

Roderick A. MacDonald Contest

Patricia MacAulay
Grade: 12

Globalization and Loss of Culture in Today's World

Globalization is a large issue in today's world; one part of that issue is the loss of unique cultures and languages to a global culture, and the impact it has on the citizens of the world.

Globalization is the process of making something become world-wide in scope, be it agricultural practices or humanitarian aid (Webster 751). The same sorts of products are being sold all over the world, promoted by a giant marketing machine. As the advertisers encourage citizens to use their products, they spread messages about the people who use them; often, these people are glamorous actors from the United States. In turn, these actors spread the message about how great their lifestyle is, and promote their own culture. Consumers see these advertisements, and many try to become like those actors - they become part of the global culture (Escaping).

Citizens may not realize the problems with a global culture - governments would co-operate more if they had the same values, tourists wouldn't have to worry about violating some obscure local custom, and businessmen would have more markets for their products and services.

However, this global culture is replacing local cultures and customs; local culture is being "swept away" by the images advertised in magazines, and in many cases, is going extinct (Abley 4). While cultures have been replaced before, the speed at which cultures and languages are dying out is "unprecedented" (Abley 4). The loss of a culture has dramatic effects on a people, and their descendants.

Starting in 1920, Canadian Aboriginal children were forced to attend residential schools; their mission was to teach students about Canadian culture and lifestyles, and prepare them for life on the reserves (Steckley 191). However, one of the founders of the residential school movement, Lt. Richard Pratt, said that the schools were to "... kill the Indian in [the student] and save the man"; as such, thousands of Aboriginal students were stripped of their culture, and are still suffering for it, and other abuses while in the schools (Steckley 190). Their languages and culture are disappearing; their anger and disillusionment with this has been linked to the Oka stand-off in 1999 (Abley 164-166). This has happened in other places, like India and South Africa, where the ruling elite had a vested interest in assimilating the native cultures.

Less dramatically, the forced migration of Aboriginal peoples in Australia has led to the deaths of several other languages. In the 1930's, Aboriginals moved off of their land and into mission towns (Abley 2). To understand each other, the residents learned two more languages: English, and Murrinh-Patha (Abley 2). One tongue, called Mati Ke, has three speakers left; it, along with several other languages, has been completely replaced Murrinh-Patha (Abley 2, 11). By the end of the century, Mati Ke will be gone. Since the introduction of televisions, and the wide-spread distribution of English media, Murrinh-Patha has also begun to be replaced by English (Abley 3).

The most insidious loss of culture, however, is the enchantment with pop culture. Young people are entranced by the bright lights of American pop culture, and watch its movies, listen to its music, and are plugged in to its messages. At the same time, they are leaving behind their own cultures, and allowing them to slip away. I saw this in person while a delegate at the Third World Summit on Media for Children in 2001; all of the fifty teenage delegates sang along with American pop songs, but most of us were hard-

pressed to sing anything that could be called traditional (i.e. - "This Land is My Land").

In many countries, agencies and organizations exist to slow the loss of identity. In Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was created to promote Canadian values; the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission enforces our laws, especially those relating to Canadian content (Canadian Content). Several countries have government departments responsible for the promotion of the country's culture, such as our own Heritage Canada. However, these departments and organizations exist mainly in countries which can afford them; much of the culture loss is occurring in less developed regions, which cannot afford these groups, and may not have laws in place to protect the unique cultures within their borders.

How can we slow - or even reverse - the loss of cultures and languages in today's world? One possible solution would be to place restrictions on how much culture (movies, music, advertisements, products) a country may distribute, based on a percentage of the global market. To get around this, many of the major exporters might place production in poorer countries (like emissions trading under the Kyoto Protocol). Advocates of free enterprise would protest; it would also be nearly impossible to enforce in today's age of free information flow.

Another solution could be to sponsor heritage projects in developing regions to preserve local culture; these would likely be government agencies responsible for promoting the country to its own people. However, this idea also has several pitfalls. As a government agency, the project would have to conform to its government's agenda; this could result in the use of the agency for propaganda, not heritage. Funding is a major issue; if the funding is coming from a private organization, it may expect something in return, or the agency could disappear when the money dries up. Critics may say the money would be better spent fighting hunger and illiteracy. Or, as was the case with the Jubilee proposal to forgive the debts of less developed nations, residents may resent another example of the developed nations "meddling" with their lives (Corbin 247-248).

Today, some researchers travel the world, recording unique and dying languages, so that the cultures will be remembered by future generations. They use video cameras, CD-ROMs, and other media to record the sounds and stories of vanishing cultures. However, they cannot record all the stories, or even preserve all of the languages which are on the edge of extinction. Some critics of the practice say the recordings "bears an uneasy resemblance to a stuffed dodo," and the languages should be used, not just studied (Abley 6).

I believe the best way to protect the cultures is to make their people aware of what they have, and what they stand to lose. Citizens have power - when they care deeply about something, they will try to protect it. They may lobby their government to form heritage societies, or create their own preservation groups; better still, they could reconnect with their roots, and protect their culture by living it. There would be no restrictions on citizens, or business; outside funding is unnecessary; and citizens helping themselves, not being told to do by an outside agency.

To me, one of the biggest issues surrounding globalization is the loss of smaller, unique cultures. However, I also believe that there are ways to protect these cultures, without negatively impacting the rest of the world.

Bibliography:

Abley, Mark. Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages. Random House, 2003.

“Broadcasting Act - 1991.” Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. January 2001. Accessed April 2005.
<<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/LEGAL/BROAD.htm>>

“Canadian Content - Mandate.” Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. April 2003. Accessed April 2005.
<<http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/cancon/mandate.htm>>

Corbin, Barry, et al. Global Connections: Geography for the 21st Century. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Escaping From History. Gwynne Dyer. Videocassette. Green Lion Productions, Inc., 1994.

Steckley, John. Full Circle: Canada's First Nations. Toronto: Prentice Hall, 2001.

n.a. “Globalization.” The Tormont Webster's Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary. Montreal: Reader's Digest, 1990.