

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

*Cultural fashion promotes the renaissance of old world techniques and the materials and styles traditionally used that will preserve ethnic heritage, rebuild communities and reinforce pride in traditional arts. Many of us have very little in our closets that represent various cultures or traditions, which is largely because of how the fast fashion world works.*

### TRAGEDY IN THE LOSS OF ETHNIC FASHION

---

Every community has its own unique, traditional art forms which have been developed over centuries and passed down from one generation to another. Fast fashion, on the other hand, does not value cultural diversity, but instead encourages cookie cutter style that's produced for a mass market. While consumers are able to select from a variety of different styles at an astonishing low price point, the fast fashion process can have a very adverse impact on preserving cultural the heritage of indigenous communities.

### HOW HUMANITY LOSSES ITS CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

---

The process of culture loss is complex and often imperceptible, but important nonetheless. At the source of the problem lies the failure of the new generations to learn the traditions of their culture from their ancestors. This can happen for a number of reasons, but the following are the most profound:

- **Community transformation:** As the human population grows, villages and towns expand into cities and in the process are transform from a groups of close-knit individuals to a large collection of anonymous strangers. This is compounded by the drive to rise out of poverty, which leads many people to migrate from their rural communities to larger cities in order to find employment. As a result, children and grandchildren move away from their elders, preventing the transfer of culture and tradition from one generation to another.
- **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 turnaround has robbed many traditional cultures of their ability to make a lively hood at doing what their family has done for decades. The sad part is most traditional artistry is done in a low impact and sustainable mater 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 life.
- **Boarding schools:** In many developed countries, First Nations peoples were subjected to forced boarding schools for their children during periods of colonialism. This meant the children were taken away from their parents and taught new culture and language. When they returned to their communities, the traditions and languages of their people were strange and unknown to them.

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- **Looting and willful destruction:** Due to a lack of value afforded many historic sites, or the inability of communities to protect their environment, some historic locations are destroyed or looted by profit-seekers and unsuspecting tourists.

**Unsustainable development:** Another significant cause of lost cultural heritage occurs when we engage in unsustainable development. By physically changing our environmental landscape, we may (intentionally or unintentionally) destroy or obscure historic artifacts and sites. For instance, the installation of hydroelectric dams often displaces communities and floods historic sites. This can make it impossible to retrieve the historic information in these regions forever. Road building, tunnel construction, and city expansions all have similar impacts on historic sites.

- **Globalization:** Many living in developing regions learn to disdain their own heritage and long for a life of relative luxury that is portrayed in modern media found in television. This can lead indigenous peoples to abandon their own culture and language in order to achieve that western reality.

Ultimately, as those with traditional knowledge pass away or abandon their heritage, humanity becomes more homogenous, losing the rich variety of human tradition and culture as we adopt a common urban culture and lifestyle. As some have said, languages are like libraries that contain references to how and why each culture functions, what traditions are important, and how to understand the world. As elders pass away, these sources of *libraries* are lost and sometimes forever. As such, the forfeiture of indigenous culture represents an irreversible loss of human diversity and heritage.

### Why the Loss of Traditional and Cultural Knowledge Matters

The importance of cultural and traditional heritage cannot be overstated. Each culture and tradition contains valuable knowledge, historical data, and information that provide a sense of identity to its individuals. Though we may not notice the slow creep toward monoculturalism, over time, the loss of cultural traditions will have an overall devastating impact on all human species.

- **Intolerance and prejudice:** Without an appreciation for and value of culture and tradition, humans tend to develop intolerance for differences. Lack of understanding of another's language and culture leads humans to belittle and devalue them and creates negative stereotypes which are often inaccurate and negative. These attitudes often turn into prejudice and feelings of superiority which can lead to all sorts of societal indifferences. The UN has said that it is not enough to educate children. They must also be schooled in their own culture to instil an appreciation for diversity and steer them away from racism and discrimination.<sup>i</sup>
- **Health of humanity and the environment:** Within cultural and traditional knowledge often lies facts and wisdom about human health and environmental sustainability. Indigenous cultures pass this knowledge down from one generation to another, but much of this wisdom has yet to be discovered by modern medicine or the environmental movement. These traditions may contain important and powerful tools we can use as a species, but will be lost without preservation of culture and language.

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- **Emotional wellbeing:** Most individuals have a desire to be connected and anchored by something. For the vast majority of humans, that anchor is their culture and traditions. As indigenous people lose their culture, they tend to experience poor emotional and psychological health due to a loss of connection. For instance, Inupiat Inuit people from Northwest Alaska have the highest youth suicide rates in the world, due in large part because of culture loss. As elders die in the community and youth shun their heritage in order to fit in with a western culture, they become disconnected from their culture, leading to a loss of security and identity.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Ancient historical knowledge:** Historic sites contain information about the course of human history and may provide insights on how to avoid future disasters. However, as communities let go of the value they hold for their culture and language, they also forget about the importance of cultural sites which are often sources of tourism revenue. As a result, these communities are often unconcerned about the loss of their cultural heritage sites, geographic locations that hold tremendous history and value. A UNESCO report recently identified 200 important cultural heritage sites which are at risk due to neglect, looting, conflict, and unsustainable tourism.<sup>iii</sup>

This is just an impact of cultural loss. There are many other important reasons why we must, as human race, put greater emphasis on preserving cultural heritage.

### Measuring the Loss of Culture and Tradition through Language Extinction

Anthropologists and sociologists often measure the loss of culture in terms of the loss of language. This is because each individual language reflects a unique world view, including value systems, philosophies, and cultural features. Within that specific language is embodied spiritual, ecological, and historical knowledge that becomes lost once the language becomes extinct.

Alarming, the rate of language loss – our cultural health indicator – is extremely rapid in our modern culture.

- **The pace of language loss:** Every 14 days, a language dies, with more than half of the current 7,000 languages expected to be dead by 2100.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Languages already lost:** It is impossible to measure how many languages humanity once had and how many total have been lost, but in certain regions we have a better understanding. In the US, for instance, 115 languages have already been lost.<sup>v</sup>
- **Recent language losses:** Two examples of language losses include the Akkala Saami language which was spoken in the Russian Federation until 2003, and the Eyak language which was spoken in Alaska until 2008.<sup>vi</sup>

This is an imminent and serious problem that we must address if we are to thrive as a species long term.

### How Fast Fashion Contributes to the Loss of Tradition and Culture

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

What does this have to do with ethical fashion? By creating an economic and trade system in which diversity and uniqueness is devalued. Mass produced fashion – that created by machines in the millions – is far more profitable and inexpensive to create. As a result, as big corporations move into developing communities to employ indigenous peoples, they encourage them to abandon their old ways in favor of new, faster ways. Jobs with these businesses include working in large-scale textile farms and mills, or becoming a laborer in a jewelry or clothing manufacturing plant.

Additionally, those in developing countries who can create traditional fashion such as small producers and artisans typically do not have the infrastructure or expertise to market their goods to a larger consumer base. As a result, over time they abandon their traditional and cultural crafting work in favor of businesses that fit into the global economy.

### **This is how fast fashion fails to protect tradition and culture:**

- **Promise of short term financial gains:** The textile industry increases their demand for fibers like cotton, promising small farmers that if they convert their wild spaces into agricultural crops they'll get rich. Additionally, fast fashion businesses recruit individuals out of their indigenous communities to work in factories that create textiles and finished products. In both cases, the financial returns are usually less than promised. Worse, by encouraging people to abandon their traditional farming and production methods, they diminish a community's ability to learn and pass on cultural traditions.
- **Environmental degradation:** Fast fashion requires the consumption of vast resources, energy, and water, and often results in serious toxicity problems such as that from tanneries and textile dyeing. This creates eco problems such as deforestation, pollution, desertification, and more. The result is that communities are left with degraded soil, drinking water, and far fewer natural resources, forcing many to leave their ancestral lands to find an income or new property elsewhere.
- **Discouragement of diversity:** Working for a large corporation often requires that individuals give up their language, religious traditions, and cultural customs in the factory.

Millions of people migrate from rural communities every year, leaving behind their heritage, their storytelling, and their connection to community. This can lead to a loss of traditional and cultural art within a single generation. And by living outside of their communities, individuals fail to carry on their native language, which is crucial to protecting the traditional heritage, cultural identity and dignity of indigenous peoples.<sup>vii</sup>

For the individual, the loss of a cultural anchor can contribute to what is known as cultural bereavement – a sense of grief over the loss of one's social structure and culture. This can involve feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, painful memories, and a loss of self-identity and self-confidence. Not only does this lead to a lower quality of life, it makes individuals less productive and sometimes incapable of contributing to the larger good.<sup>viii</sup>

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

### ETHICAL FASHION MUST VALUE TRADITION AND CULTURE

---

*There are many ways ethical businesses can support indigenous traditions, but the most important tool for preserving culture is to create conditions in which culture and tradition are recognized. Ultimately, communities must value their multiculturalism and multilingualism in order to preserve their heritage, and that can only be done if there are social and political conditions that allow this to happen.*

Fostering an environment conducive to the preservation of traditional practices can include any of the following:

---

- Establishing policies that protect minority traditions, lands, languages and customs.
- Encouraging the promotion of native languages and traditions in education systems.
- Working with indigenous people to develop writing systems to preserve native languages.
- Supporting the growth of cultural celebration and awareness.
- Keeping traditional practices alive by keeping mass production replicas and knock offs out

*Ethical fashion designers and those at Hearts work carefully to recognize the true worth of an artisan's unique culture, tradition and preserving their heritage by promoting their traditional and ethnic fashion to a wider audience. By helping artisans gain access to a wider consumer base, we provide a place in which cultural fashion using old-world materials and traditional methods, make a positive impact on cultural preservation. Through understanding and the celebration of diversity we can keep artistry and culture alive.*

### HOW SUSTAINABLE FASHION SUPPORTS CULTURAL FASHION

---

Consumers can choose to support cultural traditions and art by giving preference to sustainable fashion by purchasing from small companies and individual artisans. This action is a way to send a message to the global economy that diversity, traditional techniques, and sustainability are in demand and supports the preservation of tradition and culture.

Supporting the positive aspects of indigenous culture doesn't have to mean a total separation from the global market. Ideally, artisans who specialize in their cultural fashion should balance the need to protect their cultural identity while maximizing the benefits of urban society. As such, sustainable fashion companies that support tradition and culture provide a valuable link between small producers and the global economy – a hurdle that most small holders cannot overcome on their own.

Ethical fashion supports practices that preserve tradition and cultural legacy by encouraging these types of practice:

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- Using traditional materials and techniques, often focused on handmade fashion traditions, to create fashion that is sold on the global market.
- Encouraging artisans to craft finished products within a community setting to build cohesion, reinforce traditional values, and provide local employment.
- Opportunities for parents to work close to home (or at home) in order to foster healthy family relationships and encourage the transfer of traditional knowledge.
- Supporting educational programs that foster a value for indigenous pride, traditions and cultural embracement.

Sustainable fashion companies that promote the value of maintaining traditional and cultural principles accomplish these goals by providing technical training in traditional methods and cooperative philosophies that stress the value of mutual aid. Many of these culturally-focused companies also create cultural centers to educate outsiders about their methods, and to reinforce their local cultural identity with the next generation.

The benefits of encouraging the use of traditional techniques to create ethnic fashion are many. People who use their cultural traditions to create beautiful, sustainable products typically have higher self-esteem and cultural grounding than those who leave their traditional communities behind in search of work in an urban setting. It is not surprising that ethical fashion of this type also supports fair trade labor and production practices, eco-friendly principles, and financial sustainability.

The result is a fashion system that provides sustainable employment that improves the economic and social situations of the entire community through self-sufficiency and self-confidence.

### TYPES OF MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES USED IN CULTURAL AND ETHNIC FASHION

---

Traditional and cultural fashion techniques are as interesting and unique as the communities from which they arise. Here is just a small sampling of some of the techniques you'll find in traditional fashion pieces like those we create at Hearts:

- **Khadi:** Spinning cotton, wool, and silk together by hand without the use of electricity, a practice founded by Mahatma Gandhi in India.
- **Hand made yarns and stitches:** Many cultures have developed their own unique weaving, knitting, embroidery, crocheting, and twisting techniques for interesting patterns and textures.
- **Looming:** A manual alternative to creating textiles. Because the practice is all done by hand it is extremely sustainable and low impact. There are many methods including back strap looming, foot looming, draw looming, and hand looming just to name a few.

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- **Hand block prints:** Using vegetable dyes, patterns are printed on textiles.
- **Manual sewing:** This can include both hand sewing and sewing with the use of a manual (non-electrified) sewing machine.
- **Bandhani:** An Indian textile decoration technique using a tie-dye system for coloring silk with elaborate designs.
- **Kantha:** A folk art embroidery technique from Bangladesh and India that's thousands of years old. It involves recycling old saris and layering bits of fabric with needlework to create a decorative motif in an indigenous style.
- **Chinese knotting:** This is an ancient form of jewelry making that involves combining discs, cords, and coins together to create interesting fashion ornamentation.
- **Batik:** A traditional textile printing process originating from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria involving dye-resisting waxes and color layering.
- **Ranrang:** A weaving technique involving wefts of interlocking zig-zag or diamond patterned threads.
- **Aguayo:** A traditional Andean multi-colored woolen cloth making technique.

In many ways, traditional and cultural fashion embodies the principles of slow fashion, preferring quality over quantity, custom fit over one-size-fits-all, and long-term durability over made-for-obsolence.

Traditional artisans often make use of materials that can be found in their own backyards. Sometimes these are virgin materials such as grasses or clay, while others are recycled from waste created in the local community. You may find any number of combinations of the following materials in fashion created by indigenous artisans:

- Wood
- Fruits and vegetables
- Alpaca or sheep's wool
- Sisal and other grasses
- Shells and fossils
- Nuts and seeds
- Recycled glass
- Fibers

## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- Recycled soda can tabs
- Quills
- Vegetable dyes

The very nature of traditional and cultural fashion is diversity, so that no two items are the same. This is the beauty Hearts sees in supporting traditional fashion.

### ETHICAL LIVING TIPS FOR INCORPORATING MORE TRADITION AND CULTURE INTO YOUR LIFE

---

- **Support small producers:** Purchase ethnic fashion to help preserve indigenous languages, which are the fountain from which cultural identity and traditional heritage spring. By contrast, factory-made fashion perpetuates language loss. By supporting small artisans that use traditional techniques to create sustainable fashion, you're helping to preserve culture that builds into the rich diversity of humanity. But don't stop at fashion – choose small producers for all kinds of products, including foods, home décor, and more.
- **Learn more about endangered cultures:** When we educate ourselves in the beautiful diversity different cultures have to offer we can celebrate our uniqueness. We will grow an appreciation and understanding for how we can work together to keep traditions alive. This is essential in the development of humanity. Many endangered cultures have so much to offer in traditional knowledge and it is our duty to keep that knowledge accessible.
- **Support local culture:** Get involved in cultures within your own community by attending events at the local cultural centers, festivals that explore international foods, and folk events that showcase indigenous styles of music. You'll be expanding your horizons in terms of cultural understanding, which helps reduce any feelings of prejudice or discrimination you may have. And if there are no cultural centers in your local area, start one of your own.
- **Read historical literature:** Whether its biographies or historical fiction, it can be extremely enlightening to delve into literature that comes from different cultural perspectives. Books that have been translated from other languages into English are especially interesting. Better yet, listen to books about culture read by native speakers to hear bits of their language actually spoken.
- **Learn a new language:** Develop a deeper appreciation for languages and immigrants by learning a new language. If you can explore an endangered one, all the better.
- **Volunteer with immigrants:** There are many worthy non-profit organizations that work directly with immigrants who are new to your community. Working with these individuals will not only make their transition to a new culture easier, it will help you learn about the traditions from another heritage and culture.



## Traditional & Cultural Arts

---

- <sup>i</sup> *Urban Indigenous Peoples and Migration: Challenges and Opportunities*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 4, 2012, from United Nations Indigenous Peoples Indigenous Voices: [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/6\\_session\\_factsheet2.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/6_session_factsheet2.pdf)
- <sup>ii</sup> Wexler, L. M. (2006). *Inupiat youth suicide and culture loss: Changing community conversations for prevention*. Retrieved April 4, 2012, from Social Science Medicine: <http://www.mendeley.com/research/inupiat-youth-suicide-culture-loss-changing-community-conversations-prevention/>
- <sup>iii</sup> Debusmann, B. (2010, October 18). *Over 200 cultural heritage sites at risk: study*. Retrieved August 16, 2012, from Reuters: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/19/us-culture-heritage-sites-idUSTRE69H30320101019>
- <sup>iv</sup> *Disappearing Languages*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 4, 2012, from National Geographic: <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/>
- <sup>v</sup> *Frequent Asked Questions on Endangered Languages*. (n.d.). Retrieved August 16, 2012, from United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>
- <sup>vi</sup> *Frequent Asked Questions on Endangered Languages*. (n.d.). Retrieved August 16, 2012, from United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>
- <sup>vii</sup> *Indigenous Peoples Indigenous Voices*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 4, 2012, from United Nations: [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Factsheet\\_languages\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Factsheet_languages_FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> Bhugra, D., & Becker, M. A. (2005, February). *Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity*. Retrieved April 4, 2012, from World Psychiatry: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1414713/>