

Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Millennium Special*

Article 1

January 2000

Globalisation and the mandala: Software for the millennium

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Recommended Citation

Dellios, Rosita (2000) "Globalisation and the mandala: Software for the millennium," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol4/iss1/1>

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Abstract

Extract:

Historians of the future will no doubt look back on the third millennium of the Christian calendar to find it was dedicated not to the kingdom of heaven on earth or even to the technologically triumphant West but to the god Globalisation.

Keywords

Globalisation, mandala, international cultural relations, Confucius

The Culture Mandala, 4 no. 1, Millennium Issue: Copyright © Rosita Dellios 2000

Globalisation and the Mandala: 'Software' for the Millennium

by Rosita Dellios

Historians of the future will no doubt look back on the third millennium of the Christian calendar to find it was dedicated not to the kingdom of heaven on earth or even to the technologically triumphant West but to the god Globalisation.

Never before in human history are space and time, thought and action, so globally connected, so miraculously commonplace. It is possible to fly to 'the four corners' of the earth in a matter of hours, to exchange ideas, do business, or transmit information from distant locations instantaneously. Terms such as 'real time', 'live', 'virtual' and 'interactive' have become linguistic markers of the age. That which is remote is no longer far if it is technologically 'wired'. Indeed, the remote is defined not by geography but technological accessibility. In this sense, even the desert fathers have no place to hide. But they do have their state of grace – or at least its quest.

To this contemplative corner of the integrating global mind, the solutions of the future might have been found, our historians will one day surmise. Instead, they can only lament the decay and fall of the Western world empire and its god Globalisation. The story told will be that the technologically and economically overdeveloped heart of the world contended with a mind that was trivial and increasingly tribalised. In the absence of genuine global consciousness and the concurrent marginalisation of traditional wisdom schools like Confucianism and Christianity, Buddhism and Sufism, the world reverted to a primitive form of international life. Global politics succumbed to the 'dark ages'. An outstanding feature of that system was tribalism, with its regressive instincts for warfare and exclusionary policies across most sectors. To this, much of the governance infrastructure, especially international peacemaking, was increasingly committed. Cross-impact analyses revealed other demanding problems – including deteriorating environmental and educational standards. Global governance was challenged by resurgent nationalism armed with ethno-ideologies.

Without painting too grim a picture of a global civilisation in decline, this article endeavours to explore the possibility of one in which globalisation is made sustainable and equitable through development of mandala values. But first to meanings:

Definitions

According to Paul Kennedy (1999:441):

". . . in essence globalisation means that the degree to which people's lives are becoming interconnected, mutually interdependent and increasingly exposed to one another's practices, needs and meanings, irrespective of national boundaries or identities, has intensified and accelerated to an unprecedented extent in recent decades."

As for mandala values, these are values that advance the harmonious development of individuals, communities and civilisations. A mandala is often a diagrammatic or architectural representation of this harmonious development. According to Brauen (1997:11): "As a rule a mandala is a strongly symmetrical diagram, concentrated about a centre and generally divided into four quadrants of equal size; it is built up of concentric circles and squares possessing the same centre" (Tantric Buddhist terms omitted from the original). Dalrymple (1998:185) succinctly describes it as "a geometric diagram oriented to the four cardinal directions and symbolising the ideal cosmos". It is, in effect, a cosmogram.

Mandala literally means 'circle' in Sanskrit, and has been used in several contexts. One pertains to the 10 'song cycles' or mandalas of the *Rigveda* (Schuhmacher and Woerner, 1999:218). Another context is 'assembly', of relevance to present-day global governance (for example, the General Assembly of the United Nations) and not only to its classical Indian context:

"*Mandala* means an assembly. The differentiations of wisdom throughout the worlds, innumerable as particles of dust, come together like the spokes of a wheel to support the Mind King, Vairocana." (Subhakarasingha quoted in Snodgrass, 1985:105.)

'Assembly' does not destroy the individuality of the parts but enhances their value through their unity. Indeed, 'assembly' pertains to the idea of differentiation and integration (see Wilber, 1997). Just as the components of a mandala relate to a higher order of integration, so too people are not only conscious of their local and national identities, but also their connections with the whole world as an international experience. In other words, 'assembly' allows us to realise the wide scope of our identities (see Dellios, October 1999).

In yet another context, the political one, the mandala describes a kingdom as well as the circle of kingdoms in ancient India and pre-colonial Hinduised Southeast Asia. As a spiritual-political expression, it referred to the configuration of earthly power along cosmic lines. Palaces and royal cities in traditional India, China and Southeast Asia depicted the heaven-earth cosmogram of the divinely imbued king at the centre of a square. The square, in turn, was divided into cardinal points and sectoral interests. These were linked by strategic gateways and nested within a circle of divinely and demonically ascribed human tendencies. This use of micro-macro, self-state, earthy kingdom-heavenly order correspondences (or analogies) conforms to traditional cosmological views upon which the mandala cosmogram was based. The mandala idea, though ritually most developed in the East, is a familiar one around the world. Rome and Jerusalem are two of many examples of cities with a "mandala-like structure and a plan representing the world" (Brauen, 1997:31).

A well-governed kingdom, and the international relations system to whose upkeep it contributed, sought balance and harmony. The model king in the *Ramayana* epic, Rama, fulfils the formula of a virtuous king, just as his current namesake, Thailand's Rama IX, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, is reputed to do. By contrast, "a king of unrighteous character and of vicious habits will, though he is an emperor, fall prey either to the fury of his own subjects or to that of his enemies", warned the 4th century BC text *Arthashastra*. Attributed to Kautilya, the *Arthashastra* (trans. R. Shamasastri, 1967) depicts international relations as a *Raj-mandala* system (circle of kingdoms). In practice, this system - designed to unite India, as the Mauryan Empire, against foreign invasions - is generally viewed as having been Machiavellian and without virtue, much as the present international system is decried for its attention to power politics rather than international law and justice. The truth, as always, falls along a spectrum of degrees. Theory and practice often pose difficulties in their mutual adjustment, and aspirations are sometimes all that one can contribute to the goal. Such aspirations, and their schools of thought, may go far towards their goal. Confucius, for one, was not satisfied that he had achieved the wisdom of the ancients; however his civilising legacy to humankind is universally praised.

In reflecting on 'the way of the sages' within the mandala's political context, it is clear the quest for harmony crosses readily from the political to the personal, and back again. The Buddhist practitioner, for example, seeks to realise his or her buddha-nature by contemplating the mandala composition. Moreover, as Ricard (in Revel and Ricard, 1998:249) points out: "The individual's responsibility is to consciously preserve the harmony of society." Thus in the emerging global mandala, human responsibilities as well as rights need to be emphasised for balanced development.

In the present globalising world, the mandala has been posited as a viable metaphor in issues concerning development and international cultural relations:

With the expectation of increasing and intensifying interactions among Greater China, Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent during the coming decades, the term 'development' may be

expected to take on a more culturally nuanced meaning. This meaning is likely to reflect holistic and inclusive ways of thinking, be they in business, politics or socio-cultural relations. The conceptual model which best reflects this propensity is the mandala, a diagram of relationships toward harmonious development. Better known as a Hindu and Buddhist cosmogram, the mandala as conceptual tool may be regarded as a high-context totality picture, which allows development policies to be viewed 'in the round', incorporating the religious and spiritual alongside the material and scientific. In this postmodern age of rediscovered traditional strengths, many societies are choosing to reconstruct themselves in sustainable and balanced ways if they are to avoid development burn-out. The mandala allows the integration of local and universal values in a regional context. (Dellios, September 1997: Abstract)

The cultural method of describing technological civilisation rests well with its globalised persona. The old International Relations terminology, largely designed by 'American strategic man' during the Cold War (see Booth, 1990, p. 122; Dellios 1997), has become parochial and indigestible for the vast majority of 'international society', including two billion Chinese and Indians. In other words, metaphors from cultures other than the parochial West are to be encouraged in developing a culturally democratising globalisation.

Globalisation: deity or demon?

Clearly, globalisation holds great promise. It enables people to know one another better by installing the mechanism – the 'hardware' - for improving international relationships. This enabling mechanism of technology holds creative potentialities thanks to its communicative and integrative function. In other words, as the definition of globalisation by Paul Kennedy indicates above, there is a social dimension to the diffusion of clever technology. Globalisation sets up the mentalities – the 'software' - which position interdependence more realistically on a plurality of needs and identities, not on the hazardous dichotomies drawn from mutual ignorance. Ultimately - and ideally - globalisation makes it impossible to separate one's security and happiness from that of others. In this respect, the god Globalisation has much in common with Christ, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, Confucius, Lao Tzu, the legendary first emperor of China Huang Di and other great instructors of humanity.

But the intrusive or wrathful appearance of this new god is equally apparent. It must certainly be said that the experience of globalisation thus far has been an ambiguous one, as much concerned with destructive energies as constructive ones. The 'battle for Seattle', as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) summit was dubbed at the close of the 20th century, graphically depicted a disturbed relationship. On the one side was globalisation's economic philosophy of neoliberalism, in the form of free market capitalism and its management through institutions like WTO, and on the other, a diverse collection of suspicious publics, be they environmentalists or protectionist producers. This was largely why globalisation was as much likely to be credited for creating a hard-hearted world of 'winners and losers' as it was for ushering in a genuine family of nations - a *datong* (universal commonwealth), as the Chinese would say (elaborated below).

The critics, interpreters and modern-day diviners (or futurists) of globalisation are not far behind its every turn. "What is the connection between public suspicion of or disbelief in globalization and economic actors?" asked Robin B. Hodess (1999:5) at a Carnegie Council workshop on justice and the world economy. "I believe it lies in the fundamental issues of the legitimacy and accountability of the actors who give direction to the world economy - in the set of preferences about economic and social goods that are reflected through these various actors" (*ibid.*). Paul Kennedy, too, has acknowledged globalisation's 'bad press', caused by such factors as the "apparently untouchable power of the global money markets and TNCs [transnational companies]" as well as governments failing to restrain "global market forces, to resist moves towards dismantling hard-won social protection and welfare systems or to counter growing inequality" (Kennedy, 1999:458-9; see also Burbach, Nunez and Kagarlitsky, 1997; and Martin and Schumann, 1997).

Viewed from this darker perspective, it could well be that the god Globalisation is really the goddess Kali; that the era of globalisation is a culturally neutered term for the Hindu Age of Kali, *Kali Yug*,

distinguished by the disintegration of the world as we have hitherto known it. Just as there are many ways of knowing, so too there are many ways of becoming. Kali's divine status derives from her useful work in creative destruction, which includes the destruction of ignorance. In practical terms, it is true that many industries, methods of production, and management paradigms are being destroyed in order for globalisation to proceed. Beyond Kali, globalisation as a system could be likened to a Taoist engineering feat, a *yin-yang* formula for change. Taoist thinking is evoked in the words of American journalist and author, Thomas Friedman (1999:331):

". . . globalization is everything and its opposite. It can be incredibly empowering and incredibly coercive. It can democratize opportunity and democratize panic. It makes the whales bigger and the minnows stronger. It leaves you behind faster and faster, and it catches up to you faster and faster. While it is homogenizing cultures, it is also enabling people to share their unique individuality farther and wider. It makes us want to chase after the Lexus [car] more intensely than ever and cling to our olive trees [traditions] more tightly than ever. It enables us to reach into the world as never before and it enables the world to reach into each of us as never before." (Emphasis in the original.)

So, too, the Taoist classic, *Tao Te Ching (Book of the Way and Its Power)* tells us that "Heaven and Earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs" (Lao Tzu, Bk 1, V:14). That globalisation has caused many to feel as if they are being treated like straw dogs is incontestable, given the 'backlash' phenomenon.

That straw dogs were used by the ancient Chinese as divine offerings and were therefore treated with reverence while serving this function, offers hope for softening the prospects of further global pain. Globalisation need not be an essentially economic proposition, nor need its economic referent remain unregulated capitalism. As the Kennedy definition above suggests, there is ample scope for globalisation's 'planetisation' by incorporating a cultural and environmental connectivity (Thompson, 1989), as well as its democratisation through various sectors including Friedman's (1999:358-62) suggestions of democratising globalisation educationally, financially and politically. In the tougher political world of sovereign rights and national claims, how do the 'straw dogs' survive? At this stage a case study is in order.

Globalisation Case Study: Tibetan Theory, Chinese Practice, and Taiwanese Consciousness

If China - the oldest known site for mandalas (Dunhuang, northwest China, the ninth-tenth centuries AD), the longest continuous civilisation (5,000 years), and the largest remaining multi-ethnic empire within which international relations are still actively played (especially with unruly Tibet and free Taiwan) - cannot offer an instructive case study for how to actualise a mandalising globe, then there is a strenuous century ahead for us all. In other words, China is symbolically, historically and politically well positioned as a case study for globalisation with civilising attributes. If a mandala is to be mapped, it must be mapped in China first (see Lu and Dellios, 1998). We can see this clearly in the complex interaction between China and Tibet.

Like the desert fathers of the Orthodox East in their preferred state of grace, Tibetan Buddhists engage in the 'contemplative sciences' (Revel and Ricard, 1998). Nirvana, not death, is the ultimate escape from the misguided and mismanaged self. In world terms, this is equally true. Ethno-national pride represents a lower order of development. Consciousness has no country. The world is a mandala of higher states of citizenship, universal human rights, the United Nations Charter in detail as well as design. Upon entering each new gate of the world mandala, approaching the stateless centre, we "transcend and include" the levels of our maturing identity through the above-mentioned process of "differentiation and integration" (Wilber, 1997, p. 77).

This is the ideal modality. It is not always possible in practice, however, as many a practitioner of the 'contemplative sciences' will attest. The key to the problem is undue identification with one's individuality or 'self'. In the language of mandala architecture, the net of cosmic existence intersects at knots of individual existence - or a 'knot of being' (Snodgrass, 1985:113). Close attention and

attachment to this form is not helpful in appreciating the 'big picture'; we over-invest in a particular identity to the detriment of appreciating other points of view or bringing into play our wider identities. Hence conflict and suffering are inevitable. Metaphysically speaking, the "knot of individuality" binds us "to a determined state" and holds us "within the limits of contingent being" (*ibid.*). The results are clearly seen in Chinese politics, from all sides, within the field of globalisation (the analogous worldly web).

Escaping the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), Tibetan lamas fell into the knotted web of globalisation where their religious culture tied into Hollywood's counter-propaganda to Chinese politics. An intersection of identities and interests defined the moment, but did not let go. The quest for disentanglement from the contingent continues. The god Globalisation both obstructs and facilitates a commonly desired stateless endstate: peace and unity. It obstructs by complication (more actors and interests converging than ever before), and it facilitates by offering an 'assembly' of higher thought, one which integrates the 'big picture'. However, in the current absence of consensus as to how the higher goal of peace and unity might be constituted, the Chinese world - like the world at large - might be said to reside in multiple mandalas.

The Chinese *political* mandala is currently faithful to the age-old concept of unity, the absence of which is deemed to be chaos, and the fragmentation of China into feuding economic fiefdoms replete with their armies (the hitherto regional PLA commands). This view is strikingly similar to the psychological function of mandala, that being "the traditional antidote for chaotic states of mind" (Carl Jung quoted in Brauen, 1997:122). An interesting development from this is a *yin-yang*-like process, whereby the more centred one becomes in the mandala sense - irrespective as to whether the 'one' is an individual, a state or the world - the less concrete and totalitarian one's disposition. In other words, the terror of order does not replace the terror of chaos. Instead a fruitful emptiness arises. "The way [*tao*] is empty, yet use will not drain it" (Lao Tzu, Bk 1, IV:11). Self-realisation of the Chinese state for the sake of all its citizens - minorities and majorities, Tibetan Buddhist and Falun Gong practitioners - as well as for the citizens of the world, requires China to be stateless. In the meantime, "Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish" (Lao Tzu, Bk 2, LX:138), "because a small fish can be spoiled simply by being handled" (commentary in *ibid.*).

Another, less desirable, outcome could be a form of what the Marxists called 'false consciousness' - in the mandala case it is a false sense of the greatness, reality and indestructibility of the party-state (comparable to the ego-self in Buddhism). Hence pro-independence sentiment in Taiwan received a boost from "the successful monopolization of the Chinese identity by Beijing, its bullying strategy against Taiwan in the international community, and saber rattling in the Taiwan Strait" (Wu, 1999:567-8). It was "Beijing's forceful stance" (*ibid.*) which created what it most feared: an appetite for independence via the development of 'Taiwan consciousness'. As long as being 'Chinese' equates with the government of China, rather than with being civilised as it used to, Taiwan too will talk the language of state but not a civilisation. Nonetheless, its democratisation, globalisation, capabilities in 'diplomatic pluralism' (see DPP, November 1999), and civilisational inheritance, stand it in good stead for inspiring the mandalas of regional and inter-Chinese governance.

Therefore, Tibetan teachings, Chinese practices and Taiwanese consciousness find common cause at the stateless centre of mandala operations, where governance replaces governments, and where China presides once again as a mandala civilisation. Its mandala gates, in all four directions, need to reopen, like the doors of a house. Leaving the doors open is as important in mandala politics as not overcooking a small fish. This is illustrated by a story from Confucius about the ideal Chinese mandala, a utopia called *datong*.

When Confucius was "overcome with sighs" about the state of the world, he was asked why. This was his reply:

"When the Great Way [*Tao*] was in practice, a public and common spirit ruled everything under Heaven; men of talent, virtue, and ability were selected; sincerity was emphasised and harmonious relationships

were cultivated. Thus men did not love only their parents, nor did they treat as children only their own children. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment was given to the able-bodied, and a means was provided for the upbringing of the young. Kindness and compassion were shown to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were sufficiently maintained. . . . selfish schemings were thwarted and did not develop. Bandits and thieves, rebels and trouble-makers did not show themselves. Hence the outer doors of houses never had to be closed. This was call the Great Community [*datong*].

"Now the Great Way has fallen into obscurity, . . . Each one separately loves his own parents; each looks upon his own children only as his children. People take the wealth of natural resources and the fruits of their own labors as their own. . . . Castle walls and outer defenses, moats and ditches, are made strong and secure. . . ." (Hsiao, 1979:125)

By the same token, it should be remembered that, as the Taoists, point out:

"The way that is bright seems dull;

The way that leads forward seems to lead backward;

The way that is even seems rough." (Bk 2, XLI:91)

Therefore:

"Know the male

But keep the role of the female . . .

Know the white

But keep the role of the black"

(Lao Tzu, Bk 1, XXVIII:63)

In other words, all is not what it seems. The utopia to which some aspire is not reached by freeways; the mandala is not a straight line to happiness. Globalisation for individuals or nation-states is not easy. Various states of being, for individuals and collectives, need to be experienced and understood in order to be of rounded character. This, in turn, leads to versatility in adapting to prevailing contingencies. The knowledge of these states helps in becoming 'stateless' internally and internationally - which is to say, in a state of grace. All the while, this is done without losing touch with the wide spectrum of identities (differentiations).

Another view on the above Taoist quotes may be found in the traditional Chinese art of *feng-shui* (meaning 'wind and water'). In this art, which concerns itself with the harmonisation of spatial energy, straight lines without the mandalising contexts are the paths that demons take; nature curves, the world circles. Dictatorships are well documented for their straight and narrow formulas to utopia. Opening the global doors requires patience. Passing through the cultural gate calls for humility; nothing is mastered by ethno- and political-centrism, or by global institutional pride (as the World Bank has recently conceded). So, to "know the male but keep the role of the female", suggests a strategic culture in which the *yin* is used to attain the *yang*, just as water will wear away a stone. It tells us that there is opportunity in times of danger and disarray, not only in times of plenty. Globalisation provides such an opportunity for improved world order.

Conclusion

At the heart of the globalisation debate lies an ethical consideration: Does globalisation, in its predominant economic guise, promote anything more than the narrow production of more goods and services at the price of socio-economic dislocation ('the losers')? Has it any justification beyond the

quest for heightened states of consumer-consciousness? Here is where the mandala 'software' for globalisation needs constructing. As I have stated elsewhere (Dellios, September 1997):

". . . the mandala may be employed as a metaphor for the reintegration of the development idea into a context of values from which goods proceed, and not vice-versa. Instead of introducing the goods of industrial development first, and watching urban consumer values take hold, it makes more sense to go to the forest or temple or village council to find out what kind of infrastructure, what type of education, what manner of economic enterprise could be facilitated" (emphasis in the original).

If globalisation is to be humanised and planetised, if it is to be democratised, then it must be done so in the contemplative mind. One suitable spiritual technology is called mandala. Just as past ages of disequilibrium, like the Warring States period of ancient China, provided fertile ground for the formulation of better ways of engaging the world (Confucius being best remembered for this role), so too the present era offers opportunity. There is much about it that conforms to the known conditions of transformation: of accelerated change, and the *expectations* of change. It is at this moment (or intersection) that constructive mandala thinking can intercept the process for its betterment, untangling the contingent threads. Expressed in the language of our day: if our descendants are to see the fourth millennium, the software needs to be written now.

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