



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LIV No. 75

December 1999



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Michael B. Leigh. (1999). Unity in Diversity: Globalisation, Democracy and Cultural Vitality. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LIV (75): 31-46

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: GLOBALISATION, DEMOCRACY AND CULTURAL VITALITY

Michael B. Leigh

This paper focuses upon the highly contested usage of the terms: globalisation, nationalism, democracy and cultural identity and the interplay of these concepts in a culturally vital society, Sarawak.

Globalisation has the potential to provide unimagined benefits to human kind, as well as to impose unimagined costs on the weak and dispossessed. What globalisation means to a Kurdish refugee wandering homeless in northern Iraq, is very different to what it means to those of us who enjoy almost instant on-line access to a wealth of information, and exchange of ideas.

Politically planet earth is still organized in units known as nations, and it is these nations that are best placed to obstruct or facilitate the processes known as globalisation. The key argument of this paper is that nation-states can only have sufficient strength and integrity to play a positive role if they can expand their democratic basis, and welcome the added strength that flows from fostering cultural vitality.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY: GLOBALISATION, DEMOCRACY AND CULTURAL VITALITY

by

Michael B. Leigh

This paper focuses upon the highly contested usage of the terms: globalisation, nationalism, democracy and cultural identity – and the interplay of these concepts in a culturally vital society, Sarawak.

Globalisation has the potential to provide unimagined benefits to human kind, as well as to impose unimagined costs on the weak and dispossessed. What globalisation means to a Kurdish refugee wandering homeless in northern Iraq, is very different to what it means to those of us who enjoy almost instant on-line access to a wealth of information, and exchange of ideas.

Politically planet earth is still organized in units known as nations, and it is these nations that are best placed to obstruct or facilitate the processes known as globalisation. The key argument of this paper is that nation-states can only have sufficient strength and integrity to play a positive role if they can expand their democratic basis, and welcome the added strength that flows from fostering cultural vitality.

GLOBALISATION

We are now witnessing the emergence of the global economy in which capital, production, management, markets, labour, information and technology are organized across national boundaries.¹

The one hand we have those who talk broadly and positively about globalisation as the new reality, reducing the significance of national boundaries and promoting the flow of goods, finance, services, ideas and people too – and of overcoming local idiosyncrasies in a borderless world. A universally free market has made it possible for different cultures and regimes to cooperate without the spread of domination or war, though whether that actually takes place is a different matter. Nations are able to seize the opportunities that arise from this global phenomenon and localize them.² People of the world are being brought together as they share their similarities and preferences. Many also view this development as a means to end all inter-cultural tension and rifts within the global communities.

Globalisation can thus be taken as a trend that brings together different cultures and religious world-views.³ Globalisation is seen by its champions as inexorable, having a logic to which there is no alternative, and inevitable – as history is conditioning the present.

It is undeniably true that forces are sweeping across the globe, forces that go well beyond the nation-state, and over which no individual nation has control. The process named globalisation is often viewed as driven by “markets” that are perceived to be independent actors, and is closely identified with the ideology of neo-liberalism. There is also an economic determinist view of globalisation, but suffice here to focus upon the now dominant neo-liberal perspective. Globalisation is not occurring uniformly, it is concentrated in the three regions with advanced capitalist countries: North America, East Asia and Europe.

Globalisation as a process or phenomenon is also associated with Alvin Tofflers “third wave”: the creation and growing ascendancy of knowledge-based production, a domain that cannot readily be contained by national boundaries.

Supporters of globalisation often speak like new evangelicals. They are also strangely reminiscent of those nineteenth century Europeans who blindly supported capitalism’s worldwide transforming power at the high noon of colonialism, no matter what the cost for generations of subject peoples. The argument then, as now, has always been not to concern oneself overmuch about unequal distribution of wealth, but rather to concentrate upon unharnessing the engine of growth. The view is that once there is wealth aplenty, then it will trickle down throughout society. Over the decade to 1997 we followed that policy, and one consequence is that the UN Human Development Report registers Malaysia as having the highest income disparity in Southeast Asia.⁴

Globalisation is not value-neutral, and the term cannot be de-politicized. For many, globalisation can be equated with Americanization, particularly after the end of the cold war and the ideologically hegemonic approach adopted by many North Americans. The core of so much that is central to the globalising processes is information technology. The battle over the information economy is just as political as any contest for territory, civil authority, governance of people and ascendant ideology. We constantly hear on the radio the Malaysian Government’s song urging us to like I.T., to use I.T. [suka I.T., guna I.T.]. Yet recently the Prime Minister has expressed his righteous anger at the spreading of malicious rumors using just that same beloved I.T. The technology itself may be value neutral, but its use is not, its use involves political choices and impositions. The much-touted spread of