<sup>19</sup> Season 2, Episode 5. “Avatar Day.”

<sup>20</sup> Season 2, Episode 7. “Zuko Alone.”

<sup>21</sup> Season 2, Episode 10. “The Library.”

<sup>22</sup> Season 2, Episode 9. “Bitter Work.” Iroh to Zuko.

<sup>23</sup> The Lost Scrolls: Earth.

all her reincarnations) responsible for killing their founder, Chin the Great, whom the village is named after.

The Fire Nation is the last nation that is going to be analyzed, and it is a peculiar case because we are talking once again about a state under political censorship. As for the Earth Kingdom, this analysis will also begin with a brief history of the nation. The Fire Nation is located on the Fire Islands, on the western side of the country (Figure 1), and the capital is simply called Fire Nation Capital. It is a monarchy and a militarist autocracy, under the control of the Fire Lord. During the events of the Hundred Year War, the reigning Fire Lord was Ozai, father of Zuko and Azula and brother of Iroh. Fire Lord Sozin started the Hundred Year War because he wanted the four nations under his control: he knew that only the Avatar could stop him and that it would be reborn in the Air Nomads tribe, so he exploited the Comet's<sup>24</sup> power to eliminate all the Airbenders and thus his biggest enemy. After Sozin's death, his son Azulon continued the campaign to conquer the four nations: he expanded the Fire Nation borders and conquered most of the Earth Kingdom and former Air Nomad's territories<sup>25</sup>, using the conquered land to further industrialize the Fire Nation, making it the most advanced nation in the world<sup>26</sup>. The process of industrialization continued throughout the entirety of Azulon's reign, and many cities grew to prosper. On the other hand, the growing industrialization caused environmental pollution at the expense of the rural population<sup>27</sup>. After Azulon's death, his son Ozai followed and maintained his father's policies of expansion; moreover, his reign saw the fall of the Earth Kingdom, – thanks to the conquering of Ba Sing Se at the hand of his daughter Azula – even more technological improvement and the resurgence of Avatar Aang that eventually led to his defeat.

Concerning Hofstede's model, the Fire Nation is a society with a large Power Distance. It is the nation that gives the viewer a deeper look into family life, and thanks to the Fire Nation royal family, it is possible to determine the relationship between parents and children. Prince Zuko has been banished by his father because he unintentionally disrespected him, by speaking out against him during a meeting first, and then because he refused to duel him. This resulted in Ozai giving Zuko a distinctive burn scar, by placing his hand on his eye before dishonoring him<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, Azula has always been obedient and disciplined, and Ozai stated that "she was born lucky" while Zuko was "lucky to be born", not hiding his preference for his most obedient child<sup>28</sup>. The same thing is shown in the relationship between students and teachers: when Aang disguises himself as a Fire Nation student, he is immediately scolded for being unpolite and called a "mannerless slob" by the teacher when he does not bow as soon as he enters the class<sup>29</sup>. Moving on, it falls in the middle of the Individualism dimension, leaning slightly more toward Collectivist: on one hand, the interests that prevail are the one of the Fire Lord and the council, and – on a larger scale – the interests of the capital prevail over the ones of the other cities, as mentioned before when stated that

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<sup>24</sup> Sozin's Comet, as mentioned in chapter 4.

<sup>25</sup> Season 3, Episode 16. "The Southern Raiders."

<sup>26</sup> Season 1, Episode 6. "Imprisoned."

<sup>27</sup> Season 3, Episode 3 & 7. "The Painted Lady." and "The Runaway."

<sup>28</sup> *The Search*.

<sup>29</sup> Season 3, Episode 2. "The Headband."

the capital is highly industrialized while other cities suffer because of its pollution. On the other hand, one of the reasons the autocratic regime imposed by the Fire Lords manages to continue is the political propaganda that starts to be imposed from a young age: this shows that not only the press is controlled by the state, but even the way of thinking. During a class, the teacher mentions an Air Nomads' military force, but one never existed, since the Air Nomads were a peaceful nation<sup>29</sup>. This shows that the Fire Nation uses lies and manipulation in order to justify its attack on the Air Nomads, and this manipulation starts with children. Furthermore, children are shown to be afraid to contradict what has been taught to them and differentiate from the group: when Aang and Katara invite the children they met at school to dance, they are afraid to do so and when the duo starts to do so instead, they are labeled as different and the students look at them weirdly<sup>29</sup>. Concerning the Masculinity index, the Fire Nation falls more on the Masculine side, even though the nation is known for its long history of gender equality<sup>30</sup>. The core values are success and progress, as shown with the campaign to conquer the four nations. We also see that Ozai scolds Zuko for being too emotional, and deeming him a "coward"<sup>32</sup>, while Azula is deemed his father's pride because she shared his attitude of violence and cruelty, and became a perfectionist in order to keep her father on her side<sup>31</sup>. Lastly, the Fire Nation falls on the strong Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. The nation has numerous laws and rules, and it is extremely conservative. Moreover, the school serves as a process of "mild-molding" in order to instill a strong nationalism and loyalty to the Fire Lord in children<sup>29</sup>. This also led to the creation of a "cult" around the Fire Lord and the royal family, which were seen as messengers that were meant to spread the greatness of the Fire Nation to all other nations: these beliefs lead to discrimination at the expense of citizens of other countries and of the colonies as well, perpetuating an ideology where the Fire Nation was always and unequivocally right about all matters<sup>29</sup>.

For what concerns the onion diagram, the biggest symbol in the Fire Nation is the flame. It is highly recognizable since it is both the national emblem (Figure 6) and is present on the headpieces worn by the royal family (Figure 7); when it comes to the latter, it represents power, given the immediate connection made to the Fire Lord and their family.



Figure 7. Fire Lord headpiece.

Furthermore, hairstyles are a symbol since they represent social status: the greatest importance is given to the top-knot, and changing it signified a great loss of honor, while it was cut only in circumstances akin to death. For example, Iroh and Zuko cut off their top-knot when they became fugitives<sup>32</sup> during the events of Book Two. As mentioned above, the Fire Lord becomes idolized through indoctrination and therefore is the hero of the whole nation, whose behavior serves as a model and characteristics highly prized. Lastly, there are a number of rituals in the nation, but perhaps the most significant one is the Agni Kai. It is a firenation duel, that happens when one has a dispute with another and it is a traditional method of resolving conflict. If the challenge proposed is



Figure 6. Fire Nation Emblem.

<sup>30</sup> *The Promise: Part One.*

<sup>31</sup> Season 1, Episode 20. "The Siege of the North. Part 2."

<sup>32</sup> Season 2, Episode 1. "The Avatar State".

accepted, then the participants move to another location, either an official dueling area – such as the one in the Fire Nation Palace – or whatever open area is available at the moment. The participants begin with their backs turned and face each other once the duel starts; it ends when one burns the other, and the outcome affects the honor of both.

During Book Three, once Team Avatar arrives in the Fire Nation and tries to blend with its inhabitants, we have various examples of how cultural differences come into play – not only due to the fact that Aang comes from the Air Nomads tribe, Sokka and Katara from the Southern Water Tribe and Toph from the Earth Kingdom, but also because the differences are generational. The first instance was mentioned before when talking about Individualism: Fire Nation children are shocked when Aang and Katara invite them to dance since it was not considered proper, indicating culture shock. They are stunned and afraid of getting in trouble, while Aang does it with no problem – they are roughly the same age, and the changing factors are provenience and education. Even though this example is telling, the most interesting exchange happens when the Team has just arrived. Being the Avatar, Aang can share the memories of his past lives, and this includes Avatar Roku – who belonged to the Fire Nation. Aang mentions an old friend of his who lived in the nation, Kuzon, and claims to be an expert when it comes to the local customs; particularly, he greets firenation people with the phrase “*Flamey-O, Hotmen!*”. The greeting per-se is not uncommon or incorrect, it simply is old: Aang’s friend, Kuzon, lived in the Fire Nation a hundred years ago, while the sentence was aimed at a young couple who did not recognize the greeting. Moreover, Aang is weirded out by the fact that the pair does not recognize the phrase, and keeps repeating it again throughout the episode. This detail may seem small, but it hints at the generational discrepancy and shows another layer of culture: from Aang’s point of view, there is nothing wrong with his greeting and it is correct, while the couple recognizes it as something different that might spot a visitor.

These kinds of peculiarities – as well as the information given about the four nations which allowed us to place them on Hofstede’s dimensions – point out the thoughtfulness behind the creation of this universe, and the understanding of various facets of culture and how those may interact with each other. All these details allow the viewer not only to better relate to the characters, but also to immerse themselves in the universe these are a part of. After analyzing the case study and managing to find enough details to place it on Hofstede’s dimensions, and point out culture shocks and cultural differences between the Four Nations, it is possible to determine that the ATLA universe is a great example of well-structured worldbuilding.

## **4.2 Focus on nonverbal aspects of animated media**

This chapter is going to focus on nonverbal communication and general aspects that pertain to ATLA. It will start with some theoretical background about nonverbal communication, retrieved from *A Primer on Communication Studies* (2012), then move on to some examples from the case study and lastly it will analyze the nonverbal communication behind the different bending styles.

When talking about nonverbal communication, we are referring to the process of generating meaning through mediums other than words. It is important to stress that verbal and nonverbal communication are not opposite, but are actually different components of the same mechanism. Furthermore, they also are some important differences between the two: firstly, they are processed by different hemispheres of the brain, and secondly, nonverbal communication is not ruled by conventions and rules such as verbal communication is with grammar. Lastly, while verbal communication is mainly human, every specie is capable of generating nonverbal communication. This type of communication is involuntary for the most part and often conveys more meaning than verbal communication. It is possible to identify various categories of nonverbal communication: kinesics, haptics, vocalics, proxemics, chronemics, and personal presentation and environment.

Kinesics refers to body movement and posture and is itself divided into gestures, head movements and posture, eye contact and facial expressions. Gestures concern arm and head movements, and include: adaptors, gestures that indicate the internal state of an individual and are often related to anxiety or stress, such as repeatedly clicking a pen when uncomfortable; emblems, gestures that have a specific agreed on meaning, which changes from culture to culture, and an example of this is the thumbs up as meaning “okay”; lastly, illustrators are the most common type of gestures and accompany verbal communication. Under this category of gestures fall hand movements to indicate measures while talking, and differently than emblems, they do not have an agreed-on meaning. Head movements and posture concern the orientation of the movements of the head, which can indicate agreement (nodding), disagreement and much more, while posture can denote assertiveness, shyness, defensiveness and other things. Oculistics is the category that studies eye movements, and mainly refers to eye contact or lack thereof, and generally how an individual uses eye contact in conversation. Lastly, facial expressions refer to the use of the forehead, brow, and facial muscles to convey meaning such as happiness, sadness and many others.

Haptics refers to touch behaviors that convey meaning during interactions, and they operate at different levels: functional-professional, social-polite, friendship-warmth, and love-intimacy. Touch behaviors vary not only from culture to culture but also from one social situation to another.

Vocalics refer to the vocalized – but not verbal – aspects of nonverbal communication, such as pitch, volume, tone of voice, and rate. These are also called paralanguage and reinforce the meaning of verbal communication, as when an individual wants to emphasize a given word while speaking and raises the tone of their voice or volume.

Proxemics concern the use of space and distance during communication, and are strictly linked with culture. For example, the United States have four zones of personal space: public, which can be accessed by everyone; social, which is reserved for acquaintances; personal, which is reserved for friends and family; and intimate, which is usually reserved for partners. Moreover, proxemics also studies how people “conquer” and “defend” their personal space and territory.

Chronemics refers to the study of time and how it affects communication. For example, it concerns how different time cycles can interfere with communication, such as differences between people who are past-oriented or future-oriented. Furthermore, different cultures have different perspectives on time, which could be fixed and measured (monochronic) or fluid and adaptable (polychronic).

Lastly, personal presentation and environment refer to how artifacts – the objects individuals chose to wear or accessorize themselves with – provide nonverbal cues that others can convey meaning from. For example, the way of dressing or the seating positions in a room, given the fact that usually, the most important person sits at the head of the table.

It is possible to find various examples of kinesics in ATLA, especially gestures. One of the most relevant ones happens when the Team goes undercover in the Fire Nation, and Aang attends school with firenation children<sup>29</sup> and fails to correctly emulate an emblem. The traditional Fire Nation greeting consists of a slight bow, accompanied by the right hand placed in a fist and right under the left hand, close enough that the knuckles of the right hand meet the palm of the left. When Aang gets the greeting wrong by placing his left fist directly on the palm of his right-hand (Figure 8), he risks giving away his cover since every firenation child knows how to properly greet according to tradition. These kinds of emblems are not exclusive to the Fire Nation, since every nation is shown to have its traditional greeting: the Southern Water tribe usually greets by grabbing each other’s right arm, just before the elbow<sup>33</sup>; the Earth Kingdom’s traditional greeting consists in bowing with the right hand in a fist and covering it with the left hand, and wrists slightly lift up, making it so that the hands are facing the other individual and not the ground<sup>34</sup>; lastly, Air Nomads greet by bowing with their palms pressed together and the fingers lift up to the sky.



Figure 8. Aang doing the Fire Nation greeting improperly.

Personal presentation and environment are also relevant in the ATLA universe, given that



Figure 10. Zuko’s formal Fire Lord robe.

each nation possesses its own traditional costumes. An instance in which has been particularly relevant to storytelling and character development is in the costume design of the Fire Lord robe, and the subtle differences between Ozai’s (Figure 9) and Zuko’s (Figure 10)<sup>35</sup>. It is possible to observe that, firstly, Ozai’s robe is made of darker shades of red and black than Zuko’s, and at the same time the dress appears less voluminous on Zuko. On Ozai, the upper part of the dress appears sharper and “pointier”, mirroring his attitude as a merciless dictator – just like the character, the dress itself takes up a lot of space. Conversely, Zuko’s lines appear to be softer, even



Figure 9. Ozai’s formal Fire Lord robe.

<sup>33</sup> Season 2, Episode 19. “The Guru.”

<sup>34</sup> Season 1, Episode 11. “The Great Divide.”

<sup>35</sup> Images are taken from the official Artbook of the Series, by Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko.



the neckline is not as high and buttoned up. This symbolizes Zuko's new approach as a Fire Lord and his own personal desire of distancing himself from his father. These little details also change the profile of the Fire Lord image: not as authoritarian, not as tyrannical as Ozai was.

The details in greeting and the character design are a part of the layers of nonverbal communication shown in ATLA, and perhaps the most important form of nonverbal communication is the art of bending itself. In the artbook of the series, Byran Konietzko (2020) states that they "had a desire to do something physical and tangible with the concept of magic" (p.26), in order to steer away from traditional magic depictions. Since the series is set in an "Asian-inspired" fantasy world, the next logical step was to use traditional Chinese martial arts to manipulate the four elements. Initially, the authors thought about using only Northern Shaolin as bending style and moved to find instructors willing to help them, and the aim behind this was to make the bending moves as realistic as possible. The concept shifted when Konietzko met with martial arts instructor Sifu Kisu, who suggested assigning "a specific discipline of Chinese martial arts to each nation and element based on each style's characteristics", an approach that greatly helped to define the different cultures of the ATLA universe. In chapter 4, what discipline had been assigned to each bending style had been briefly mentioned, and this paragraph is going to dive deeper into the disciplines, the characteristics that belong to them, and how they play into the Avatar universe culture.

Airbending is modeled after Baguazhang, a discipline that emphasizes circular motions, and it is one of the few disciplines that utilize weapons: this is mirrored in airbending, as Avatar Kyoshi uses fans to enhance her airbending technique, and Air Nomads are shown to carry a glider with them that aids in flying and can be used in combat as well. The Air Nomads are a pacifist but fierce population – as shown when Monk Gyatzo's corpse is shown surrounded by the corpses of defeated Fire Nation soldiers – and this characteristic pertains to Baguazhang as well. The bender and/or martial artist is constantly moving, showing flexibility: they are agile and constantly repositioning, allowing them to easily gain the upper hand in combat. Furthermore, these quick and unpredictable movements mean they can easily switch from evasion and defending to attacking, mirroring the dual nature of airbending.

Waterbending is modeled after Thai Chi, whose fluid movements parallel the ones of a tide. Although it is commonly used as exercise or for meditation purposes, a skilled Thai Chi practitioner is able to both defend and attack in just one movement. It requires time and patience to master, no matter how easy it appears to be: even though a Thai Chi practitioner could look like an easy prey, they are able to completely turn the tide around, mirroring the strength of the ocean and its ability to transform calm into sudden waves.

Earthbending is modeled after Hung Gar, a discipline focused on extremely solid stances and powerful attacks. It employs low and wide movements, making its practitioner almost impossible to take down, just like the "immovable" earthbenders. Moreover, it involves a great amount of footwork, mirroring the Earthbenders connection to their element. One of the greatest earthbender shown in the series is Toph, who is blind: for this reason, her style of bending was modeled after Chu Gar – or Southern Praying Mantis Style – a discipline focused on keeping one's feet always on the ground. This detail is important, as Toph always

mentioned that her feet are her eyes, and choosing a discipline that involves this great amount of footwork and stance makes perfect sense for her character.

Lastly, Fire Bending is modeled after Northern Shaolin Kung Fu. This discipline involves more jumps, kicks, and punches than any other style, making firebending a more energetic form of bending than the others. It has a sharp form and it mostly focuses on offense rather than defense, perfectly representing the nature of a warring country like the Fire Nation. Even though it appears more chaotic when compared to the other styles, learning to control the form and master the style requires a great amount of time and patience. This mirrors the way in which firebending has been manipulated by the Fire Lords: by making the firebenders believe that their main focus is aggression, there was no time for patience or practice, the only aim was to attack. However, it is actually shown that the origin of firebending<sup>4</sup> steers away from this aggression and instead relies on time and dedication.

### **4.3 Avatar: The Last Airbender: creating culture from existing sources**

When I chose ATLA as the case study for this dissertation, the choice came easily given how much I love the franchise and highly appreciate the storyline and all the details that make the ATLA universe feel so real. However, it would be incorrect and unethical not to mention the fact that some of these elements exist in the real world first, especially when the influences mainly belong to Asian and Pacific Islanders communities and Indigenous people. Some of the influences are quite obvious, such as the fact that the art and calligraphy in the show replicate Chinese and Japanese style calligraphy, as well as the references to Japanese anime and how heavily based on Japan the Fire Nation is – the monarchical system, the style of clothing and the overall aesthetic of Fire Nation citizens. Furthermore, it borrows elements from Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Chinese martial arts as well. As for Native American culture, the overall aesthetic of the Southern Water Tribe is taken from the Inuit film *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), as confirmed by Di Martino and Konietzko (2020, p.42) too.

The word “Avatar” itself comes from the Sanskrit word *Avatāra*, which means “descent”. In Hinduism, it is believed that the gods manifest themselves in the form of Avatars in the time of great need or danger (Britt, 2008), and this connection is reaffirmed because the Chinese characters that appear in the show’s intro mean “the divine spiritual medium who has descended upon the mortal world”. The Avatar cycle is also influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, and this is shown when Aang reveals that – when he was young – the monks made him choose between hundreds of toys, and he picked out the four that belonged to the previous Avatars; in Tibetan Buddhism a similar ceremony is carried out for the reincarnations of a Tulku Lama: “a number of objects such as rosaries, ritualistic implements, books, tea-cups, etc., are placed together, and the child must pick out those which belonged to the late *tulku*, thus showing that he recognizes the things which were theirs in their previous life” (David-Néel, 1936:p.108).

In my opinion, the universe that DiMartino and Konietzko created with ATLA is marvelous and incredibly well-written when it is put in perspective the fact that it was mainly aimed at a very young audience. However, my opinion stems from the background of a white girl in

her 20s, and can therefore be biased since I do not belong to a minority nor is my culture constantly misused and mistreated by the media. The opinion of the Asian community regarding ATLA has been expressed many times online, and that is the opinion that matters the most: a Chinese user (2022) on a forum states that “there are times that I somehow felt a little bit offended about some small part or details of the shows that I can't help but become curious is whether is the show producer is trying to add insults towards me and my race”, and concludes the post by saying that “moreover, I would like to say that the shows do offend me a little bit/or not, but I truly enjoy the shows.” Another user on Reddit (2012) writes “my personal thoughts: speaking as a second-generation Taiwanese American I find that what makes ATLA so compelling for me comes packaged in the form of representation— and not just any old representation, but good representation”, and this points out the fact that ATLA has been both positively and negatively received by the community. As Caroline Cao (2017) states in an article for *The Mary Sue*, “of course, the show’s synthesis of various Asian and indigenous cultures is not every Asian American viewer’s cup of tea. Nothing has the pitch perfect illustration of existing cultures. There are viewers who perceive the show as more cultural oriental appropriation than adept world building with cultural application”.

As seen by some of these comments, the show might do a good job as far as representation goes, but it still is important to stress that the representation could be – and oftentimes is – biased and incorrect since the point of view is still that of two men that do not belong to the cultures they borrow from.

## 5. Conclusion

This dissertation analyzed *Avatar: The Last Airbender* from a cultural standpoint, diving into its worldbuilding and concluding with a chapter about the main inspiration behind the show and the possible biases behind it. Before analyzing the case study, a theoretical background about culture was outlined, with a brief summary of the evolution of the world itself and the challenges that it encompasses even today. Then, the paper moved on to the theoretical background, analyzing Hofstede’s dimensions of culture and Agar’s theory on languaculture and rich points. Moreover, by analyzing the response to the *Divergent* series and then the case study, it has been possible to determine that worldbuilding and culture matter. By comparing *Divergent*’s reviews and both viewer rates and the prizes received by ATLA it appears clear that the importance given to the construction of a fictional universe is an important factor when it comes to the success of a series, be it animated or not. Overall, it is possible to say that the main aim of this dissertation is to put into perspective the relevance of culture in worldbuilding, switching the focus from the traditional approach to culture to a different one. This decision came with the fact that viewers have more choices nowadays, and can pick out what they like and dislike from a vast number of products – so, we are left to ask ourselves how to choose, why some franchises fail and some instead become standpoints and blueprints from those to follow. The reason behind this might lie behind the attention it was put into the construction of that given universe, how much detail was put into giving it a culture, however difficult it is to even define it, allowing the viewer to connect not only with the characters but also to almost feel at home in the world. Namely, this last point is what motivated me to write

this dissertation, with the hope of reminding those who choose to read it that stories are almost never just stories, but mediums through which we can see the world differently.

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