

Losing Tradition

In an increasingly globalized economy, cultural diversity is at risk. Western corporations like McDonalds and Starbucks have vast overseas operations and actively look to garner a greater market share in offshore economies by displacing traditional local businesses. When the first Starbucks opened in Paris, some became concerned with the possibility of cultural homogeneity in the sphere of café culture. “Many French...do not want France to be just like the rest of the world: with standardised disposal cups of coffee—identical in 7,000 branches around the world.”¹

The destruction of cultural traditions expands well beyond food culture. Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* deals with the effects of the encroachment of Western culture and religion in Nigeria. In the novel, the traditional culture of Nigerian groups is presented as technologically unsophisticated but complex, rich with many positive (and non-Western) qualities.² Over the course of the novel, the presence of Christian missionaries and their new traditions causes violent rifts between local groups.

Culture loss of the kind expressed in *Things Fall Apart* is of great concern to the international community. UNESCO asserts that, “the defense of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity.”³ Nevertheless, the international community actively fights to eradicate some forms of traditional culture. Female Genital Cutting (FGC), the cutting and destruction of vaginal tissue associated with sexual pleasure, has been a cultural norm for many peoples in Africa and the Middle East. The World Health Organization and other international advocacy groups actively work to end FGC as a cultural practice, arguing that FGC is oppressive to women.

Study Questions:

- (1) Is it worth giving up technological and economic advancements in favor of maintaining traditional practices?
- (2) Should efforts be made to preserve traditional cultures in the face of globalization?
- (3) How do we distinguish between a cultural practice or tradition worth saving and a practice that should be eradicated?

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3401637.stm>

² Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.

³ <http://www.unesco.org/bpi/eng/unescopress/2001/01-120e.shtml>

