

Cultural Awareness

Fashion based on cultural awareness supports the preservation of cultural diversity by working with global artisans from many cultures to keep traditional practices, arts forms, and linguistics thriving. If we continue to consume cheap, assembly-line goods that lack any hint of culture and traditional art, we are dooming humanity to lose some of its most valuable knowledge and insights.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND GLOBALIZATION: HUMANITY BECOMES MORE HOMOGENOUS

The United Nations (UN) has declared cultural diversity one of their highest values.ⁱ Yet through the process of globalization as goods and services are traded, sold, and swapped around the globe, cultures and deep rooted traditions are being lost at an increasing rate. The loss of cultures are inextricably linked to this consumption model, spurred on by marketing values that encourage people to buy more and more cheap goods at a faster and faster rate. But to start, let's explore why culture and traditional practices are important and how they're being lost.

Defining Cultural Identity

In order to understand the current state of cultural health today, it will be helpful to define what we mean by "culture." It is what makes a community unique and can be expressed in both tangible and intangible ways. You see culture in many tangible ways such as:

- Typical foods
- Local dress
- Special holidays
- Cultural artifacts
- Folkloric tales
- Ritual songs
- Spoken cultural creations

Intangible expressions of culture are those elements in which we exist every day, but may never notice. It's like the air we breathe – we know it's there, but it's not often that we think about its presence. Intangible expressions of culture may include the following:

- Beliefs
- Values
- Practices
- Customs
- Routines

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- Rituals
- Sentiments
- Assumptions

Humanity possesses thousands and thousands of unique and interesting traditions around the world.

MEASURING LOSS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY USING LANGUAGE

It is difficult to measure just how culturally diverse humanity is today and how quickly we're losing our cultural heritage. Consider, for instance, how challenging it would be to quantify how many Latin American people are still practicing the technique of adobe construction or the number of people preserving the art of Chinese tattooing. It would be a monumental task.

An alternative method for measuring cultural diversity loss is to count and measure how many people are speaking specific languages. This allows anthropologists and sociologists to estimate the loss of culture by recording the languages spoken around the world and whether they are disappearing or alive and well.

Researchers know that this is not an entirely accurate way to measure the number of unique cultures – English, for instance, is a language that spans dozens of cultures around the world, from the USA to Canada to Ireland to Jamaica to Australia, yet each country possess unique English-based culture. But as a verbal representation of human culture, languages are one measure of just how many different groups of people there are on our planet.

Not only that, but languages are an *expression* of a unique world view in that they encompass, in words and awareness, the philosophy and features of a particular culture. Language is the verbal embodiment of culture, and as such, when language is lost, it is a tangible symbol of cultural loss as well. You can see this in many ways:

- Language is the primary vehicle by which families and communities transmit cultural ideas. Language is often infused in symbolism and communicated through art, such as hand loomed textiles and paintings.
- Language is necessary for socializing children in particular cultural methods and systems.
- Children develop a socio-emotional bond at a young age to their language by learning appropriate communication styles, problem solving skills, and social competencies.

To get an idea of how many cultures are distributed throughout the world, we can examine language statistics throughout the globe:^{ii iii}

- 85% of the 7,000 languages in the world are spoken in 22 countries.
- Asia possesses the largest number of languages, followed by Africa and the Pacific. The Americas and Europe have the fewest.

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- Countries with the largest number of unique languages are Papua New Guinea (~900 languages), Indonesia (~700 languages), Nigeria (~500 languages), India (~400 languages), Cameroon (~300 languages), Mexico (~250 languages), Zaire (~200 languages), Brazil (~200 languages).
- Regions with the greatest diversity of language and cultural identity are the most at risk of experiencing the endangerment or extinction of their unique knowledge and communication styles.^{iv}

We have an incredibly rich and diverse world – the more we increase our cultural awareness, the more we appreciate that fact! Yet at the same time, we need to acknowledge that much of the uniqueness of humankind is being lost.

- The National Geographic Society estimates that a language dies every 14 days.^v
- Though estimates of language extinction are difficult to develop, some believe that the number of languages on our planet may decrease by as much as 80% within the next century.^{vi}
- Of the 300 languages that were spoken in North America by indigenous populations in generations past, most are either extinct or in danger.^{vii} In the United States, 115 indigenous languages have been lost over the last five centuries.^{viii}

Scientists and anthropologists estimate that as languages die, so do cultures. This is therefore a serious problem if we value our cultural diversity as a species.

Modern Threats to the Survival of Culture

So what exactly is endangering cultures around the world? Culture can be lost – or endangered – over time as fewer and fewer people utilize a community's unique practices. Endangerment of culture can be either gradual or sudden, and can happen for a number of reasons, but these are the most common:

- **Immigration and assimilation:** Immigrant children can experience a stigma as a result of speaking a different language or practicing unique cultural traditions. To avoid this, they let go of their traditions and language to fit in better with the new culture. Today, families that immigrate to a new region tend to lose their native language within one generation, though in decades past, the loss of language occurred in three generations.^{ix} It is estimated that 50% of all spoken languages today are spoken only by the adults and not spoken by the next generation, which means in one generation we could lose half of all human languages.^x
- **Subjugation:** Those in power may attempt to subjugate groups of people based on race, culture, or language. This can be accomplished through economic, religious, cultural, military, or educational subjugation, which may lead to the endangerment or extinction of a culture or language.
- **Community dislike:** A community may develop a negative attitude toward its own language and culture because of a sense that they are of no use or not worth retaining. Local

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languages are abandoned in order to overcome discrimination, to secure a livelihood, or enhance social mobility.^{xi}

- **Dramatic population loss:** Natural disasters, disease, and war may endanger small communities where the local language and culture are known by only a few hundred people. After the tragic loss of the majority of the population, the remaining individuals may not be able to carry on the culture.
- **Community trade:** When two small communities exist in close proximity, they will trade and exchange cultural ideas. Often one community is inferior, in which case cultural and language identity may be given up in favor of adopting that of the dominant culture.
- **Migration and urbanization:** Individuals and families, in today's globalized economy, will leave their historical homes to find employment and opportunity in other locations. This usually means migrating from rural to urban centers where fitting in through homogenization is the key.

As you can see, there are many factors that play into the loss of culture around the world. This is a serious problem for the survival of humanity as you will soon see.

Why You Should Care about Cultural Awareness and Endangerment of tradition?

Culture provides humans a sense of identity by defining who they are, where they come from, and who and what matters in their lives. When individual cultures and traditions go extinct, they represent the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge which has been developed over centuries. These cultures embody historical knowledge, spiritual points of view, and ecological awareness that can be incredibly valuable to the survival of people within those cultures as well as the global community as a whole. This Navajo elder's expression explains the importance of cultural identity and language well:^{xii}

If you don't breathe,
there is no air.
If you don't walk,
there is no earth.
If you don't speak,
there is no world.

This poem is also a beautiful example of how cultural groups demonstrate their connection with the earth. Their respect for the natural world is evident, and reinforces their belief that living in harmony with nature is more forward-thinking and sustainable. We as a society would benefit from their understanding of the natural world, but are losing that advantage as their culture disappears.

Let's consider some of the other consequences of loss of culture and language:

- **Loss of generational cohesion:** Children who adopt new cultural traditions and languages may, in the process, experience a loss of ability to communicate across generations with

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others in their family or community. This happens because as they lose their language, they lose the socioemotional and cognitive understanding that comes with language.

- **Loss of history:** Much of the history of a culture is canonized in language through oral traditions such as storytelling and folklore. When the language is lost, so is this history. For instance, the Ket language, spoken inland of Russia's eastern coast, may be a distant ancestor of Navajo spoken by Native Americans. Loss of the language (which is imminent) will represent the loss of an important link with anthropological significance.
- **Loss of scientific opportunities:** The diversity of language tells scientists a lot about cognition, but as more languages disappear, scientists lose the ability to study the human brain. When cultures and languages die, we also lose the knowledge they possess about nature and the wider world which may hold truths that are useful tools in rebuilding what we have destroyed.
- **Loss of confidence:** As people begin to see their language and culture as useless or irrelevant, they may begin to believe that they too are useless or irrelevant. This can significantly, negatively impact an individual or community's sense of worth and confidence. Ultimately this can severely hinder their ability to reach educational, economic, and environmental goals.
- **Cultural bereavement:** As people migrate away from their culture, they carry with them mental and emotional distress at being alienated, dislocated, and distant from their roots. Additionally, loss of self-worth and confidence can create a sense of despair and grief which may lead to lower productivity and ultimately to suicide.^{xiii}

In other words, the loss of artistic culture and diversity has many profoundly negative impacts on our global community and us as individuals as well. It is in our best interest to try to preserve these traditions and uniqueness's. By tapping into the varied, time-tested wisdom of multiple cultures, we learn truths about our existence and how to live better. Yet this opportunity is becoming increasingly impossible as cultures are lost.

HOW THE CURRENT ECONOMY CONTRIBUTES TO THE LOSS OF CULTURE

Like canaries in a mine, when cultures and languages start to die, they are a sign of deeper issues, such as loss of environmental health or a significant change in socioeconomic systems. When local ecosystems are significantly disrupted or when the economic environment changes drastically, people will begin to disperse in order to find new sources of food, water, or income. As they scatter, culture and traditional practices are lost.^{xiv} Unfortunately, like fish living in a dying ocean, the demise of culture is slow and almost imperceptible – we hardly notice as the water all around us becomes less nurturing.

So how does industry and the consumption economy (as seen in the fast fashion world) contribute to the loss of culture and language? Consider these features of the current mass production system:

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- **Regional displacement:** Multinational and local companies often move into a community to extract resources. As they do so, they displace small communities who are forced to move to new locations. This can result in loss of community cohesion as families move to different regions.
- **Environmental degradation:** During the process of extraction of natural resources and production of finished goods, large companies often leave a path of environmental destruction, including water, soil, and air pollution, deforestation, desertification, species loss, and so on. Health problems and loss of resources will force communities to migrate to new regions in order to survive. In fact, researchers have found that 70% of the world's languages are also found in the planet's most biologically diverse regions, combined with the fact that the loss of species is 1,000+ times greater than historic rates, and that biodiversity loss is directly related to culture and language loss.^{xv} In other words, as ecosystems die, so does human culture.
- **Migration for employment:** For various regions, individuals and families may leave their communities in order to seek out employment in new regions. This represents a loss of connection to their roots, and integration into urban melting pots where artistic culture and language diversity are devalued.
- **Mass production:** Mass production has taken the trend of cultural and ethnic fashions and has forced old world styles into fast fashion practices. Many corporations who don't wish to wait for the time it can take for handcrafted goods to be made, usually that of traditional techniques, will opt instead for mass produced replicas that can be made quickly and at a cheap cost. This demand for fast turnaround has robbed many cultures of their ability to make a lively hood of using traditional practices that their family has been depending on for decades. The sad part is most traditional artistry is done in a low impact and sustainable manner because they were handed down from a time when civilizations were reliant on nature to feed, shelter, and support them as the only means of having a sustainable life.
- **Uniformity:** Mass consumption such as that in fast fashion values cheap, assembly-line style, cookie-cutter production, which results in uniformity of products and loss of cultural artifacts and techniques. Yet the beauty and value of a product should come from the individual expression of the creator. If the creator cannot express individual ideas and concepts, the product has little to no cultural value.
- **Language of trade:** Large companies will encourage employees to speak one language in order to stimulate more efficient production. Over time, individuals may lose their native language skills as a result.
- **Spread of Western individualism ideal:** The Western ideal of individualism places a high value on having a homogenous set of values and beliefs. As media and computers become ubiquitous even in the poorest regions of the world, the values and beliefs being spread are generally those of American consumerism. Industry contributes to this by producing ad campaigns that encourage individuals to emulate the Western ideal and abandon their own cultural uniqueness.

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- **Patenting a culture's intellectual property:** In some of the most offensive cases, a corporation will co-opt the wisdom of an indigenous culture and patent their ideas and techniques as their own. Not only can this negatively impact a local culture by making it legally impossible for them to practice their culture without being sued, it also robs that community of the ability to market their own uniqueness to the world.

These and many other factors imposed on local cultures in the name of creating more stuff at cheaper prices has a profound impact on cultural differences .

ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES THAT ENHANCE AND PRESERVE CULTURE

As the embodiment of unique human expression, cultural traditions hold tremendous value for humanity and should therefore be preserved. Consumption based on cultural awareness acknowledges the value of individual traditions and has a direct impact on protecting distinctive ideas and traditions by supporting artisans who create within community based on traditional knowledge and techniques.

Choosing culturally-rich products like those created by Hearts.com reinforces our awareness of our own beliefs and those of others, accepting them as different and valuable. In the end, consumers are able to contribute to world culture for the benefit of all humanity.

Many ethical businesses today are choosing alternative approaches to the economy and consumption that value cultural uniqueness and foster these things while turning a profit. Ethical fashion companies, for instance, will put people and culture on par with (or above) business success and profit, knowing that by doing so, they can produce higher quality goods that are unique and benefit society as a whole.

In order to preserve cultures and languages, we have to make it possible for communities to continue to speak their languages and practice their cultural traditions, and more importantly, encourage them to teach these things to their children. This can be accomplished in several ways:

- Establish educational systems that value culture and language and teach them in the classroom.
- Foster political systems that protect minority groups and traditions.
- Engage in collaboration between sociologists and linguists to record information about unique cultures and develop educational and written systems to pass this information on to future generations.
- Ensure that multilingualism and multiculturalism are valued and encouraged rather than seeing them as liabilities.

In the world of sustainable consumerism, there are a number of ways businesses can make the preservation of culture a priority:

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- **Community collaboration:** Goods such as ethnic jewelry or traditional fashion garments can be crafted in a community setting rather than in industrialized factories. This encourages the sharing and reinforcement of small community knowledge and languages close to the roots of those working within the system. As a result, people can avoid migrating to urban centers and instead maintain family and community ties.
- **Expression of cultural uniqueness:** Ethically and sustainably produced goods based on native fashion concepts often infuse cultural ideas and historical references within the very fibers of the finished product. Textiles, for instance, may be adorned with pictures that depict local folklore, or jewelry can be made using traditional techniques, and so on.
- **Preservation of historical techniques:** Whether it's low impact, traditional textile weaving, resourceful eco dyeing techniques, construction of wooden goods without waste, or traditional spice mixes based on local ingredients, culturally-sensitive products and services help to preserve historical methods and techniques that are valuable and often much more natural and eco-friendly than industrial ones.
- **Traditional materials:** Many traditional materials were abandoned by large companies in favor of materials that can be mass-produced, including those used in fast fashion. But ethically-produced and sourced consumer goods can revive these materials by creating a market for them internationally.
- **Family cohesion:** By allowing families to work close to home – or from home – families are able to maintain better cohesion, which benefits the emotional wellbeing of children, ensures the transmission of cultural values and language from one generation to another, and results in healthier communities.
- **Consumer education:** By increasing cultural awareness in consumers, businesses can help instill the value of cultural preservation in wider society. This should influence a consumer's other lifestyle choices, hopefully expanding their world view and encouraging a greater appreciation for cultural differences.

ETHICAL LIVING TIPS FOR HELPING TO PROTECT HUMANITY'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY

1. **Expand your mind:** Learn about your own culture and that of others by reading, watching documentaries and international news, or traveling to new places to expand your mind about how the world works! As you do, your prejudices about other peoples will crumble and you'll learn to appreciate the differences between your world and theirs.
2. **Get to know immigrants:** Get to know people from other cultures in your very own community by volunteering in the immigrant community. There are many worthy organizations that work with people who are new to your region. Help them make the adjustment to their new home by showing them around, and open your ears to learn more about their cultural traditions, too.

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3. **Eat different foods:** You can learn a lot about a culture by experiencing their food firsthand. So check out the local ethnic restaurants in your community and try something new! Better yet, see if there's a cultural center through which you can experience ethnic events focused on food and other traditions.
4. **Take a cultural art class:** Learn a new skill like weaving or clay throwing from a cultural teacher to expose yourself to traditional techniques and creative arts. We at Hearts have already learned so much from listening to the artisans with whom we work!
5. **Learn a new language:** If you haven't already, try to learn a new language! Doing so will help you think in different ways and will give you an appreciation for what it takes to transition from your native tongue to a new language out of necessity.
6. **Choose ethnic products:** Step out of your comfort zone next time you go shopping and looking for fashion, home décor, and other consumer goods that are infused with an ethnic flair. But go one step further and ask questions about the culture that created it and how it's unique.

ⁱ *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. (2001, November 2). Retrieved August 8, 2012, from UNESCO.org: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

ⁱⁱ Brenzinger, M., & de Graaf, T. (n.d.). *Documenting Endangered Languages and Language Maintenance*. Retrieved April 20, 2012, from UNESCO Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Statistical Summaries*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2012, from Ethnologue - Languages of the World: http://www.ethnologue.org/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=area

^{iv} *Frequent Asked Questions on Endangered Languages*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2012, from United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>

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^{vi} Woodbury, A. C. (n.d.). *What Is an Endangered Language?* Retrieved April 20, 2012, from Linguistic Society of America: <http://www.lsadc.org/info/ling-faqs-endanger.cfm>

^{vii} (Brenzinger & de Graaf)

^{viii} (Frequent Asked Questions on Endangered Languages)

^{ix} Sancez, S. Y., & Thorp, E. K. (n.d.). *Why Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Preservice and Inservice Preparation*. Retrieved April 20, 2012, from UNC FPG Child Development Institute: http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~scpp/crosswalks/pdfs/why_address_CLD.pdf

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^{xi} (Brenzinger & de Graaf)

^{xii} Yamamoto - paraphrased from a Navajo elder's words. (n.d.). Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World. (P.-T. M. Series, Interviewer)

^{xiii} Bhugra, D. (2004). *Migration, distress and cultural identity*. Retrieved April 20, 2012, from British Medical Bulletin: <http://bmb.oxfordjournals.org/content/69/1/129.full>

^{xiv} Nettle, D., & Romaine, S. (2000). *Vanishing voices: the extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{xv} Kinver, M. (2012, May 13). *Study links biodiversity and language loss*. Retrieved August 8, 2012, from BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-18020636>