

by Richard Kurin

When I was growing up in New York in the 1950s, there was a popular joke about a man who was opening up a Chinese restaurant — though it could just as easily have been a Jewish deli or Italian pizzeria:

This guy wanted to promote his new restaurant, so he put a sign in the window — “Best Chinese Food in New York City.” Another guy a few stores away got nervous and the next day put a new sign in *his* window — “Best Chinese Food in the United States.” A third restaurant owner on the block, worried about losing customers, got someone to make him a new neon sign for his window — “Best Chinese Food in the Whole World.” In this battle, a fourth restaurant put out its sign — “Best Chinese Food in the Universe.” The last restaurant was owned by a guy who thought the whole thing ridiculous; he really served the best food and was very clever, so he put up his sign — “Best Chinese Food on the Block!” Of course, he got all the business.

The Globalization & Localization of Culture

Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Tip O'Neill said that "all politics is local." The joke illustrates a parallel point — all culture is local. Though all sorts of traditions, innovations, discoveries, and events may originate in distant places, their impact, if they have any, must be felt "close to home" to make a difference in people's everyday lives. Conversely, as in the example, local culture is often projected into a larger regional, national, even global context. From foods to sounds, technology to fashion, language to celebrity, the products we associate with global culture originate with particular people in a localized situation.

GLOBALIZING AND LOCALIZING PROCESS

Globalization and localization are dynamic, inter-related processes of cultural interchange. We sometimes equate globalization with the spread of Western and particularly U.S. commercial cultural products around the world — McDonald's burgers and fries, Levi's jeans, reruns of "I Love Lucy," CNN "Headline News," Hollywood action films, and Disney characters. The seeming ubiquity of these products and their attendant economic consequences are sometimes seen as threatening or wiping out local culture and draining local economies for the benefit of distant multinational corporations. Folklorist Alan Lomax saw this trend early on — the ever-extending spread of a commercial mass culture that would lead to the increasing homogeneity of culture everywhere. "Cultural gey-out" was the term he used.

There are other cultural products that also go global

or at least close to it, and yet have little association with either American origins or Western corporations. Indian films from Mumbai — "Bollywood" in the vernacular — move easily across the Subcontinent into East Africa and the Gulf, and to groceries and eateries in Chicago, picking up Swahili, Arabic, and English subtitles, and racking up more viewers than anything Hollywood puts out. Chinese food is found across the globe, carried not by chain stores but by families who've settled in just about every nation. Sometimes the globalization is aesthetically driven — while Americans danced the Brazilian Macarena and hummed the tunes of South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo, bluegrass became more popular in Japan than in the United States. Other times, it may have socio-political ends. Amazonian Native people, for example, work with Ben and Jerry's and Cultural Survival on creating tropical nut ice cream to sell to American consumers to help save rainforest culture. In these cases, a localized cultural product has been universalized. And it's not only commercial products that traverse the planet, but ideas as well. Americans, French, and Brazilians chant Tibetan Buddhist mantras. Ideas of democracy and human rights reach Tiananmen Square, as students sing "We Shall Overcome." Indian writers dominate contemporary English-language literature, and South African heroes inspire the world.

At the same time culture goes global, it also becomes localized. McDonald's, to accommodate Hindu and Muslim sensibilities in India, serves mutton burgers — no beef, no pork. Universalized English is transformed into



example, of the spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet even with formal doctrine and belief, we see a tremendous variety of local forms of “universal” religion, e.g., Afro-Caribbean syntheses with Christianity; Indonesian, Moroccan, and even British styles of Muslim practice; Japanese, Sri Lankan, and American styles of Buddhism. Some globalizations occur over centuries, spreading cultural products, customs, beliefs, and values, such as Hispanization in the New World; and some forms of localization occur almost immediately, as for example the adaptation by Trobriand Islanders in World War II of cricket as a clan contest invoking magic and ritual exchange. Some forms of globalization may be more humane than others, more respectful of the cultural diversity they subsume. They may actually encourage local cultural practice and the production of traditional and innovative arts, goods, and ideas. In other cases, the agents of globalization – whether they be conquerors, merchants, or missionaries – may be quite imperial and

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Spanglish at the Mexican border. Computer keyboards are remanufactured with Chinese rather than Latin characters to serve a nation with over a billion people. American television shows are recast with local characters, accents, and plots the world over. Studio synthesizers are retooled for use as instruments in African pop music clubs. Western rock music acquires Russian lyrics and themes in Moscow.

Localization tends to make culture more heterogeneous. Widespread cultural forms are actively adapted by local people and particularized to local sensibilities, taking on local nuances, local character, and terminology. New products and ideas are absorbed into local practice.

The processes of globalization and localization are not new. From ancient times, trade along the Silk Road was a globalizing force, bringing luxury goods and ideas across continents. The ancient civilizations of India, of Meso- and South America were globalizing in their own right, developing dialectical relationships with local and regional subcultures as they spread over the landscape. While some globalizations are commercially based, like the Silk Road, others are religious; one thinks, for

oppressive. Rather than encouraging a local engagement of the global culture, they may persecute practitioners of the local culture and seek to outlaw or delegitimize the identity and institutions of local folk. In such cases, local culture may become a refuge from or vehicle of resistance to globalizing forces.

CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL EXCHANGE

What is new about the current processes of globalization and localization is the speed at which they take place, the number of cultural products involved, and the breadth of distribution. Paleo-archaeologists suggest it took a few hundred thousand years for the knowledge of fire-making to spread among all humans. Now, goods can spread around the world in days, information in minutes, and digital transactions in milliseconds. This is fine for many things, but it is not uniformly good. Viruses biological and virtual now spread much more quickly than our ability to control them. Secondly, in prior forms of globalization relatively few products, materials, or ideas were moved from place to place, traveling by foot, horseback, or boat. Today, uncountable ideas flow over the World

Wide Web across the planet. Innumerable goods and materials fill shipments, suitcases, and express mail packages. Again, while this is beneficial for distributing medicine to needy children, it is problematic in reference to the flow of pollutants, illegal drugs, and weapons. Finally, while prior globalizing forms depended upon face-to-face contact and reached only a relatively few people at a time through adventurers, brokers, and middlemen, today's globalization reaches great numbers of people through mass migration, travel, communication, and the pervasive electronic media. When the content is humane, democratic, uplifting, this may be fine. But when it conveys lies, inflames hatred, and provokes violence, a broad global reach might not be such a good thing.

The pace and scope of the flow or movement of cultural products have implications for the way we think about cultures. Most of our social sciences are based upon the idea of culture as a natural phenomenon. Early theorists classified cultures as they would species. Natural

istic framework of cultural processes. Culture doesn't just happen. Globalization and localization depend upon the active decision-making of particular people and groups of people, deliberating agents who recognize various beliefs and practices in a constellation of local and global spheres, weigh alternatives, craft strategies, and pursue activities to achieve desired ends. Many political, fiscal, cultural, and artistic leaders are quite conscious of their choices to, for example, adapt global practices, support local institutions, invite benevolent and fend off malevolent influences, etc., as they see them.

2001 FESTIVAL PROGRAMS

The programs at this year's Festival, like those of other years, well illustrate the relationship and dynamic tension between local and global cultural processes.

Globalization is not new to Bermuda, itself discovered during an age of global exploration. From the beginning, settlers had to adapt to local conditions to survive. They

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processes of evolution were thought to model cultural ones. Indeed, we still find anthropology departments in natural history museums. This naturalistic view of culture has also been a rather static one — cultures are named, bounded, clearly associated with a particular people, time, and geography. Society has structure, is arranged in strata, has a morphology, and culture has a set of discrete traits and characteristics. Globalization and localization challenge this static view and suggest an alternative, hydraulic metaphor. Culture and society may be more fluid, as beliefs and practices flow globally and are channeled locally. Populations flow across borders in waves. Speech and images flow through fiber-optic cable. The free flow of ideas, information, and fiscal transactions is the basis of the global economy. We now have "streaming culture," as sounds and images from around the world flow into home computers. Thinking about the ebb and flow of culture may be a more appropriate 21st-century way to conceptualize exchange than to see it in terms of center and periphery, metropole and hinterland, as characterized 19th- and 20th-century views. But even more, globalization and localization challenge the natura-

lized seafaring and trading skills. They carved furniture out of local cedar and ingeniously quarried limestone, cut it into slabs, and made roofs for their homes with conduits to catch, funnel, and store precious rain — their only source of fresh water. Despite its small size and lonely mid-Atlantic location, the world came to Bermuda, with its settlers originating in England, and subsequent population coming from the Caribbean, the United States, the Azores, and increasingly now from around the world. Tourists and international companies followed. Bermuda gave the world its onions, its shorts, its sailing prowess. Now, Bermuda builds on its experience as historical values and connections have evolved into contemporary ones. Its strategic position on mercantile sea trade routes has been transformed into a similarly strategic position in the flow of international capital through the finance, banking, and re-insurance industries. Ingenuity on the high seas has turned into skill in navigating contemporary markets. The survival skills honed on rock isles have encouraged adaptability, flexibility, and self-reliance. Bermudians know how to take things from elsewhere and make them their own, giving them local significance.



Kite-flying, benign child's play in most places, had serious educational value here, teaching children to adapt materials, designs, and techniques to wind currents, a particularly useful talent on the high seas. Cricket, a colonial game imported by Anglo-Bermudians, is the centerpiece of Cup Match, an annual island ritual celebrating the 1834 liberation from slavery. In music, Caribbean calypso, Jamaican reggae, club music, and even jazz acquire Bermudian lyrics and tones.

The masters of the building arts brought to the Mall for the Festival illustrate the historical, global spread of craftsmanship. Stone carvers, originally immigrants from Italy, have carved American icons from Washington National Cathedral to the Supreme Court. Of course, they have had to do their work with Indiana limestone, Vermont granite, and a host of other local materials. Adobe builders from New Mexico practice an art with roots in the ancient Middle East. This architecture, mud brick used by peasants the world over, became a local tradition in New Mexico. Now it is the rage among the richest of newly immigrant home buyers in that state.

The building arts have flourished because of their spread. New tools, techniques, and materials have been acquired in decorative metalwork, plastering, and brickwork over the centuries, as these crafts have traversed the planet. Still, localizations provide nuances of style and innovations.

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And then there is New York. There is no place more global. Wall Street, the garment district, Broadway — these are global institutions, intimately tied to financial, fashion, and entertainment networks the world over. Just about every cuisine in the world is available in New York. People speaking hundreds of languages, from every nation and region on earth, populate the city. New York is a concentration of ideas, styles, and information, a magnet for the rest of the world, drawing in people of all kinds, shapes, persuasions, and interests.

But New York is not just a collection of the world's cultural diversity. It is its crucible. The local culture is juxtaposition, combination, fusion, opposition, resistance. Localization is interaction. Where else can you get kosher

Chinese Cuban food? Where else do Dominican merengue, Afro-Puerto Rican rap, and Indian *bhangra* come together? In New York, the localization process gathers in people and ideas, puts them together in new ways, and turns them loose — primarily and first for local consumption. New York is its distinctive neighborhoods and its varied communities of ethnicity and interest. But it is most importantly the movement between them. As *New York Times* music critic Jon Pareles notes, “In New York, we don’t need no stinkin’ Internet, we have the subway!” In New York, globalization is local culture.

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

Humans have generally benefited by cultural exchange. But a balance needs to be maintained between globalization and localization. Extreme globalization would eliminate cultural diversity on the planet. Imagine all ideas expressed in only one language. How about one culture, one cuisine, one way of dressing, one way of praying, one way of thinking, one way of playing music or making art? This would not only be boring, it would probably doom humankind, for in an evolutionary sense, cultural diversity gives us options for future survival.

On the other hand, extreme localization would preclude the adaptation of good new ideas, good innovations from “somewhere else” that could bring benefits to local people everywhere. Local cultures would likely

All people need the freedom to realize their own identity and to practice their own traditions, be they religious, linguistic, culinary, musical, or artistic. Cultural democracy relies upon the knowledge of cultural practitioners and their access to their own heritage — significant sites, land, texts. Cultural democracy flourishes when people reap the benefits of their cultural achievements and have the continued opportunity to build on those achievements through creative change. Localization depends upon the ability of local people to continue their means of cultural production. In an era of intense globalization, local people need to be seen — and see themselves — not just as consumers or recipients of goods and ideas produced elsewhere, but as cultural creators.

Encouraging local cultural creativity in a global context has long been central to the purpose of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Ralph Rinzler, its first director, saw the Festival as a means of highlighting the diversity of local cultures for the beauty, wisdom, and knowledge they embodied and of sharing that appreciation broadly. S. Dillon Ripley, the former Smithsonian Secretary who passed away earlier this year and whose memory we honor, provided the leadership for instituting the Festival, and was always a strong supporter. He saw the Festival as a way in which the Smithsonian, as a globalizing force, could nonetheless help preserve local cultures by drawing attention to their historical and ongoing value to human-

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atrophy without a source of new energies, ideas, and goods from other societies.

How then to assure a balance between processes of globalization and localization? At the global level, there has to be a respect for cultural democracy, the idea that diverse cultural communities have something to say and contribute to the wisdom, knowledge, skill, and artistry that define our humanity. There need be concomitant understandings, ethical and legal, in place that can assure human cultural rights, including those which allow people to benefit from their cultural creativity and property, tangible and intangible. The world has made great strides, at the global level, in defining those rights through international accords.

ity. Margaret Mead, the world-renowned anthropologist whose centennial we also honor this year, was a strong supporter of the Festival. She noted that at the Festival, “everyone is a participant,” local tradition-bearers and Smithsonian officials and casual visitors. The idea behind this was profoundly culturally democratic. It is in each person’s long-term interest that a diversity of strong cultures be encouraged to preserve and extend their traditions, even create new ones, so that all people might have that much more to learn from each other.

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