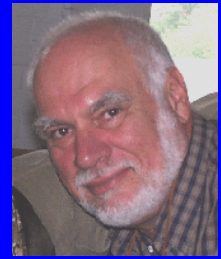


## **PILLAGING THE CULTURAL RAINFOREST**

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### **Icons for sale**

There is nothing like the holiday season (coming earlier each year, it seems) to remind us that, as Calvin Coolidge (30th US President), once said, "Business is the business of America." There is always money to be made and at holiday time when our cultural icons that are for retail sale in endlessly imaginative forms. US versions of Halloween, Christmas, Valentines Day, etc., are rapidly penetrating the world markets and either replacing local versions, if such exist, or being inserted whole cloth into to the cultural fabric of new regions and countries. For the Yankee trader, if it sells, it sells, and we will flog it until it sells. Some may see this as cultural exchange, but there is little exchange to be seen. In market terms, it is more akin to dumping than to exchange.

At the risk of being the Grinch who at least seems hell-bent on stealing Christmas, I want to focus our attention on the blatant contradiction in the US concept and practice of diversity. We pride ourselves on promoting diversity while we systematically destroy it. If we look at the domestic scene, it is true that US cultural groups do make efforts to preserve their heritage from the flood of media culture eroding their foundations. But the dominant influence is so strong that what is "ethnic" is too easily becomes quaint and cute rather than a contributing its potential influence to who we are as a people of peoples.

When it comes to employment and organizations, the focus of US diversity efforts has been economic opportunity. Economic opportunity and leveling the playing field to achieve it are essential diversity goals. They extend the US values of fairness and justice to the full population. It is interesting, however, that for many years now, those of us involved with diversity consulting and training, whatever our personal motivation, have been increasingly constrained to focus our energies on trying to convince the business world that the ultimate reason for supporting diversity lies in the "bottom line benefits" to organizations who implement its best practices. These benefits are also real, but exploiting diversity in this fashion ought not to be confused with encouraging group cultures beliefs, and practices to flourish. Diversity, US style, is not about protecting and promoting group culture much more than slash and burn is about protecting the rainforest.

### **Diversity as commodity**

Religion and moral values being private affairs in the USA, the validation for diversity is that it makes money. If it makes money, it resonates with the key US values of money and property. If it can be sold, it should be sold. Yes, diversity may be the right thing to do, and the threat of compliance may hidden somewhere in the background, but business, unless driven by other values, would rather ignore these factors or even let them erode--they smack too much of cost instead of profit. With the exception of a few outstanding and outspoken business leaders, morality, justice, and the ethical and cultural imperatives for diversity initiatives tend to be carefully hidden in order to make diversity palatable to stockholders and stakeholders. Diversity

then becomes a saleable commodity to US organizations and an industry has developed around it to serve domestic consumption and more recently to export it worldwide.

While diversity initiatives are sometimes called "cultural diversity," there is often little about them that is cultural beyond token ethnic cafeteria offerings and the occasional X (you define the X) -pride day. Making it into the mainstream for non-mainstream folks has largely meant adopting the values, beliefs, behaviors and icons of the dominant culture. As many Europeans have noted, almost from the beginning, diversity in the USA is just another more subtle form of the "melting pot." Now, in the post 9/11 xenophobia, the "golden door" is not completely shut, but it takes a lot of effort and some luck to squeeze through with a visa.

### **Cultural diversity and biodiversity.**

It is enlightening to compare what is going on between people diversity and environmental or biodiversity. Environmentalists have been vociferous about the protection of both the natural patrimony of virgin terrain, rain forests, and the like, both domestically and in collaboration with native peoples elsewhere for whom these habitats are important for survival. They were quick to point out, for example, that the solution to the power blackouts of the past year should not be seen as a carte blanche invitation to exploit more natural reserves, but rather demanded significant investment in the infrastructure and distribution networks of our existing power resources. Of course, exploiting natural resources is a more immediately profitable venture than investing in infrastructure. It is certainly more appealing to investors and business interests as the margins are simply a lot better in the short term. If some people want to protect their national or regional patrimony, they face the daunting manifest destiny of business.

The point of this comparison is that, just as tribal peoples face an almost impossible challenge in defending their environment and its biodiversity from despoliation, most of the world faces whatever its stage of economic development and the same challenge of protecting itself when it comes to its culture. In this case it is likewise a matter of erecting defense systems where boundaries that are far more permeable. Culture travels, via electronic and print media, and is constantly being marketed as a part of products and their functions. All trade is trade in culture as well as commodities.

Attempts have been made to stem unwanted aspects of this flow, and getting around them becomes a fine art. A decade ago when I worked regularly in Indonesia, US expats in the oil industry used to thwart the national ban on importing rock music and videos by hiding cassettes in Kotex boxes and ham tins--places where any self-respecting Muslim customs officer would be reluctant to put a hand. Cultural restrictions by other governments, then as now, are loudly decried by US Americans as censorship, restraint of trade, restrictions of free speech, and violations of human rights. Beneath the self-righteous rhetoric, the real problem is that they keep us from making another buck abroad.

### **Cultural Policy**

A universal declaration of UNESCO in 2001 asserted that, "Cultural diversity is as necessary for the human race as biodiversity is for the survival of living things." Smaller cultures generally have no way of resisting the onslaught. They shrivel and disappear into natural history museums. Resistance on the part of religious groups to cultural invasion as in numerous Muslim areas today is too easily dismissed by the US as fundamentalism or despotism. More and more cultures, like natural environments, are rendered increasingly fragile and eventually destroyed by the US media and marketing feeding frenzy. What little is left after this flood is often a

caricature or an Epcot version of the original culture, which can then be marketed as a cultural commodity as if it were the real thing.

In a few places such as Quebec, France, and Croatia policy makers are attempting to put teeth into defending indigenous culture by promoting laws and providing subsidies that protect the cultural patrimony from the juggernaut "*industrie hollywoodienne*" and encourage development of local culture and the arts. UNESCO sponsored legislation is coming into force shortly to stiffen this resistance, though one suspects "too little, too late."

US Americans find it incomprehensible that much of the world currently sees the US as the greatest threat to world peace. It will be even more shocking to hear that the US is the world's greatest threat to diversity. This is a paradox in which the USA would do well to understand rather than resist or dismiss, because it speaks to what is happening domestically as well as around the world. Globalism promises much. But the challenge is to avoid the brutal marginalization of cultural variety and instead encourage rich and diverse forms of cultural expression that are still vital. It calls us to integrity around the concept and practice of diversity that we have so well enunciated in the past two decades.