

The March of the Monoculture

Helena Norberg-Hodge

Director, ISEC

For many, the rise of the global economy marks the final fulfilment of the great dream of a 'Global Village'. Almost everywhere you travel today you will find multi-lane highways, concrete cities and a cultural landscape featuring gray business suits, fast-food chains, Hollywood films and cellular phones. In the remotest corners of the planet, Barbie, Madonna and the Marlboro Man are familiar icons. From Cleveland to Cairo to Caracas, Baywatch is entertainment and CNN news.

The world, we are told, is being united by virtue of the fact that everyone will soon be able to indulge their innate human desire for a Westernised, urbanised consumer lifestyle. West is best, and joining the bandwagon brings closer a harmonious union of peaceable, rational, democratic consumers 'like us'.

This worldview assumes that it was the chaotic diversity of cultures, values and beliefs, that lay behind the conflicts of the past: that as these differences are removed, so the differences between us will be resolved.

As a result, villages, rural communities and their cultural traditions around the world are being destroyed on an unprecedented scale under the impact of globalising market forces. Communities that have sustained themselves for hundreds of years are simply disintegrating. The spread of the consumer culture seems unstoppable.

The development of the consumer monoculture

Historically, the erosion of cultural integrity was a conscious goal of colonial developers. French government adviser on colonial affairs D. Goulet, for example, urged that "traditional peoples must be shocked into the realisation that they are living in abnormal, inhuman

conditions as psychological preparation for modernisation”.¹

Or, as applied anthropologist Goodenough explained:

“The problem is one of creating in another a sufficient dissatisfaction with his present condition of self so that he wants to change it. This calls for some kind of experience that leads him to reappraise his self-image and re-evaluate his self-esteem.”

Towards this end, change agents were advised that they should:

- “1. Involve traditional leaders in their programmes.
2. Work through bilingual, acculturated individuals who have some knowledge of both the dominant and the target culture.
3. Modify circumstances or deliberately tamper with the equilibrium of the traditional culture so that change will become imperative.
4. Attempt to change underlying core values before attacking superficial customs.”²

It is instructive to consider the actual effect of these strategies on the well-being of individual peoples in the South. For example, the Toradjas tribes of the Poso district in central Celebes (now Sulawesi, Indonesia) were deemed completely incapable of ‘development’ without drastic intervention. Writing in 1929, A.C. Kruyt reported that the happiness and stability of Toradjas society was such that “development and progress were impossible” and that they were “bound to remain at the same level”.³

Toradja society was cashless and there was neither a desire for money nor the extra goods that might be purchased with it. In the face of such contentment, mission work proved an abject failure as the Toradjas had no interest in converting to a new religion, sending their children to school or growing cash crops. So, in 1905, the Netherlands Indies government decided to bring the Poso region

¹ John Bodley, *Victims of Progress*, Mayfield Publishing, 1982, p. 111.

² Quoted, *ibid*, p. 111-112.

³ *Ibid*, p. 129.

under firm control, using armed force to crush all resistance. As a result of relocation and continual government punishment and harassment, mortality rates soared among the increasingly desperate and bewildered Toradjas. Turning to the missionaries for help, the Toradjas became “converted” and began sending their children to school. Eventually they began cultivating coconut and coffee plantations and began to acquire new needs for oil lamps, sewing machines, and ‘better’ clothes. The self-sufficient tribal economy had been superceded, as a result of deliberate government action.

In many countries, schooling was the prime coercive instrument for tampering with “underlying core values” and proved to be a highly effective means of destroying self-esteem, fostering new ‘needs’, creating dissatisfactions, and generally disrupting traditional cultures. An excerpt from a French reader designed in 1919 for use by French West African school-children gives a flavour of the kinds of pressure that were imposed on children: “It is... an advantage for a native to work for a white man, because the Whites are better educated, more advanced in civilisation than the natives... You who are intelligent and industrious, my children, always help the Whites in their task. That is a duty.”⁴

Cultural erosion today

Today, as wealth is transferred away from nation states into the rootless casino of the financial markets, the destruction of cultural integrity is far more subtle than before. Corporate and government executives no longer consciously plan the destruction they wreak — indeed they are often unaware of the consequences of their decisions on real people on the other side of the world. This lack of awareness is fostered by the cult of specialisation that pervades our society: the job of a public relations executive is confined to producing business-friendly sound bites, while time pressures and a narrow focus prevent a questioning of their overall impact. The tendency to undermine cultural diversity proceeds, as it were, on ‘automatic pilot’ as an inevitable consequence of the spreading global economy.

⁴ Ibid, p. 11.

But if the methods employed by the masters of the 'Global Village' are less brutal than in colonial times, the scale and effects are often even more devastating. The computer and telecommunications revolutions have helped to speed up and strengthen the forces behind the march of a global monoculture, which is now able to disrupt traditional cultures with a shocking speed and finality which surpasses anything the world has witnessed before.

Preying on the young

Today, western consumer conformity is descending on the less-industrialised part of the world like an avalanche. 'Development' brings tourism, western films and products and, more recently, satellite television to the remotest parts of the earth. All provide overwhelming images of luxury and power. Adverts and action films give the impression that everyone in the West is rich, beautiful and brave, and leads a life filled with excitement and glamour.

In the commercial mass culture which fuels this illusion, advertisers make it clear that westernised fashion accessories equal sophistication and 'cool'. In diverse 'developing' nations around the world, people are induced to meet their needs not through their community or local economy, but by trying to 'buy in' to the global market. People are made to believe that, in the words of US advertising executive in China, "imported equals good, local equals crap."

Even more alarming, people end up rejecting their own ethnic and racial characteristics — to feel shame at being who they are. Around the world, blonde-haired blue-eyed Barbie dolls and thin-as-a-rake 'cover girls' set the standard for women. Already now, seven-year-old girls in Singapore are suffering from eating disorders, and it is not unusual to find East Asian women with eyes surgically altered to look more European, dark-haired Southern European women with hair dyed blonde, and Africans with blue- or green-coloured contact lenses aimed at 'correcting' dark eyes.

The one-dimensional, fantasy view of modern life becomes a slap in the face for young people in the Third World. Teenagers in

particular come to feel ashamed of their traditions and their origins. The people they learn to admire and respect on television are all 'sophisticated' city dwellers with fast cars and designer clothes, spotlessly clean hands and shiny white teeth. Yet they find their parents asking them to choose a way of life that involves working in the fields and getting their hands dirty for little or no money, and certainly no glamour. It is hardly surprising, then, that many choose to abandon the old ways of their parents for the siren song of a western material paradise.

For millions of youths in rural areas of the world, modern Western culture appears vastly superior to their own. They see incoming tourists spend as much as \$1,000 a day — the equivalent of a visitor to the US spending \$50,000 a day. Besides promoting the illusion that all Westerners are multi-millionaires, tourism and media images also give the impression that we never work — since for many people in the 'developing' world, sitting at a desk or behind the wheel of a car does not constitute work.

People are not aware of the negative social or psychological aspects of Western life so familiar to us: the stress, the loneliness, the fear of growing old, the rise in clinical depression and other 'industrial diseases' like cancer, stroke, diabetes and heart problems. Nor do they see the environmental decay, rising crime, poverty, homelessness and unemployment. While they know their own culture inside out, including all of its limitations and imperfections, they see only a glossy, exaggerated side of life in the West.

Ladakh: the pressure to modernise

My own experience amongst the people of Ladakh, or 'Little Tibet' in the trans-Himalayan region of Kashmir, is a clear, if painful, example of the destruction of traditional cultures by the faceless consumer monoculture. When I first arrived in the area 23 years ago, the vast majority of Ladakhis were self-supporting farmers, living in small scattered settlements in the high desert. Though natural resources were scarce and hard to obtain, the Ladakhis had a remarkably high standard of living, with beautiful art, architecture and jewelry. Life moved at a gentle pace and people enjoyed a degree of leisure

unknown to most of us in the West. Most Ladakhis only really worked for four months of the year, and poverty, pollution and unemployment were alien concepts.

In 1975, I remember being shown around the remote village of Hemis Shukpachan by a young Ladakhi called Tsewang. It seemed to me, a newcomer, that all the houses I saw were especially large and beautiful, and I asked Tsewang to show me the houses where the poor lived. He looked perplexed for a moment, then replied, “We don’t have any poor people here.”

In recent years, external forces have caused massive and rapid disruption in Ladakh. Contact with the modern world has debilitated and demoralised a once-proud and self-sufficient people, who today are suffering what can best be described as a cultural inferiority complex.

In traditional Ladakhi culture, virtually all basic needs — food, clothing and shelter — were provided without money. Labour was free of charge, part of an intricate and long-established web of human relationships. Because Ladakhis had no need for money, they had little or none. So when they saw outsiders — tourists and visitors — spending what was to them vast amounts of cash on inessential luxuries, they suddenly felt poor. Not realising that money was essential in the West — that without it people often go homeless or even starve — they didn’t realise its true value. They began to feel inadequate and backward. Eight years after Tsewang had told me the Ladakhis had no poverty, I overheard him talking to some tourists. “If you could only help us poor Ladakhis”, he was saying, “we’re so poor.”

Tourism is part of the overall process of development which the Indian government is promoting in Ladakh. The area is being integrated into the Indian, and hence the global, economy. Subsidised food is imported from the outside, while local farmers, who had previously grown a variety of crops and kept a few animals to provide for themselves, have been encouraged to grow cash crops. In this way they are becoming dependent on forces beyond their control — huge transportation networks, oil prices, and the fluctuations of international finance. Over the course of time,

inflation obliges them to produce more and more, so as to secure the income that they now need in order to buy what they used to produce themselves. In political terms, individual Ladakhis once wielded real influence and power within their own village-scale economy. Now each is just one within a national economy of 800 million, and one within a global economy of six *billion*. Their influence and power have been reduced to zero.

As a result of external investments, the local economy is crumbling. For generation after generation Ladakhis grew up learning how to provide themselves with clothing and shelter; how to make shoes out of yak skin and robes from the wool of sheep; how to build houses out of mud and stone. As these building traditions give way to 'modern' methods, the plentiful local materials are left unused, while competition for a narrow range of modern materials — concrete, steel and plastic — skyrockets. The same thing happens when people begin eating identical staple foods, wearing the same clothes and relying on the same finite energy sources. For global corporations, making everyone dependent on the same resources creates efficiency; but for consumers it creates artificial scarcity, and heightens competitive pressures.

As they lose the sense of security and identity that springs from deep, long-lasting connections to people and place, the Ladakhis are starting to develop doubts about who they are. The images they get from outside tell them to be different, to own more, to buy more and thus be 'better' than they are. The previously strong, outgoing women of Ladakh have been replaced by a new generation — unsure of themselves and desperately concerned with their appearance. And as their desire to be 'modern' grows, Ladakhis are turning their backs on their traditional culture. I have seen Ladakhis wearing wristwatches they cannot read, and heard them apologising for the lack of electric lighting in their homes — electric lighting which, in 1975 when it first appeared, most villagers laughed at as an unnecessary gimmick. Even traditional foods are no longer a source of pride: now, when I'm a guest in a Ladakhi village, people apologise if they serve the traditional roasted barley, *ngamphe*, instead of instant noodles.

Ironically, then, modernisation — so often associated with the

triumph of individualism — has produced a loss of individuality and a growing sense of personal insecurity, as people feel pressured to conform and to live up to an idealised image. By contrast, in the traditional village, where everyone wore essentially the same clothes and looked the same to the casual observer, there was more freedom to relax. As part of a close-knit community, people felt secure enough to be themselves.

Creating divisions

In Ladakh, as elsewhere, the breaking of local cultural, economic and political ties isolates people from their locality and from each other. Life speeds up and mobility increases — making even familial relationships more superficial and brief. At the same time, competition for scarce jobs and for political representation within the new centralised structures increasingly divides people. Ethnic and religious differences began to take on a political dimension, causing bitterness and enmity on a scale hitherto unknown. With a desperate irony, the monoculture — instead of bringing people together — creates divisions that previously did not exist.

As the fabric of local interdependence frays, so do traditional levels of tolerance and cooperation. In villages near the capital, Leh, disputes and acrimony within previously close-knit communities, and even within families, are increasing. I have even seen heated arguments over the allocation of irrigation water, a procedure that had previously been managed smoothly within a cooperative framework. The rise in this kind of new rivalry is one of the most painful divisions that I have seen in Ladakh. Within a few years, growing competition actually culminated in violence between Buddhists and Muslims. This in a place where those two groups had lived peacefully side by side for 600 years, and where, previously, there had not been a fight in living memory.

The rise of divisions, violence and civil disorder around the world are the consequence of attempts to incorporate diverse cultures and peoples into a single global monoculture. These divisions often deepen enough to result in fundamentalist reaction and ethnic conflict. Ladakh is by no means an isolated example.

In Bhutan, where different ethnic groups had also lived peaceably together for hundreds of years, two decades of economic development have resulted in the widespread destruction of decentralised livelihoods and communities. Unemployment, once completely unknown, has reached crisis levels. Just as in Ladakh, these pressures have created intense competition between individuals and groups for places in schools, for jobs, for resources. As a result, tensions between Buddhists and Bhutanese Hindus of Nepalese origin have led to an eruption of violence and even a type of 'ethnic cleansing'.

Elsewhere, Nicholas Hildyard has written of how, when confronted with the horrors of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia or Rwanda, it is often taken for granted that the cause must lie in ingrained and ancient antagonisms. The reality, however, as Hildyard notes, is different:

“scratch below the surface of inter-ethnic civil conflict, and the shallowness and deceptiveness of 'blood' or 'culture' explanations are soon revealed. 'Tribal hatred' (though a real and genuine emotion for some) emerges as the product not of 'nature' or of a primordial 'culture', but of a complex web of politics, economics, history, psychology and a struggle for identity.”⁵

In similar vein, Michel Chossudovsky, Professor of Economics at the University of Ottawa, argues that the crisis in Kosovo had its roots at least partly in the macro-economic reforms imposed by Belgrade's external creditors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Multi-ethnic Yugoslavia was once a regional industrial power with relative economic success. But after a decade of Western economic ministrations and five years of disintegration, war, boycott, and embargo, the economies of the former Yugoslavia lay in ruins. Chossudovsky writes:

“In Kosovo, the economic reforms were conducive to the concurrent impoverishment of both the Albanian and Serbian populations

⁵ (Nicholas Hildyard, "Briefing 11: Blood and Culture: Ethnic Conflict and the Authoritarian Right", The Cornerhouse, 1999

contributing to fuelling ethnic tensions. The deliberate manipulation of market forces destroyed economic activity and people's livelihood creating a situation of despair."⁶

It is sometimes assumed that ethnic and religious strife is increasing because modern democracy liberates people, allowing old prejudices and hatreds to be expressed. If there was peace earlier, it is thought to have been the result of oppression. But after more than twenty years of firsthand experience on the Indian subcontinent, I am convinced that 'development' not only exacerbates existing tensions but in many cases actually *creates* them. It breaks down human-scale structures, it destroys bonds of reciprocity and mutual dependence, and encourages people to substitute their own culture and values with those of the media. In effect this means rejecting one's own identity, rejecting one's self.

Ultimately, while the myth makers of the 'Global Village' celebrate values of togetherness, the disparity in wealth between the world's upper income brackets and the 90 percent of people in the poor countries represents a polarisation far more extreme than existed in the 19th century. Use of the word 'village' — intended to suggest relative equality, belonging and harmony — obscures a reality of high-tech islands of privilege and wealth towering above oceans of impoverished humanity struggling to survive. The global monoculture is a dealer in illusions: while promising a glittering, wealthy lifestyle it can never provide for the majority, it is destroying the sustainable ways of living that traditions and local economies provided. For what it destroys, it provides no replacement but a fractured, isolated, competitive and unhappy society.

⁶ Chossudovsky, *Dismantling Yugoslavia, Colonising Bosnia*, Ottawa, 1996, p.1