Cultural Extinction

Statement of the Problem:

Culture is essential for human beings since it is the key for people to identify themselves and fit in the groups. The culture can be the sum total of people’s behaviors, along with the things such as language, traditions including burial rituals, weddings, and so on. People will build their networks and relationships according to those cultural ideas, and form different types of groups of people. The similarities between the lifestyles of a people and their descendants pass on, gradually developing a cultural heritage.

Language is fundamental to cultural identity. For example, most people from China speak Mandarin Chinese, but Chinese people from different regions of China speak their own dialects. Therefore, it is important for people from different regions and countries to protect their language and make sure that it is alive.

However, because of the increasing globalization and cultural invasions, more and more unique cultures are disappearing and endangered. The cultural globalization is the transmission and exchange of ideas, attitudes, values and meanings all over the world. On one side, it helps countries to communicate more and develop faster, but on the other side, it may decrease a country’s unique cultural groups, especially for the groups with small populations. Modernization and economic development is another cause of cultural extinction. In addition, cultural imperialism can also force some minority cultures die. The phenomena of cultural extinction are increasing all over the world. Cultural extinction includes the loss of language, traditions, habits, and customs. Like the various species of animals and plants, cultures can become extinct as well. Therefore, more and more people and world organizations are working to prevent the loss all kinds of cultures throughout the world.

History of the Problem:

In different periods of history, some unique cultures have disappeared. Two typical examples are the disappearance of Maya cultures and Indus Civilization (India’s early civilization). The Maya originated in the Yucatan around 2600 B.C., best known of the classical civilization of Mesoamerica. Around
A.D. 250, the Maya cultures rose to prominence in southern Mexico (nowadays), and ended by A.D. 1200.

There are many famous inventions and ideas created by the Maya. The Maya developed astronomy, calendar systems, math, and hieroglyphic writing. In addition, it had sophisticated engineering to build the pyramids and pavilions.

However, even though the language and some traditions of the Maya survive no\textsuperscript{1}, the civilization was lost. The reasons explained the disappearances of Mayan cultures are various: deforestation and climate change are widely agreed by scholars. Some people think the peasants’ revolt might be another reason for Maya’s cultural extinction\textsuperscript{1}.

INDIA

India has a rich cultural heritage. Famous for its religious traditions, dance, music, food and architecture, India tries to preserve the aspects of ancient India still around today. Although Indian culture is rich, it was bound to undergo reforms and changes over thousands of years. Indus Valley Civilization is an epic period of time originating in 3300 BCE in the northwestern region of India. People of the Indus Civilization achieved great accuracy in measuring length, mass, and time. Moreover, there were various arts and crafts such as pottery and gold jewelry. Around 1800 BCE, the invasion of an Indo-European tribe, the “Aryans,” accelerated the collapse of the Indus Civilization.

Nowadays, the influences from the Western countries affect the traditional Indian cultures, and some of its cultural traditions are endangered of being lost. Many tribes are struggling to retain their most important cultural expression, including arts, stories, and rituals. However, some tribes are losing large parts of their culture because many tribal religious practices are tied to or must be done in specific locations that had strong spiritual and sacred meaning to the ancient tribes. Migration, industrialization, and agricultural development have changed the geographic locations to the point where many of the ancient rituals and ceremonies can no longer be performed there\textsuperscript{2}.

\textsuperscript{1}Industrialization: to develop manufacturing and technologically advanced industry very quickly
Discussion of the Problem:
Countries all over the world are affected by the cultural extinction. One of the main reasons cultural extinction occurs is because the cultures being lost are minorities in the countries they live in. The minority cultures feel enormous amounts of pressure to assimilate to the majority culture through education or feel the need to integrate into the majority culture in order to be economically successful (get a decent job for a decent wage). Many traditional ways of life are also being lost because of industrialization and modernization.

Case Study: Ladakh
Ladakh is a typical example of the change of traditional lifestyle. Before the effects of outside world and globalization, Ladakh was a self-sustainable region in India. People who lived in the region put their community first and help each other in the village. The community was based on a communal structure, meaning individuals put the welfare of the whole community before their own welfare. The society was very environmental friendly and the economy was self-reliant, meaning the members of the community produce everything they need to survive. But when modernization took hold in India and Ladakh was exposed to the outside world, especially Western ideas, Ladakh started to build roads connecting it to other, more modern parts of India. Situations such as human waste, pollution, and poor infrastructure began to occur. Not long after connecting to the modern world, water is no longer fit to drink, water-born disease became prominent amongst the population and environmental and health situation became a very serious problem. The area became more dependent on outside support, including food and technology. Fewer farmers could make a living producing agriculture; families were separated since parents and older children needed to leave Ladakh to find employment. Traditional cooperation lost its meaning within the community. Crime and violence incidents increased. The gap between poor and rich became much larger. Old traditions disappeared, including the values and beliefs of the community, more and more modern problems, including poverty and environmental degradation have occurred.

LANGUAGE
There are some aspects of cultural extinction. Language is a very important symbol of culture. Language conveys the traditions and cultures. It records the history of a people. But many languages are becoming extinct. A language is considered extinct when the last person who learned it as his or her primary tongue (or first language) dies and no one else in the world can speak or write in that language. Nowadays, one language goes extinct about every two weeks, more frequently than bird species become extinct. Around a quarter of the world’s population speaks just

**Assimilate**: to absorb an immigrant or minority into the mainstream culture
three languages, which are Mandarin Chinese, English and Spanish. However, out of the 6,700 of the world’s identified languages, nearly 2,500 are deemed at risk according to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. For example, Irish language or Gaelic is now facing the danger of extinction because fewer and fewer people are learning how to speak it and using it in daily conversation.

**WHY DO CULTURES BECOME EXTINCT?**

There are many reasons that cause cultural extinction. The first reason is cultural globalization. Cultural globalization is defined as the transmission of cultural ideas, values, and meaning across borders. Cultural globalization also includes media technology, entertainment, and economic institutions. Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany are better developed than developing countries, and because of this, many American, British, and/or German cultural ideas and technologies are spreading to the developing world. Some of the most well-known aspects of American culture that can now be found all over the world are fast food chains, Hollywood movies, and social media outlets, and all of these influence younger generations. The new culture is seen as cooler or more than traditional cultures, and many young members so of minority cultures leave their culture traditions behind to join the mainstream and globalized culture. The cultural invasion does harm the preservation of traditional cultures.

The second reason is the natural disasters and disease. Some natural disasters such as earthquakes can make some traditional cultures disappear. For example, the earthquake can destroy the ancient buildings and may kill people, maybe including the only person know some skills or secret histories of the culture. Similar as the natural disasters, disease may kill groups of people who had the same cultures and their cultures may disappear if no one survived in the disease. The third reason is a lack of education. If people are not educated about certain cultural traditions, handicrafts, or histories, they will be easily lost because fewer and fewer young people are willing to learn or have the opportunity to learn the traditional skills and legends.

**HOW DOES WORLD STOP CULTURAL EXTINCTION?**

What we can do to help preserve endangered cultures? Firstly, we need to raise people’s awareness how important different cultures are and what the negative consequence would be if more and more cultures become extinct. In addition, people who are not members of a particular culture in their
country should learn about the endangered cultures and the value that culture adds to the entire country. Countries need to identify innovative technologies and solutions to help preserve different cultures and cooperate with each other. Governments must work to stop cultural extinction. Governments should increase funding to the preservation of minority cultures because minority cultures play a vital role in the cultural heritage of the country it resides in.

Past International Actions:

UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO issued Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in order to try and prevent the extinction of cultures. UNESCO acknowledged the forces of globalization and modernization, and the negative impact both can have on preserving traditional cultures. UNESCO called for countries to build more awareness about disappearing cultures, especially amongst young people. UNESCO also created an “Intangible Heritage” List that includes specific cultural traditions, handicrafts, and histories that are seriously in danger of becoming extinct.

Questions to consider

- Does your nation have cultures in danger of being lost?
- Does your nation have any languages in danger of becoming extinct?
- Does the government of your nation already have programs in place to help preserve cultural traditions?
- What role does the UN play in preserving endangered cultures?
- What role should countries, governments, and individuals have in helping preserve the endangered cultures?

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i http://www.history.com/topics/maya
ii http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/indus_valley/
iii http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~alvar22n/Disappearing_Languages/Welcome_Home.html
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