Technology and tradition: preserving culture in a globalised world

Artists Tony Spencer and Kye Wilson present 'Spearman,' a new artwork incorporating a full-scale video installation of a Gambian musician. 'Spearman' is a single-screen life-size video projection of a Gambian village drummer who left his home in Kartong village to embark on a dangerous migration over land and sea to Europe, in the hope of a better life.

The story of musician Spearman is a story of migration and cultural identity - and the impact of digital technologies on migration and cultural identity. Globalisation has had a huge impact on the movement of peoples between and across countries, a burgeoning trend in the last century. Now, over 244 million people live in a country different to the one where they were born (data from 2015); a 41% increase compared to just seventeen years ago in the year 2000.[1] In his paper *Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity,* Yi Wang claims that "human societies across the globe have established closer contacts over many centuries, but recently the pace has dramatically increased. The communications revolution, thanks to its rapidity and outreach, has made the world a global village."[2]

But how, in this global village do we preserve traditional cultural identities and maintain cultural connections between people and their homes?

This new world we live in, where people move and migrate for a myriad of different reasons, has been made possible largely because of developments in science and technology. We are now able to travel more widely, and for prices that mean globetrotting is not just restricted to the very wealthy. We now have the ability to communicate – in seconds – with the other side of the world. This ultimately has had an impact on cultural traditions, and, more specifically, how they are no longer linked to place. Instead, they are linked to people; people who have memories, stories and experiences that they are now able to share across the globe.

In *The Cultural Aspect of Technology*, Fatemeh Farahani asks whether technology causes alienation.[3] Farahani asserts that "the friction between technological development and the preservation of cultural values, in particular the influence of the former upon the course of social and cultural changes have been a great source of controversy."[4] This issue of tension is a familiar face in the culture and identity studies world. In fact, in stark contrast to this familiar theory, Spencer and Wilson's project is an incredibly positive illustration of how technology can maintain – or even increase – engagement with age-old traditions. By

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[1] UN statistics, available online at:
http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/01/244-million-international-migrants-living-abroad-worldwide-new-un-statistics-reveal/
[2] Yi Wang, *Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity,* available online at:
http://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09-Yi-Wang.pdf, p1
[3] Fatemeh Farahani, *The Cultural Aspect of Technology,* available online at:
http://ignca.nic.in/ls_03019.htm
[4] Ibid.

projecting Spearman back in Kartong with his former troupe, Wilson and Spencer have effectively enabled Spearman to transcend borders, time and space.

Spearman's story is one that will resonate with many people from many parts of the world. Leaving the place he was born, where he was a part of the culture and the culture a part of him, Spearman left Kartong village in the hope of forging a better life for himself. He took with him, of course, his ability to perform traditional West African rhythms, but there was the danger he could have lost his cultural connection with his home. Spencer and Wilson's project highlights the role technology can play in breaking down geographical barriers, as well as the role the arts have in preserving cultures and cultural identity.

Preservation of the diverse cultural identities and traditions that exist across the globe is absolutely vital, particularly in present times of exponential growth, and in light of the creation of new cultures or convergence of existing ones. In *The Importance of Cultural Heritage*, the author notes that "culture can give people a connection to certain social values, beliefs, religions and customs. It allows them to identify with others of similar mindsets and backgrounds. Cultural heritage can provide an automatic sense of unity and belonging within a group and allows us to better understand previous generations and the history of where we come from."[5]

Spencer and Wilson's film will remain forever a moving portrait of Spearman's heritage, the culture of his village and of his own identity. In a world where cultures are at risk of being forgotten, merging, or becoming diluted, this preservation through art and technology highlights how globalisation can offer hope and opportunity for many. In spite of the reservations about our increasingly global world and what this means for the people that live in it, 'Spearman' is a real example of how globalisation and technological development do not spell the end of cultural tradition.

As Wang states in his essay, "in the new era of globalization, people become much more concerned about the uniqueness and particularity of their own culture. Cultural identity provides the global significance of local knowledge and the sense of self, community and nation. In terms of science, technology and economic development, globalization reflects somewhat the theory of convergence and hegemonic control, but in a deeper sense, it promotes cultural identity."[6]

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[5] Cultivating Culture, *The Importance of Cultural Heritage,* available online at: http://www.cultivatingculture.com/2013/04/05/the-importance-of-cultural-heritage/
[6] Yi Wang, *Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity,* http://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09-Yi-Wang.pdf, p1

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