

Weathering the Globalization Storm

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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I spent much of the last three years working and traveling across the Middle East and Asia in one of the most unique and fulfilling experiences of my life.

Not only did my journey require me to question and adjust a range of values and perceptions which for long I've held as absolutes, but in fact it cemented my sense of "out-of-placeness," which has become an integral part of me, being a descendant of Palestinian refugees expelled from their homes in Palestine nearly six decades ago. And yet, through living and visiting many countries on four continents, I came to accept that "not belonging" is no longer a limitation, but a unique position that has helped me forcefully transcend beyond stereotypes and superficialities.

However, one of many realizations that I have also aggregated is the incredible and deliberate conformity that most Third World countries are pressed to embrace, one that is unquestionably forcing the uniqueness of these cultures to disintegrate in favor of imposed and manufactured cultural alternatives.

The traditional village structure of the Arabia Gulf cultures for example, has nearly disappeared in its entirety, to be replaced by skyscrapers and housing compounds that neither represent nor relate to the cultural identities of the inhabitants. Of course it is not modernity that is on trial here, but the rash attempt to embrace Western symbols of civilization while disposing of one's own.

In the tiny Arab state of Qatar, for example, abandoned traditional villages following subsequent oil booms starting in the 1960's are left bare. Standing close to one, you could swear you could hear the wailing of a baby or the laughter of children. Scattered like ghost towns in the middle of the vast desert, there seems to be no governmental plans to renovate or preserve them in any way, despite of the billions of dollars spent on giant Western-style structures and artificial islands that seem to serve no specific purpose.

But more or less, the age of globalization is uncompromisingly incessant on discarding local cultures altogether for failing to present any sort of viable economic potential. Thus, falafel restaurants in most Middle Eastern cities are nearly obsolete, while American fast food joints spring up at enormous speed throughout the region.

This cultural encroachment — and subsequently the abandonment of one's own culture — is turning the once dominant and self-asserting cultures of the Third World into inconsequential and highly symbolic discourses, at best, indigenous cultures fighting for survival.

According to the classic definition, to speak of a people being indigenous is to concede to

several understandings; First is the probable assumption that a geopolitical territory of a fixed group of people who had occupied that space for a reasonably extended period of time has been expropriated or dominated by another, by way of direct foreign interference or into a new political setting such as a nation state. Second, is to also acknowledge that that group of people has distinct social, cultural, religious and even economic attributes, of which some are to be maintained in order for the designation of being indigenous to be preserved.

It comes as no surprise then, that the classic imperialism of the past and the more concealed cultural imperialism of the present were and are adamant in ensuring the slow yet irreversible dismantling of what makes a targeted indigenous culture distinctive and unique, its social and spiritual attributes, its economic pillars, its religious adherences; thus, its way of life.

It goes without saying that indigenous cultures are under incessant attack, both literally and figuratively. Some have survived, some disintegrated and others still endure a fateful and decided struggle for recognition, for rights and for a space in an increasingly polarized world.

From Arabia to Borneo, I am left with little doubt that the seemingly dominant cultures of these regions have long ago conceded their dominance — though not yet their relevance — and have relegated to the position of indigenoussness. However, even that secondary role is under unrelenting attack from the pressing speed of economic globalization, so polarized and domineering.

In this growing age of globalization, we must understand that clinging to age-old tradition and heritage is not analogous to backwardness. It remains to be seen whether globalization has left much room for indigenous cultures to negotiate a space for themselves in a world of encroaching global polities and often uncompromising nation-state boundaries.

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