

The Cultural Edge

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THIS SUMMER, THE FESTIVAL features programs on the cultures of Mali, Scotland, and Appalachia. Each, obviously, could stand on its own. Yet their juxtaposition on the National Mall, while largely arbitrary, nonetheless suggests a broader conceptualization. The Festival's participants—creative musicians and artisans who will sit together on shuttle buses, live and eat at the same hotel, and jam together in the evening—will surely make something of sharing a common moment. So what to say about this mix?

Mali, Scotland, and Appalachia are different types of entities. Mali is an independent nation; Scotland is part of a larger United Kingdom; Appalachia is a region of the United States. They represent three different continents, and sub-regions of those continents at that. But there are similarities. All are relatively sparsely populated compared to nearby population centers. All are possessed of a rugged natural environment that posed historical challenges for economies, communication, and transportation. Their populations have also reflected upon and struggled over issues of representation—basic ways of having their voices heard. All are democracies. Mali was home to a series of historic empires and then part of France's colonial regime before winning independence in 1960. Scotland was long an independent kingdom, fighting and later united with England, and now gaining a measure of autonomy. Appalachia has always been part of larger colonies and states but lacking in enough political weight to have a strong voice across their boundaries. Most interestingly, all have been centers of immense cultural creativity. The Festival programs this year thus provide a good case for thinking about culture in a more general way.

During various periods of human history, it has been commonplace for rulers and even the ruled to think in terms of center and periphery. There is the imperial capital and the hinterland, the metropole and the distant colony. Such thinking has a contemporary dimension. Politically, is the world to be increasingly dominated by one superpower, or is it moving toward a more multipolar, multisectoral world with varied and numerous power centers? Economists in this era of unprecedented globalization see the United States as the engine of worldwide growth, but also find multiple centers of strong commercial activity in Europe and East Asia. With culture—as with politics and economics—can we also speak of cultural centers and hinterlands?

Folklorist Alan Lomax, who had a profound influence on the Festival and who passed away last year, had argued for decades that cultural centers were to be found all over the planet. He warned that the diversity of local, regional, ethnic, and national cultures was in increasing danger from the spread of a powerful, central homogenizing force—

a singular, global, mass commercial culture. The diverse cultures would “gray out,” he predicted, unless there was countervailing action to keep such cultures vital. The potential loss of thousands of languages, belief systems, songs, oral histories, and poetries would be profound and harmful to the species.

An assessment of the cultural situation today in this regard is surely mixed. On one hand, there has been an expansion of a singular mass culture across the globe. Billions of people have been exposed to similar products, ideas, technologies, musics, and other cultural expressions. There is a greater commonality among all humans than ever before—more people are listening to the same musics, speaking the same handful of languages, eating the same foods, watching the same movies and television programs than ever before. There are unprecedented opportunities for people to communicate, share with, and learn from one another. In many cases, that expansion of a largely commercial mass culture has detracted from more localized traditions. Some languages have withered as they have been devalued in schools and the workplace. Songs and foods have retreated from public spaces into tight-knit communities and private households. But we have not seen the full-scale demise of local, regional, national, ethnic, and religious traditions. To the contrary, these forms of culture are in many cases quite healthy and assertive; in some cases they too in their own way have gone global, found new means of propagation and meaning. Some forms of culture have even been rejuvenated, both in resisting outside influences as well as in embracing them.

Profound, beautiful, interesting, insightful cultural creations have been produced all over the planet. Cultural scholars and historians have had a hard time identifying the conditions where and when tremendous spurts of such creativity will emerge—for such creative genius is not necessarily associated with political power or wealth. Great food, great music, great art emerge among the rich and victorious, but also among the poor and oppressed. Furthermore, what people may take to be the “center” of culture or civilization may depend upon where one stands. The distinguished regal capital for the ruler may be the decadent, hollow heart of the beast for the ruled. One person’s center can be another’s frontier; the margins of urban society—the desert, the forests, the hills, the mountains, and even the inner city—may indeed be the places where people find their true spirit.

Consider Mali—home to Timbuktu (Tombouctou), regarded by some as the “end of the earth.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Timbuktu was at the crossroads of West Africa, the north-south salt and “ink” routes across the Sahara and the famed gold route traversing the Niger River. It hosted an important university during the 16th century, scholars of Islam and Judaism, and the most amazing of architectural arts. Timbuktu was at the center of great civilization.

Or take Scotland. Its highlands and islands may appear to be quite distant from European centers of culture. Yet in the 18th and 19th

centuries, Scotland was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution. Its scientists and thinkers excelled in the making of modern technology, medicine, and philosophy.

Appalachia might be perceived as a mountainous enclave that has been marginal to the development of the United States. But that would be a historically erroneous view. In the 18th century, Appalachia was at the cutting edge of settlement and expansion. Its spirit fueled an American ideal. Trails, rivers, and later railroads linked the region to East Coast cities and the West. It became a meeting point and crucible for layering of cultural influences from the British Isles, Africa, and other parts of Europe. As a region, it has come over centuries to embody a distinctly “American” culture.

Cultural centers often become so because they join disparate currents of creativity. Mali stands at the crossroads of northern and western Africa, the Africa of the Sahara Desert and that of the Niger River. Numerous ethnic groups, practicing different religions and speaking many languages, have been brought together in a kind of *cousinage* that has facilitated a fascinating sharing of culture. So too has Scotland joined lowland, highland, and island communities, people speaking English, Scots, and Gaelic, and those worshipping in diverse ways. And emigrants from Scottish and Malian lands contributed to the culture of Appalachia.

Culture not only flows into centers, it also flows outward. Cultures, if vital, are often at the edge of change and interchange. When culture is dynamic and creative, it cannot be bottled up or confined like a static, dusty treasure. With Scotland this outflow is so ubiquitous as to be almost unrecognizable. Revelers, not only in Times Square but in Singapore and other cities around the world, ritually sing a classic Scottish song by Robert Burns, “Auld Lang Syne,” to bring in the New Year. Golfers around the world play on links with clubs and balls first developed in Scotland. Mali too is not just on the receiving end of cultural creativity. Musicians from Timbuktu and elsewhere in Mali are world music superstars, with fans seeing their concerts in Europe, Asia, and the United States, and on the Internet as well. *Bogolan* mudcloth and indigo-dyed fabric made by expert Malian craftswomen are sold not only in home markets, but also in fashion salons around the world. As for Appalachia, its music is now everywhere. Despite its “old-time” label the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack sold more than six million copies and won a Grammy, moving well beyond home and challenging contemporary popular music.

Cultural creativity, quality, and vitality travel well. This year, cultural creativity, quality, and vitality come to us from Mali, Scotland, and Appalachia. The Festival on the Mall becomes a new edge in a world of cultural centers, where participants, visitors, and organizers may come together—exchanging cultural insights and experiences, while celebrating our ability to do so in an enjoyable, appreciative, and respectful way. □