

**Rambo, Barbie and Wordsworth:
Partners in Cultural Destruction on the Tibetan Plateau**
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The scene is a classroom in Leh, Ladakh, twelve thousand feet up in the western Himalayas. A young teacher stands in front of her class of 12 year-olds.

“I appreciate the poetry of ...”, she starts, inviting her students to complete the sentence.

Milarepa? Nagarjuna? Tagore, perhaps?

But no.

“Wordsworth”, they dutifully respond.

This scene from the documentary film *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* would be funny if it weren't so sad. But sad it undoubtedly is — and typical, too, of the monoculturalisation of the planet. On every continent, centuries of location-specific knowledge, which has been finely tuned to the needs and limitations of the particular place and people, have been brushed aside — wiped out — by the imposition of a supposedly *universal* set of values arising out of the modern, *western* way of looking at the world. Cultural diversity — itself a celebration of the diversity of *nature* — is giving way to stultifying and dangerous uniformity.

There are many lessons which the industrialised world can learn from traditional cultures like Ladakh — and from their environmental, economic, social and spiritual breakdown under the impact of the process we call “development”.

Lessons, for instance, in frugality. Over the generations, the Ladakhis have learned to make the most of the scarce resources of their harsh environment. Everything that grows wild is gathered and put to use; literally nothing is wasted. In fact, as poet/philosopher Tashi Rabgyas puts it, “You could really say that the Ladakhis are the real

economists. Not like modern economists, increasing production, destroying all the natural resources. Rather, taking care of natural resources and how to develop them.”

Lessons, too, in the *structures* necessary for truly sustainable patterns of living. In the traditional Ladakhi culture, the individual is part of a web of supportive relationships, from the extended family to the *paspun* (a network of mutually dependent households) to the village. This is *human scale* — and it shows in the wonderfully open faces of the people who live it. As the scale of life grows, community ties are weakened and personal identity is undermined. That too shows. Young men squeeze themselves into tight-fitting Levis, self-consciously backcombing their hair or blowing rings of imported tobacco smoke. At the new Paradise Toys shop, windows full of blonde Barbie dolls and gun-toting Rambos provide the backdrop for all-too-real imitators.

The example of Ladakh forces us to reconsider what we mean by wealth. In the traditional way of life, there are almost no monetary transactions, so conventional economists would rank the Ladakhi people amongst the poorest of the poor. Yet, by the standards of the ‘Third World’, there is no poverty in Ladakh; everyone has enough food to eat and a house to live in. What’s more, the status of women is remarkably high, crime is virtually unknown, aggression of any sort extremely rare. How well does our *own* culture fare in these terms?

Sonam Wangchuk, a young student leader, makes a distinction between cleverness and wisdom. “Cleverness”, he tells us, “is when you are very sharp in your head... but wisdom is beyond that. Wisdom is the capacity to see what is useful and what is harmful for your future, irrespective of how advantageous it is for you right now.” It is the wisdom of old Ladakh, he argues, that we in the industrialised world urgently need to acquire.

Ladakh teaches us above all that we need to move towards a more ecological, community-based way of life. Yet year by year, we head ever faster in the opposite direction. We can’t, of course, go back to living like the Ladakhis, but we can and must reverse the frightening process of cultural and economic globalisation, so as to be able to take steps towards reestablishing our connection with each other and

the earth.

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