

The World's Game

DAVID ELIAS

When Manchester United won the 2008 FIFA World Club Championship in Tokyo, the team on the field, fittingly enough, resembled a diverse global community: a Dutchman, a Serbian, two Brazilians, a Frenchman, a Portuguese, an Argentinean, a Korean, and last but not least, three Englishmen (McLeish). The club, nicknamed the “Red Devils,” has become a symbol of success, and its victory in Japan cemented its status as the world’s best soccer club. United’s fan base is equally international: it has approximately 75 million fans worldwide, with 40 million supporters located in Asia alone (Wilson). The pandemonium during the club’s trip to South Korea in 2009 was compared to the first arrival of the Beatles in the US in 1964 (Rich).

However, unbeknownst to many fans, the club hasn’t always been synonymous with glamour and global fame. It was founded during the Industrial Revolution by railway workers in the Newton Heath area of Manchester; the workers organized matches against other railway companies, and after a few years, joined the English Football League on a very tight budget. After nearly going bankrupt in 1902, the team won its first league title in 1908. The club continued to grow financially and gained more and more supporters from the Manchester area. In 1968, the club became famous all around the world when it won the European Championship in London (“Manchester United”). The team that won the final that day in May 1968 consisted of seven Englishmen, three Irishmen and one Scot (Graham).

It is these humble beginnings that opponents of United’s growing global brand harp on, arguing that United’s pursuit of fame has separated the club from its local fans and its working class roots. As Adam Brown describes in the article “Golden Goals Versus Local Loyalty,” fans of Manchester City, United’s greatest rivals, mockingly call the Red Devils the “pride of Singapore.” In many ways, United’s transformation from a local working class club into a multi-million dollar franchise is a story of globalization and cultural identity. Due to globalization, its matches are watched by millions of

fans around the world through satellite TV. United's ethnically diverse team represents multicultural societies; players from different cultural backgrounds are all integrated into one team. As a result, United's original identity, its place in Manchester's local culture, has been drowned in the sea of its international fans.

But what drives people in Asia or Latin America to support a team in England that is situated thousands of miles away from them? The issue is one of cultural identity, and is not limited to the world of soccer. The culture an individual identifies with has a significant influence on his decisions; he is consistently guided by the values and customs of the culture he relates to. Just as a Singaporean soccer fan could grow to support Manchester United, individuals around the world are connecting to ideas in the realms of art, philosophy, sports, and sociology that are different from their native cultures. They are adopting aspects of foreign cultures, which in turn has a profound impact on their individuality. But what happens, then, to their original culture, the culture they were born into?

A few decades ago this question could be answered more easily, as is evident in Richard Rodriguez's essay "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," published in 1982. In his essay, Rodriguez reflects on his Mexican background and how his native language influenced his assimilation into the United States. Rodriguez's essay is a response to bilingual educators, who "scorn the value and necessity of assimilation," and support the education of non-English-speaking children in their native language (508). Rodriguez argues that bilingual education, which focuses on the cultural uniqueness of immigrant students, can lead to separation instead of individuality. He draws comparisons to his own experiences with bilingualism: as a young boy, Rodriguez's family only spoke Spanish and struggled with the English language. Consequently, Rodriguez felt distanced and separated from his peers; in public, he tells us, he always felt uncomfortable. Rodriguez saw his home, where Spanish was the primary language, as a sanctuary where he was protected from these uneasy feelings; the Spanish language gave him a sense of intimacy and belonging he never had in public. However, this had an adverse effect: he came to see Spanish as a "ghetto language that deepened and strengthened [his] feeling of separateness" (504). Only when he started to master the English language did he feel that he "belonged in public" as "an American citizen" (506).

Rodriguez's essay highlights the struggles that second-culture exposure brings for immigrants. He argues that assimilation, adjusting to the dominant local culture, is ultimately in the best interest of immigrants. Second-culture

exposure is further explored in the 2006 psychology article “Biculturalism: A Model of the Effects of Second-Culture Exposure on Acculturation and Integrative Complexity,” by UC Berkeley scholars Carmit Tadmor and Philip Tetlock. Rodriguez’s path of “assimilation,” according to Tadmor and Tetlock, is a process which “involves relinquishing cultural heritage and adopting the beliefs and behaviors of the new culture.” Other acculturation strategies include “separation” (maintaining your heritage culture without intergroup relations) and “marginalization” (non-adherence to both the old and the new culture). The most significant acculturation strategy they outline, however, is “biculturalism,” which involves “maintaining one’s cultural heritage and adopting a new cultural identity” (174). But it is all too easy for biculturalism to turn into assimilation and the loss of cultural heritage it entails: while Rodriguez feels that learning the English language made him finally feel at home, he acknowledges that he lost a part of his Mexican identity, the sense of intimacy he felt at home with his Spanish-speaking family. It seems in fact that in Rodriguez’s time, becoming bicultural was a long and often emotional struggle. Adopting elements of another culture as your own was still a relatively foreign idea: for Rodriguez, Mexican culture was the only way of life he had been exposed to since birth.

Rodriguez wrote his piece in an era when the world was a bipolar one, guided by sharp demarcations. There was a clear boundary between locals and immigrants; a comprehensible line between the dominant local culture and the immigrant culture. Rodriguez’s acculturation process thus resulted in a clash of Mexican and American cultures. But much has changed since Rodriguez wrote “Memoir” in 1982. In the early nineties, the Internet became widely available to consumers, an event that would have a dramatic social impact. Fiber-optic cables carried messages and ideas around the world in minutes. Over time, the Internet became faster and faster, while the world became smaller and smaller. The Internet signaled a transition from the industrial society of United’s railway workers to a networked society in which everyone and every culture is connected.

This interconnected world is the main theme of Thomas L. Friedman’s essay, “The World is Flat.” Friedman comes to terms with a new era of globalization: due to the incredible advances in technology, individuals have the opportunity “to collaborate and compete” in a global economy (667). What makes this era of globalization unique, though, is that unlike much of recent history, it is not only Western countries and companies who will play a leading role. Individuals from “every corner of the flat world,” Friedman believes, will engage in a fully integrated global economy (668).

Due to globalization, societies have become more integrated than ever. People are exposed to multiple cultures and as a consequence, cultural identity—the values and customs shared by a society—has become difficult to define. Moreover, cultural identity is not exclusively determined any more by location or nationality. Instead, individuals have the ability to *choose* their own cultural identity. This is apparent in the case of Manchester United, with fans from all over the world choosing to support the club. But it is even more evident in the realm of international soccer.

In Europe and Latin America, a country's national soccer team is an integral part of its society and culture; during the World Cup, the streets are filled by fans swelled with national pride. Each team has its own unique identity. The Dutch national team, for example, has always been famous for its exciting, daring, and attacking style of soccer, called "Total Football" by legendary Dutch coach Rinus Michels. Nicknamed "Clockwork Orange" for its precise passing and jersey color, the team became a symbol of the liberal Dutch society in the 20th century. According to the Dutch, their national team distinguished them from the "hardworking" Germans and the "sneaky" Italians. Their fearless style of play won the admiration of millions of fans all over the world; they quickly became the public's favorite (Kuper). However, this admiration did not translate into on-field success; in 1974 and 1978, the Dutch lost in the World Cup final to the Germans and the Argentineans respectively (*Classic*).

In the recent 2010 World Cup, though, the Dutch team sacrificed much of their stylistic play: they adopted the defensive and cynical *catenaccio* largely attributed to the Italian team, a strategy that emphasizes patience and capitalizing on your opponents' mistakes. The Dutch change of style brought instant success (the Dutch reached the final once again), but sparked great debate in the Netherlands. Some fans argued that it was necessary for the Dutch to adjust their style in order to be successful in "modern" football. However, others criticized the team for betraying the traditions and values of the Dutch. These former supporters did the unthinkable: they started to support Germany, the Netherlands' biggest and most despised rival, which had ironically adopted "Total Football" (Kuper).

The discussion surrounding the Dutch national team became one about cultural identity. Important questions were raised: What is *Dutch* soccer and how much do we value it? How can we support a team that has adopted a *foreign* strategy and mindset? And finally: Is it really wrong to support another team that reminds us of the Dutch teams of old? In his essay "Globalization and Cultural Identity," John Tomlinson argues that cultural identity is no

longer a “collective treasure of local communities” (269). This is evident in the Netherlands: the willingness of fans to support another country shows that cultural identity has transcended nationality. Due to globalization, fans can watch any team in the world, and cultural identities are formed differently than in the past. Our cultural experiences are not predetermined anymore by our nationality or race; Dutch fans started to identify themselves with the German team because they felt attracted to its style.

The effect of globalization on cultural identity raises the issue of richer cultures absorbing poorer and more fragile ones. Western culture is viewed as an all-conquering force, with globalization often seen as an “enforced distribution of a particular Western lifestyle” (Tomlinson 272); yet, in a *New York Times* article, Tyler Cowen argues that “American entertainment . . . will lose relative standing in the global marketplace.” According to Cowen, “decisions to consume a culture have an economic aspect;” in developing countries, where caste systems are often still prevalent, individuals use local cultural products to signal their place in hierarchies. As Cowen describes, “an Indian Muslim might listen to religious Qawali music to set himself apart from local Hindus” or “a native of Calcutta might favor songs from Bengali cinema.” For this reason, American culture is not dominant in countries with surging economies such as China and India, where local markets are important. Instead of individuals being influenced by richer cultures, they are consciously making their own cultural choices to define their place in society. According to Cowen, this shows that globalization will not lead to “cultural imperialism,” but will lead instead to a world without a clear cultural leader.

So how do we define cultural identity in an ever-globalizing world without a clear cultural leader? Due to globalization, more than ever, individuals are given a choice; the ability to select a culture to their liking. Cultural identity is not homogeneous anymore, as in the time of Manchester United’s founding in 1878; nor is it uniform any longer, as in the era of Holland’s “Total Football” in the seventies or Rodriguez’s “Memoir” in 1982. Instead, cultural identity represents a mosaic of cultural choices, a patchwork of stylistic, economic, and moral selections.

These pieces of evidence resonate with me. Globalization has had a profound impact on my own identity. I was born to Chinese and Lebanese parents and grew up in the Netherlands Antilles, a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands located in the Caribbean. I became accustomed to the Chinese and Lebanese cultures, but I cannot call myself either “Chinese” or “Lebanese.” Instead, globalization allowed me to come into contact with an incredibly diverse set of ideas and lifestyles. Mine was a non-

tage of cultural choices: I became a fan of Manchester United, I listened to Bob Marley, read the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, and became a lover of Dutch Gouda cheese.

And yet, I wonder if all these cultural options came at a cost. Maybe there is something special in having your cultural identity given to you, and having a clear sense of belonging. Our cultural identities have become a way to strengthen our individuality and our uniqueness in today's world. We have all formed our own cultural "mosaics," and consequently, we may have unconsciously grown detached from our roots. Likewise, even though I am of Chinese and Lebanese descent, I don't have the same emotional attachment to those cultures as my ancestors did. True, in some regions of the world, like South America and Africa, people are not blessed with the cultural exposures accessible to us. But it will not be long before these regions become a part of our interconnected, globalized world.

When I watch a Manchester United match on TV nowadays, I see people from all over the world in the stands, supporting a cosmopolitan team on the field. The stadium erupts when United scores a goal, and the fans are struck by an immense feeling of euphoria. Even as I cheer, I can't help but have a tinge of regret for not having experienced the feeling of standing alongside twenty thousand locals in Manchester, cheering on a fledgling United team in 1908. Imagine how different it would feel to stand alongside fans united under one voice, unified by a shared cultural identity, cheering on local heroes who originate from their city. Imagine the feeling of jubilation experienced by all those supporters when an entire community came together in a long moment of joyous revelry.

And yet, still, I cheer for my United team.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Adam. "Golden Goals versus Local Loyalty." *The Times Higher Education* 11 Oct. 2002: 22-23. Print.
- Classic Football. FIFA.com*. FIFA, n.d. Web. 21 June 2011.
- Cowen, Tyler. "Some Countries Remain Resistant to American Cultural Exports." *New York Times* 22 Feb. 2007: n. pag. Web. 22 Feb. 2011.
- Friedman, Thomas. "The World Is Flat." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 663-68. Print.
- Graham, Mark. "1968 European Cup Final Line Up." *mufcinfo.com*. MUFCINFO, n.d. Web. 15 June 2011.

- Kuper, Simon. "Dutch Style and the Dutch Nation." *Sports Illustrated*. Turner-SI Digital, 8 June 2011. Web. 21 June 2011.
- "Manchester United FC." *FIFA.com*. FIFA, 2011. Web. 15 June 2011.
- McLeish, Ian. "LDU Quito 0 United 1." *manutd.com: The Official Website*. Manchester United, 21 Dec. 2008. Web. 15 June 2011.
- Rich, Tim. "Manchester United Achieving Their Main Goal in Asia." *guardian.co.uk*. Guardian News and Media, 22 July 2009. Web. 15 June 2011.
- Rodriguez, Richard. "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." *Occasions for Writing: Evidence, Idea, Essay*. Ed. Robert DiYanni and Pat C. Hoy II. Boston: Thomson, 2008. 501-08. Print.
- Tadmor, Carmit T., and Philip E. Tetlock. "Biculturalism: A Model of the Effects of Second-Culture Exposure on Acculturation and Integrative Complexity." *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 37.2 (2006): 173-90. Print.
- Tomlinson, John. "Globalization and Cultural Identity." *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate*. Ed. David Held and Anthony G. McGrew. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Blackwell, 2003. 269-77. Print.
- Wilson, Bill. "Why Is Man United a Prize Catch?" *BBC News*. BBC, 7 Feb. 2005. Web. 15 June 2011.

106 - MERCER STREET