**Globalization: Its Impact on Oceania**

What is globalization?

For some the meaning of the term is mainly economic. It is the process of unifying the world by means of a movement toward a single, interdependent global economy that transcends national interests and cultural boundaries.

For others the term implies something that touches every part of human life. One theologian, in summarizing some of the material that has been written on the subject, defines globalization as “the extension of the effects of modernity to the entire world,” occurring as a result of the “compression of time and space” and bringing about “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”[[1]](#endnote-1) In other words, globalization links all of us in the world much more quickly and far more intimately than ever before. Telecommunications bring to every part of the world today, in color image, what might have taken years to reach there in the days of the sailing vessel. Globalization in this sense affects not only what we produce and what we purchase, but how we think of others and ultimately of ourselves.

Globalization is often perceived as a threat to the Third World today, especially in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. It is sometimes viewed as a subtle and more pernicious form of neocolonialism by which the developed world lays countries bare to the depredations of the West. Opening the borders of all nations to the flow of capital, finances and merchandise without restriction, it establishes strict market rules. In a system in which money reigns, human beings are as commodified as what they produce, and wealth and power in poorer nations is concentrated all the more tightly. Many feel that the gap between the rich and poor only widens as a result of globalization. The nation state, which may not have been much in protecting the interests of the poor even in the best of times, but at least served as a buffer of sorts, is now rendered nearly impotent in the face of global economic concerns. Globalization is seen as impacting on economic systems, upsetting the old balance of power and wealth in nations, and subverting the value systems that peoples live by.

Although the word is of recent coinage, globalization did not begin with the arrival of the Internet. Powerful financial interests, most of them from the West, have been reaching into other nations for resources and for cheap labor for decades now. For many of us in the 1960s the symbol of multinational power was the United Fruit Company, with holdings throughout Latin America and political clout that stemmed from its commercial role in those countries where it had plantations. Multinationals, or trans-nationals, even thirty or forty years ago, were vines that sent their creepers over the globe. Examples are plentiful: we need only think of Coca Cola, Nestle, Shell Oil, or Lever Brothers. Today much the same thing is happening, but the new icons of international market forces today are names like Nike, McDonald’s, Toyota and Sony.

There is one major difference perhaps. Today these forces have been enhanced by the power of telecommunications. This technology has shrunk the world in our day, for someone on one side of the globe can be in immediate contact with someone on the other side. Wire transfers are instantaneous. Megadeals can be concluded in minutes. Worldwide computer links put every part of the world, no matter how remote and formerly inaccessible, squarely on the “information highway.” In the eyes of some, telecommunications threatens to lay bare every hideaway and make potential prey of us all.

How, then, does globalization impact on the Pacific today?

The Pacific has been invaded by economic giants before. In fact, the Pacific islands have been subject to global market forces for the past five hundred years–just as long as they have had dealings with Westerners. The Spanish and Portuguese caravels that put the Pacific islands on western maps were driven by market forces. The two countries descended on the Pacific from opposite sides, in a sort of pincer movement, in their desire to gain access to spice and the other wares of the Orient.

With the passing of the Siglo d’Oro, the 16th century, the Spanish and Portuguese yielded their supremacy in the Pacific to northern Europeans. The East India Companies (British and Dutch), in establishing their trade routes to Asia, created company posts wherever they touched. The islands’ small size and scant resources spared them the fate of India and the Dutch East Indies. The Pacific islands had little significance to Westerners other than as way-stations en route to other destinations.

European market forces made themselves felt in the Pacific repeatedly during the 19th century, as whalers, traders and labor recruiters stopped off at islands, either for produce such as sandalwood, beche-de-mer or turtle shell to be used for other markets, or for resources like copra and phosphate that were needed in Europe. The multinationals of their day–Godeffroy & Son, Henderson & MacFarlane, Crawford & Co, and DHPG–continued this trade on a grander scale during the latter party of the century, even as it established the plantation economy on many islands.

By the end of the 19th century the Pacific islands, with the single exception of Tonga, had been colonized. The effects of colonization, though perhaps varying with the different island groups, included the appreciation of national status. Thus, after World War II, the creation of the new nation-states in the Pacific began as one island group after another won its independence from its former masters. This process was probably hastened by the independence movement in other lands, including the Philippines, India, Pakistan and Indonesia after the war, and soon afterwards Africa.

Globalization in its economic definition is not a new thing for the Pacific. The islands have been enmeshed in a global economic net for some five hundreds year now. Is globalization, as it is understood today, involving new communications technology, significantly more threatening than it was during the past few centuries? If so, what new threats does it pose?

Let’s first look briefly at the economic effects of globalization today.

It may be that the economic dangers of globalization for Pacific islands have been exaggerated. Very few Pacific nations have “sold the store” to outside interests or mortgaged their future to make a quick killing. If anything has left island nation states economically vulnerable, it is their very nationhood. Pacific peoples might have easily supported themselves with their own land-based systems in the past, island societies today carry the additional burden of supporting the public services, the infrastructure, and the government bureaucracy that is part and parcel of nationhood. To this end, they are required to increase productivity and turn out a hefty surplus just to support the concomitants of nationhood. These include schools, hospitals, dispensaries, water and power systems, roads, airports and so much more. The burden is even greater when the new nation feels it has to have the obligatory insignia of nationhood: a college, a national airline, and a monumental capitol building.

Transnationals would like to have the trees and the minerals that are produced in those few islands that can claim these resources, but there is little in the Pacific beyond its climate and location of interest to the West. Land is scarce and people are reluctant to alienate it. Besides, legal protections exist in many island to guard people against the kind of rash land sales that impoverished the Hawaiians in the 19th century. The physical beauty of the islands, one of their main attractions to the West, can be spoiled, but not without the active collaboration of “insider” interests.

The small size of the islands, which once made them vulnerable to predators, may actually protect them in this day of globalization. The islands offer few resources, small and not especially well trained labor pools, and tiny markets for Western produce. The Pacific islands are small fish for the multinationals of our day. There are many tastier meals for the entrepreneurial sharks that swim the world’s waters today.

Not only are the Pacific islands better protected than many other parts of the world, but they are in a better position to take advantage of the benefits of globalization. Most nation states in the region have been doing this for some years now through what some authors call their MIRAB economy. MIRAB stands for migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy. Let me explain.

Globalization implies two-way traffic to and from even remote parts of the world. For years now, islanders have been emigrating to destinations where they are more likely to find the jobs that are often not to be had in their own islands. An estimated 300,000 islanders now live in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Some island nations, like Samoa and Tonga, have far more of its nationals living outside the country than within its borders. Even in the Freely Associated States of Micronesia, which only began sending citizens out in any numbers some fifteen years ago, one of every eight of its people now lives abroad.

Because of the small populations in Pacific nations, emigration from these islands poses little threat to more developed nations that receive their emigres. Hence, islanders continue to resort to this option when their national economy fails to satisfy their expectations. Relatively large numbers continue to seek their fortune abroad and earn a living. The money they send back in the form of remittances constitutes a considerable part of the national income of many of these island nations.

The small size of the Pacific nations also makes these nations more attractive to donors of foreign aid. Fewer dollars can count more. Foreign aid is an important source of income in many of these independent nations, and this aid goes toward paying the salaries of the bureaucracy that makes up the government.

In other words, some of the most obvious economic effects of globalization are working to the advantage of the islands rather than against them. Foreign aid and emigration, both of which can be considered spin offs of globalization are among the principal sources of support for many island nations today. Moreover, tourism, which is generally envisioned as the industry of the future in the Pacific, only stands to benefit from the forces that produce globalization.

But globalization, as we have seen, has more than an economic side to it. Worldwide communications, in the form of satellite television and the Internet, has social impacts as well. What can we expect it to do to island cultures?

Westerners have been pronouncing obsequies over the grave of the island cultures for the past century two centuries. To cite some examples from the part of the Pacific with which I am most familiar, the Russian naval commander Lutke, in a visit through Micronesia in 1828, thought that the red shirts and straw hats that Carolinians on Guam sported tolled the death knell for culture of these “children of nature.”[[2]](#endnote-2) George Westbrook, a trader on one of the atolls near Pohnpei in the 1880s, was sure that the canned meat and biscuits that he sold the islanders would destroy the beguiling simplicity of the islanders’ lifestyle.[[3]](#endnote-3) A decade earlier, another trader in Palau had predicted, in the face of rapid population decline and the onslaught of civilization, that “before long the last Micronesian will have disappeared.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

They, like so many others, have underestimated the resilience of the islanders and their cultures.

Do we really have to fear that telecommunications will achieve today what two hundred years of intense contact with the West has not yet brought about?

Yes is the answer of some church leaders from other parts of the world. Television and the video machine are so capable of affecting values and attitudes, asserts on African priest that “what they have done in a decade to alienate Africa from itself is probably worse than what colonialism did in the same area in more than a century.”[[5]](#endnote-5) The Jesuit provincials in Latin America sees the vision that is propagated by mass media as “destroying the identity of local cultures that lack the ability to make themselves heard.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Yet, my own thirty-five years in the Pacific and my long work in the history of the area has made me skeptical of such sweeping claims. Local cultures, I have learned, rebound in the most amazing ways despite the external changes they may undergo. Guam, which has been subject to longer and more intense colonial influence than any Pacific island I know of, is a good illustration. Two centuries of Spanish rule followed by another century of US colonization have succeeded in changing the islanders’ clothing, housing, and even the size and shape of the family. First-time visitors to the island sometimes will say, with a shake of their heads, “They don’t look any different from us.” But they are–in their funeral celebrations, and the way house parties and barbeques are organized, and in the reliance on family contacts for government services, and in a hundred other less obvious ways.

The fear that global forces will homogenize island cultures is simply unfounded. They may change them, but it is unlikely that TV or the computer or any of the other apparatus of this age of instant communications will erase the island cultures. As unlikely, I think, as that these global forces will eventually make Germans indistinguishable from Americans or Australians. There is something in local cultures that seems to resist homogenization. The greater the pressure to conform to a universal cultural standard, the more the particular identity of a culture reasserts itself in new (or perhaps revived) forms. People may choose to use traditional island names again, or they may revive their spirit dances or marae ceremonies, or they may start wearing their hair in topknots again. Paradoxically, those same global forces that seem to be reducing us all to a common standard also heighten our reflex consciousness, making us more acutely aware of who we are and who we are not.

Let me conclude, then, by reminding you that globalization, which is often thought to be a threat to local societies, can also be seen as an opportunity. Many Pacific islanders, perched at their computers, are dealing with it as such today. Whatever globalization might bring, you can count on island cultures, which have confounded the predictions of prophets of doom for two centuries and more, to endure.

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1. 1 Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity* (Maryknoll: Orbis,1997); quoted in T. Howland Sanks, “Globalization and the Church’s Social Mission,” *Theological Studies* 60:4 (1999), 630. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2 Francis X. Hezel, SJ, *The First Taint of Civilization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1983), 107-108. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3 Hezel, *First Taint*, 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4 Alfred Tetens, as cited in Hezel, *First Taint*, 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5 Laurenti Magesa, “Africa’s Struggle for Self-Definition During a Time of Globalization,” SEDOS 31:8/9 (1999), 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6 Letter of the Latin American Provincials of the Society of Jesus on Neo-Liberalism in Latin America, SEDOS 29:11 (1997), 309. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)