

THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION  
ON CULTURAL IDENTITIES.  
A COMMENT ON PEDRO MORANDÉ'S PAPER

MARGARET S. ARCHER

Let me begin this commentary by stating a seeming paradox which will be well known to everyone here. On the one hand, globalisation with its political, economic, the informational and cultural facets is presented as a 'great wave' of changes whose overall effect is the homogenisation of local and regional cultures as they assimilate global influences. In short, it is often presented as a hegemonic mechanism leading towards increasing cultural uniformity throughout the world. On the other hand, taking an example from the Church, at precisely the same time that globalisation is intensifying, an increasing emphasis is being placed upon the need for 'inculturation'. In short, the impetus behind 'inculturation' recognises *enduring* cultural diversity throughout the world and an increasing need for the Christian message to respect this diversity and to engage in sensitive accommodation to it.

What kind of paradox is this? Basically we seem to have two groups of thinkers, one of which heralds future cultural uniformity under slogans like the 'electronic society', 'the information age', 'McDonaldization' or the 'global village'. The other accepts cultural diversity in the foreseeable future and the need for any universal cultural message to be filtered through local and regional practices, customs and beliefs. Does this simply mean that one group of thinkers has got it right and the other has got it wrong making the paradox an apparent one? Alternatively, are we dealing with a much more complex phenomenon, where *both* the tendencies promising global uniformity and those protecting and protracting cultural diversity are at play?

I want to endorse the latter interpretation, and, in so doing to make three basic points each of which, would require considerably more elaboration than will be possible in this short note.

(a) Pedro Morandé has presented a very sophisticated account of the homogenising effects of globalisation, but I believe it needs supplementing by an equivalent stress upon the socio-cultural mechanisms which mediate its impact and reinforce cultural heterogeneity – as something which is quite different from the endurance of local traditionalism in the face of global changes.

(b) The dynamics involved in any form of internationalisation (structural or cultural) have always manifested the same paradox, namely that the forces for uniformity are matched by the simultaneous release of forces for diversity.

(c) That we can only understand and analyse this seeming paradox of homogeneity and heterogeneity by examining how the socio-economic mechanisms fostering international uniformity are mediated by the entrenched structural organisation and cultural affiliation that they encounter.

In brief globalisation has to be understood in its interaction with localisation and the outcome cannot be expected to be identical or even similar everywhere because of the qualitative differences which characterised these encounters.

Let me begin with a few illustrations of (b), how tendencies to homogenisation simultaneously stimulate heterogeneity. If this can set the scene, by presenting it as a universal phenomenon, we can then move on to the brief consideration of (c), the interactive mechanisms involved, and finally relate these back to (a), that is to providing the other face of Morandé's account and to specifying how globalisation is mediated by socio-cultural localism, to generate divergent and distinctive outcomes from their interaction.

The phenomena which constitute globalisation today are unique and novel. Nevertheless, this does not preclude their comparison with earlier moves towards internationalism which also did not to depend ultimately upon coercion (i.e. I am explicitly excluding imperialism and territorial conquests from this discussion). A structural example can be taken from the post First World War initiative to establish a League of Nations. In exactly the same period, more new nation-states were created than ever before. Similarly the foundation of the European Union was accompanied by an intensification of certain forms of localism, for example heavily rural countries like the Irish Republic accentuated their difference in the quest for agricultural subsidies. Britain's enduring Euro-scepticism manifests a lasting contestation over 'loss of sovereignty' and 'devolution of powers'

which makes her a reluctant and minimalist participant. Then again global geographical mobility and multi-culturalism have intensified national boundaries and 'asylum seeking' a prominent electoral issue. Even the famous American 'melting pot' has now been transformed into the tense quest for the green card to on the part of highly qualified individuals.

These are structural examples, and it is often naively assumed that cultural influences are more pervasive and that their diffusion is uncontrollable – something which today is reinforced by reference to cuisine, couture and pop culture. Even there we should be cautious. That this year's Oscars up were being fought over by an American movie featuring Australian playing an ancient Roman versus a Chinese American evocation of oriental martial arts, is all good stuff for the globalised diffusion thesis. Nevertheless, the spread of the same cinematographic technology has enabled the emergence of a booming Indian film industry, in indigenous languages, with indigenous stars, themes markets and festivals.

These disparate instances are cited to show that homogeneity and heterogeneity, globalisation and localisation proceed side by side. The questions are why and how? It is here (c) that we need to address the interaction between influences for global uniformity and their reception, as mediated by localised or regionalized socio-cultural factors. The critical point I wish to underline is the variability of these outcomes, which are too diverse to fit a smooth curve of progressive globalised uniformity.

Drawing briefly upon my book, *Culture and Agency* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), three divergent scenarios can be disengaged for what occurs when different corpuses of cultural ideas interact – scenarios which appear to be confirmed by localised responses to global incursions. Firstly there is the 'constraining contradiction' where certain exogenous factors are perceived as highly desirable but nevertheless cannot be assimilated directly without threatening endogenous features which are also positively endorsed. Here the interaction generates a pressure towards syncretism. A syncretic elaboration is one which enables their co-existence. This, crudely speaking up was the relationship typical of Western entrepreneurial production and the Japanese kinship structure, underpinned by the religious values of Confucianism and Shintoism alike. The syncretic outcome – the Japanese factory – combined the two: a modern production unit, conducted on familial lines, with kin-type obligations substituting for Western contractual relationships. The elaborated and syncretic form of Japanese entrepreneurship represented neither the pure continuity of tradition nor simple western imitation.

Secondly, there is the 'competitive contradiction' where the majority of socio-cultural incursions are negatively evaluated by the local hegemonic culture and outright opposition ensues. Islamic fundamentalism, especially in the extremist Iranian call of 'Death to America', legal prohibition of Western practices (alcohol consumption etc) and arrest of foreign infringers, can be cited here. What is especially significant of this scenario is the intensification of indigenous attempts to ensure or even enforce cultural rectitude internally.

Thirdly and finally, it might seem that cases of 'compatibility' where global influences are in some sense welcomed, would be paradigmatic of the globalised uniformity thesis. Even this seems questionable, for the newly institutionalised patterns by which localism assimilates globalisation may actually represent divergence between them. One glaring example of this is the proliferation of Western sex tourism. Western foreigners pay for cultural practices which are illegal back home, yet simultaneously foster a growing group (e.g of child prostitutes) in the countries visited. Thus, at precisely the same time that Western legislation covering all forms of child abuse is intensifying, countries like Thailand have been increasingly tolerant of it as the price of tourist revenues.

### *Conclusion*

These then are the points about globalisation stimulating heterogeneity which I would use to moderate Pedro Morandé's excellent account of global tendencies towards homogeneity. Where in conclusion does this leave our overall discussion of the impact of globalisation on cultural identities? Basically since I have been maintaining that this impact is as much a force for stimulating diversity (and importantly in new syncretic forms) then three conclusions follow.

1. What are often called the 'politics of identity' cannot be simplistically construed in terms of traditionalism versus globalisation.

2. Syncretism and cultural elaboration means that there is increasing array of identities which can be assumed both locally and worldwide which will increase the complexity of the tasks of every social institution especially those of law, politics, education, and religion.

3. The Church's agenda for 'inculturation' becomes more difficult and needs to be more flexibly nuanced than when it was possible to think about increasing acknowledgement of more uniform traditionalistic cultures.