



ODUMUNC 39

Special, Political, and Decolonization
Committee

Human Rights and Cultural Diversity

By: Hristina Georgieva & Tiana Bailey



ODUMUNC 2016

Issue Brief for the General Assembly Fourth Committee:
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Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society

Introduction:

One of the most beautiful features of humanity is the spectrum of different cultures seen across the globe. Many people visit different regions and countries simply to marvel at the creations of different cultures and to be submerged in an environment that reflects a way of life unlike their own. We often find ourselves fascinated with people or even items that come from a place or time that is unfamiliar to us. This fascination causes us to delve into the experiences of others and the history behind these objects to have a basic understanding of concepts that are new to us. In short, culture is arguably one of the most interesting qualities of mankind. However, these wondrous intricacies that draw us to experience cultures outside of our own are under threat. The world's network of cultures is undergoing tremendous change and the diversity of our human planet is at risk as a result. The United Nations in response is tasked with identifying at risk cultures and taking actions to prevent the destruction of human diversity, a task broad in application and specific in instance making this challenge one of the UN's greatest

Culture is defined as “various characteristics and values shared by a group or community (which form ethnic groups) that affects their everyday life, and is a shared experience and perspective of a group of individuals who live in very close

proximity of each other¹.” Culture is highly influential as it shapes how we see and understand the world around us. Different aspects of culture include (but are not limited to) religion, morals, race, ethnicity, and language. The differences seen in cultures worldwide constitute the world's cultural diversity, a concept that helps the human race flourish with versatility and color. It is often the goal of states to create a cultural homogeneity within their borders, because having an array of cultures, especially ones often at odds, can be a force that weakens the state and their power in the areas under a different cultural identity (known as a centrifugal geographic force). Ways that cultures are eliminated are shocking truths of reality, and are typically universally deplored actions that constitute genocide, including but not limited to forced immigration/deportation (on a local or global scale), the banishment of cultural practices which hold religious, historical, or traditional significance, or in extreme cases ethnic cleansing². The situation of cultures worldwide, from the Uyghurs and Tibetans in China, to the Sami in Norway, the Rohingya of Myanmar, or to the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina, are becoming increasingly endangered. This degradation of cultural rights has continued largely unabated despite considerable developments in the field of human rights since the establishment of the United Nations (UN). It is imperative that the cultural intricacies of

¹ Fouberg, Erin H., Alexander B. Murphy, and Harm J. De Blij. *Human geography: people, place, and culture*. Wiley Global Education, 2015.

² Ibid.



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the world today are protected against the eroding forces that several states have set in place in an attempt to construct a false sense of nation and the forces that persist from centuries of colonization and western exploitation, which have in turn endangered aspects, and sometimes the whole, of culture such as language or tradition.

Background:

A cultural entity is one comprised of people. People who all share a unifying culture as expressed through language, common history and traditions, religion, a relatively common homeland, and are spaced reasonably close together make up a nation³. Nations are therefore cultural entities, not political ones. Examples of nations are like those mentioned above, the Mapuche, the Rohingya, the Sami, the Tibetans, and the Uyghurs, are among the majority of nations in the world in that they do not hold power in their respective governments and are therefore not the dominant nation within their state. Other nations historically fared better and have enjoyed a status as traditional rulers of countries; examples of such are the Danes in Denmark, the Han in China (with the Qing dynasty as an exception), the French in France, the Japanese in Japan, the Russians in Russia, and the Castilian Spanish of Spain. This disconnect between nations, in this case between the ruling ethnic group and those under the control of another, leads to conflicts, insensitivity, an erosion of the minority ethnic group's culture, and a

sometimes extreme response from the ethnic group being repressed.



Art is one of the chief expressions of culture, like this Navajo depiction of an eclipse. Source:

<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/05/19/avert-your-eyes-eclipse-viewing-taboo-navajo-and-other-cultures-113739>

Culture is expressed in several ways, but geographers and political scientists pay special attention to the preeminence of two main factors because of their ease of measurement and their place as indicators of the rest of a nation's cultural identity: language and religion. Of the two, the situation facing global linguistic diversity places it as a prime challenge to the greater cultural diversity of the world because of language's ascendancy in terms of culture. Language is the main vehicle through which a culture is expressed. Language contains the historical context and the physical origins of the people who speak it, and therefore unique aspects regarding each culture can be seen through the nation's

³ Ibid.



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language. Whether languages are expressed only verbally or if they have a written element of their own, if they place a particular emphasis on tone or not, or how cultures express overall tendencies towards or away from something passively through tone, association, or word choice illustrates profound foundational knowledge of a given culture. A culture's language is a projection of its social, geographic, and historical foundations, from which a culture emerged and continues to inhabit, and the maintenance of such is of utmost importance to not only the continuation of the cultural diversity of the world, but also the heritage of billions of people⁴. As a result of language's importance to global cultural diversity and the human right to culture, to be discussed below, the current status of linguistic diversity in the world will be evaluated in the coming sections.

With the establishment of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 came the perspective of culture as a global and fundamental human right. The declaration maintains that it is a human right for every living person to exercise their culture, to maintain their culture, to practice their culture's religion, and to speak their culture's language without any of those rights being infringed upon by their ruling

governments⁵. This document is a requirement for entry into the United Nations, and so each of the UN's 193 permanent member states (and its 2 observer states) are bound by international law and custom to uphold the human right to culture. This does not stop many states from acting in the contrary, including some of the world's most powerful⁶. This establishment of culture as a human right is challenged in two ways worldwide: passively and actively. Passive erosion of culture is happening now faster than ever in the world because of the rapid growth of the force causing this passive erosion, globalization. Though globalization is certainly carried out by several actors directly, including non-state actors like corporations or NGOs, individuals, and states, the erosion of culture is an often undesired and unaccounted for consequence therefore making this degradation of culture a passive force. Active erosion of culture happens when state institutions directly attempt to assimilate a culture into the mainstream culture of the given state, or simply destroy the culture outright. This practice, if truly an act of active cultural erosion, is carried out by official state policies that either directly ban cultural practices or result in some aspect of cultural assimilation such as the banishment

⁴ Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove, Robert Phillipson, and Mart Rannut. "Linguistic human rights." *Overcoming linguistic discrimination*. Berlin/New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1995.

⁵ Ayton-Shenker, Diana. *The challenge of human rights and cultural diversity*. Geneva: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1995.

⁶ Cerna, Christina M. "Universality of human rights and cultural diversity: implementation of human rights in different socio-cultural contexts." *Human rights quarterly*, 1994: 740-752.



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of religious practices, indigenous language use, or forced relocation.

Current Situation:

Active Repression:

Active repression of the human right to culture can be seen all over the world, but more notably in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The dominant nation, the Han, exert considerable power on several periphery nations in terms of both hard (military, monetary, and political might) and

the mainstream Chinese Han culture. Since China's original control over Tibet during the Qing dynasty (a Manchu nation controlled government), and into the PRC's conquest of Tibet in 1950 (the modern Han dominated government), the Chinese government has sought to replace local Tibetan culture, mainly its religion and language, with that of the ruling culture⁷. Similar practices are being carried out in China along its western border in the province Xinjiang. Here the Uyghurs (pronounced weeger in English phonetics), a



This picture shows both the considerable difference in architecture and religion in this region with the mosque in the background, and the Chinese government's response in the foreground with its increased police and military presence in Xinjiang province.

Source: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2014/08/pictures-uyghurs-xinjiang-2014847180855327.html>

soft (cultural dominance) power in an attempt to assimilate said fringe nations into

⁷ "China and Tibet" Human Rights Watch. 2015.



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Muslim Turkic nation of 10-15 million people live in the Altai Mountains and the surrounding steppe. Uyghur separatists have exacerbated the already stark differences between the local nation and their Han rulers, and in the past few decades the Chinese government has been actively repressing the local culture by disallowing the wearing of hijabs and other religiously significant practices, and has forcibly relocated Uyghurs out of Xinjiang into the east, and replaced them by relocating Han Chinese into Xinjiang. Linguistically the Chinese government refuses to allow the official use of any language other than Mandarin Chinese, especially in its fringe provinces. As the dominance of Chinese characters takes root in these provinces a negative feedback loop is established and the local language suffers⁸. These steps taken by the Chinese government to assimilate and repress the human right to culture represent an active attempt to repress the culture of people within its state, and are only one of many similar situations around the world.

Another active repression tool employed by governments worldwide is the general exclusion of minority cultures in the broader political process and from the benefits of government programs aimed at development or fiscal prosperity. Actions from governments disallowing a nation's

right to vote, or refusing to reproduce a translation of available government programs intelligible by locals who speak another language within their state are examples of ways that governments can actively destroy a culture via exclusion. Excluding minorities places them in the vicious cycle that can plainly be seen all over the world: the stature of a nation cannot improve unless they are allowed to. Continued exclusion from the political and economic realms because of differences within the social one results in the perpetuation of a cycle which keeps minority and fringe nations at the bottom of a given state's social ladder. Any provision for the maintenance of global cultural diversity hangs on a state's willingness to incorporate an ethnic group into greater society without forcing them to abandon the cultural traits that make the group unique. State exclusion on the basis of cultural or religious differences can be seen in modernity against the Rohingya people, a Muslim population in central western Myanmar, where in 2014 the entire culture's citizenship in Myanmar was revoked. The government of Myanmar maintains that the Rohingya, the population of which is over one million people in Myanmar alone, do not exist, and the only way these people are accounted for on the 2014 government census was if they identified as Bengali. Instead of seen as another person, the Rohingya are ignored entirely by the government and, regardless of the fact that some members of the Rohingya nation were elected to political office in 2010, are not allowed to vote or participate in elections.

⁸ Demirtepe, M. Turgut, and İzzet Ahmet Bozbey. "Accommodation or Assimilation? Chinese Government Policies Toward Uyghur Minority." *USAK Yearbook of International Politics and Law* 5 (2012): 151-174.



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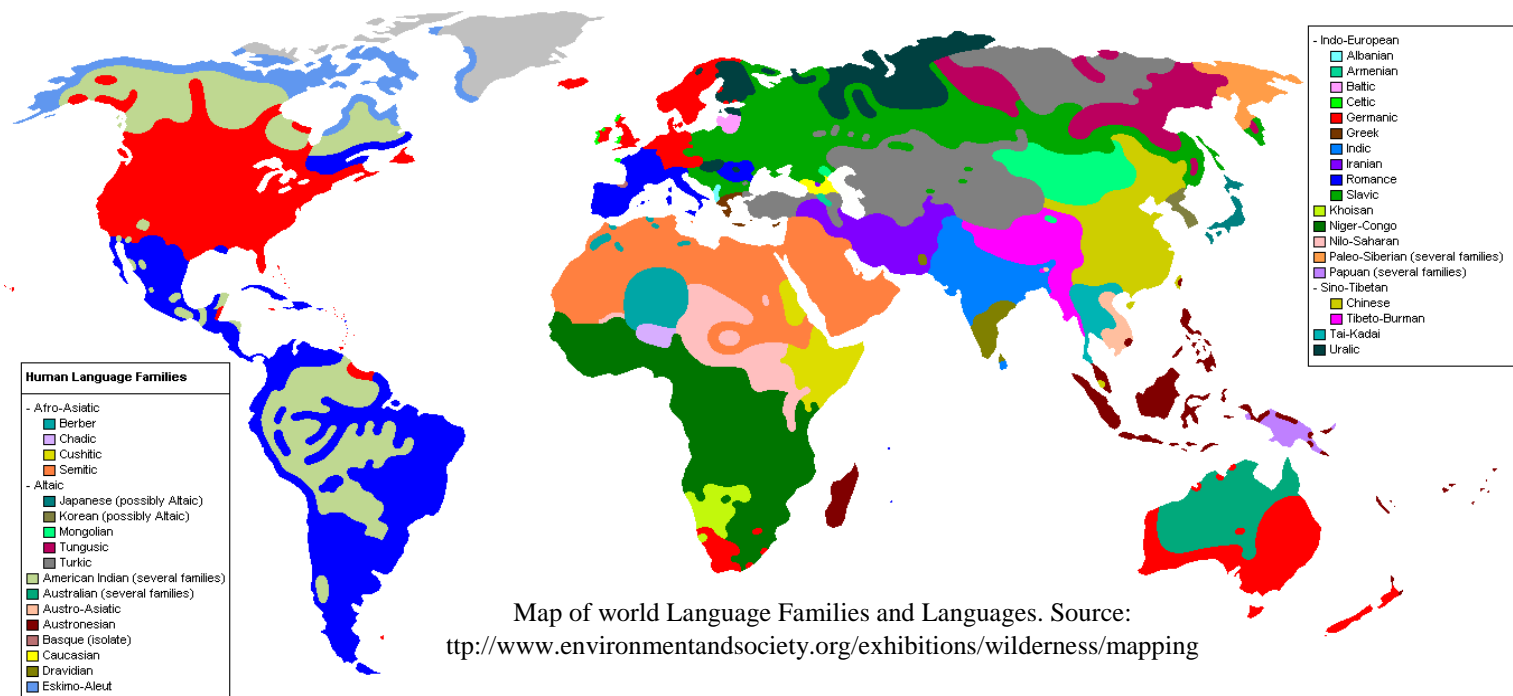
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The exclusion of the Rohingya people by the government of Myanmar amounts to a breach of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where in article 6 it is stated that “Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.” For more in-depth information discussing realities in Myanmar and for the plight of the Rohingya people, check out [this article from Time](#)⁹.

Passive Repression:

Passive repression of culture is far harder to tackle than active repression

vehicle through which culture carries itself out, and in the modern world many “world” languages have flattened or even forced local languages into extinction. As the major European colonial empires acquired and incorporated territories, they brought along with them language¹⁰. The leftover of the colonial world most clearly is the persistence of the global languages of English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese throughout their former empires. Native speakers of each of these languages in their former territories greatly outnumber the number of native speakers in the hearth, or



⁹ Iyengar, Rishi. “Burma’s Mission-Strong Rohingya Population Faces ‘Final Stages of Genocide,’ Says Report,” *Time*. Oct. 28th, 2015.

¹⁰ Tomlinson, John. *Globalization and culture*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.



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English speaking country (itself a remnant of colonialism) into a global superpower¹¹.

Approximately 7,000 languages exist in the world today. The forces of globalization and the wider diffusion of several particular world languages have exacerbated the rate of language extinction and the number of endangered known languages dramatically. Linguists place about half of the world's languages as endangered, and every year 25 languages go permanently extinct. As global languages grow in usage to a wider base, the compounding pull factors for speaking the language on a regular basis over local languages directly causes the apathy in local communities that in turn ends in the extinction of a language¹². Crucial aspects of the world's cultural heritage are lost yearly because of this process which renders old languages obsolete. Language's importance to culture leads to the point that language requires particular attention when approaching the issue of cultural diversity, because losing one's language is losing one's culture.

The Topic at the United Nations:

Beyond the establishment of the UN's ideological foundations on the issue of culture as a human right in the declaration of human rights, a majority of the UN's effort

at bolstering the protection of global culture has been through the efforts of the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). A program that UNESCO established and is tasked with managing is the World Heritage program. This program highlights places in the world of cultural, scientific, or natural significance and mandates its preservation for future generations. This in turn preserves aspects of world culture for future generations, a task essential in maintaining the cultural diversity of the planet¹³. Another practice central to UNESCO is language preservation. Sadly, this wing of UNESCO is underfunded and underwhelming, and is only able to impact language extinction on a very limited scale. The identification of languages as endangered and the subsequent steps of documenting and attempting to revive the language are steps identified by UNESCO, but such measures are rarely carried out because of the specificity of each operation and the often futile results yielded¹⁴.

The Special, Political, and Decolonization General Assembly committee has been discussing the issue of human rights and cultural diversity since last session, and has yet to establish a concrete

¹¹ De Blij, Harm. *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Logan, William. "Cultural diversity, cultural heritage and human rights: towards heritage management as human rights-based cultural practice." *International journal of heritage studies* 18, no. 3, 2012: 231-244.

¹⁴ Graber, Christoph Beat. "The new UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity: a counterbalance to the WTO?." *Journal of international economic law* 9, no. 3, 2006: 553-574.



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decision on the matter. This topic fits nicely into this committee because of the global extent of the issue, the post-colonial aspects of the problem, and because of the variety of political issues arising from the issue. Politically, states should be encouraged to include other cultures in political affairs, and to serve as active partners in the preservation of culture. This topic also fits itself well into this committee because of the prospects for the fragmentation of states because of cultural divides. Since the establishment of the UN, the organization has been seen as a legitimizer in the realm of self-determination and international recognition of independence. The balkanization of the world into smaller more ethnically homogenous states is a definite possibility, and because of the centrality of this topic to the formation of new states around cultural divides, how states allow different cultures to exercise freedom directly affects this committee specifically. All over the world, various nations are vying for statehood mainly based on the cultural differences that exist between the ruling nation and the otherwise¹⁵. International examples include the largest stateless nation in the world, the Kurds, and other nations in search of statehood, such as the Basque in Spain and France, the Palestinians (who have achieved legitimacy for statehood through the UN), the Tamil of Sri Lanka, the Chechens of Russia, and the Inuit of Greenland, a territory of Denmark.

¹⁵ Thornberry, Patrick. "Self-determination, minorities, human rights: a review of international instruments." *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 38, no. 04 (1989): 867-889.

Country Positions:

Russian Federation:

Beginning with the Soviet Union, cultural diversity within Russia has taken strange political manifestations. During Stalin's reign several ethnically specific "republics" (first level political divisions similar to Canadian Provinces or the USA's states) were established, sometimes with blatant disregard to the actual location of ethnic groups. One defunct example was the Jewish Autonomous Oblast (a similar subdivision to a state as well) centered around the town of Birobidzhan. What is unique about this Oblast is not only that it was established specifically for the Jewish ethnic group, but the fact that it borders China in the fringes of Siberia, almost on Russia's Pacific coast. Other strange locations of ethnic republics include Tatarstan, which is an ethnic republic for the Tatar nation. The historical domain of the Tatar nation is not where this republic is located, and a massive forced movement engineered by Stalin relocated some of the ethnic group into their designated ethnic republic. Russia has a total of 22 (including Crimea) titular republics, each dedicated to a non-Russian ethnic group, making the political and cultural geographies of Russia unlike most states of the world¹⁶.

People's Republic of China:

China has a long history of discrimination towards minorities within its

¹⁶ Blinnikov, Mikhail S. *A Geography of Russia and Its Neighbors*. New York: Guilford Press, 2010.



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borders. A vast majority of Chinese people identify as Han Chinese, and those who identify as such are typically well represented with better access to resources and rights. There are even cases of minorities assimilating to the culture and identity of the Han Chinese, with the completed example of the Manchurians specifically. Despite the unity of the Han culture, many minorities experience poor representation along with discrimination from Han people and the government. The continual mistreatment of Tibetan people despite action from the United Nations is a prime example of this discrimination. The United Nations has accused China of violating numerous human rights towards Tibet after The People's Republic of China asserted dominance in 1951. During this invasion the government of China destroyed sacred monasteries, statues, and other symbols of Tibetan culture. Tibet still struggles to this day with the oppression China has imposed in the region as do other minorities such as the Uyghur population discussed earlier¹⁷.

ASEAN:

Although the Association of South East Asian Nations has voted to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, most of the members in this organization continuously violate the rights of indigenous people. While there are still many native tribes

within these countries with rich cultural differences to predominant cultures, many of these tribes are misrepresented. Indigenous people in these nations have been collectively deprived of their rights to self-determine governance, usage of territories, and resource exploitation. Despite the fact that every member in ASEAN voted in favor of adopting the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, there is a clear gap in enthusiasm when it comes enforcement. In addition, many of these states face internal issues regarding ethnicity and religion, causing many of the conflicts between cultures and the ruling cultures. A prime example of such is discussed above between Myanmar and the Rohingya minority¹⁸.

Papua New Guinea:

Papua New Guinea is home to the most diverse population in the world. Many parts of Papua New Guinea survive principally with primitive devices, such as bows and arrows, and remain as hunter-gather tribes. Despite being the host of the most diverse population in the world, Papua New Guinea struggles with persistent tribal warfare between neighboring tribes due to disputed territory or disagreements between the conflicting tribes. In 2013, VICE released an article illustrating Sam Nallen Copley's visit to Papua New Guinea and his encounters with the different tribes. His story escalates

¹⁷ Wang, Jiawei, and 尼玛坚赞. *The historical status of China's Tibet*. 五洲传播出版社, 1997.

¹⁸ Haacke, Jürgen. "' Enhanced Interaction" with Myanmar and the Project of a Security Community: Is ASEAN Refining or Breaking with its Diplomatic and Security Culture?." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (2005): 188-216.



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from learning to shoot a bow and arrow to tribal warfare within a four month time span.



Thomson Harokaqzeh, then Papua New Guinea's Minister of the Environment (seen in the center) is greeted by a tribe in Papua New Guinea. Source: James Morgan Film & Photography

[Read the article here.](#)¹⁹ This particular occurrence is hardly uncommon, and Papua New Guinea is not only notorious for the profound level of cultural diversity, but also for the violent ramification of these differences. Another article can be found [here](#), which features a detailing of modern Papua New Guinea and striking photographs of the country and its people.

Closing Thoughts:

Whether someone is born into the largest nation in the world, the Han, or the smallest in the world, the Faroe nation, they are guaranteed the human right to exercise their culture. Increasingly however, that right is under attack by states and globalizing forces the world over. Unless the United Nations and states themselves take necessary action, then the engendered roles of minorities and majorities will never be overcome to allow for equal rights in terms of being able to fully exercise one's culture. Pillars of culture like languages are fading away to global trends, a process that serious international cooperation and work are needed to gap. Regardless of where someone is born or who they are born as all humans have the same fundamental rights, and it is the moral responsibility of the world to allow for the full use of those rights, and culture is a foundational aspect of that.

¹⁹ Copley, Sam N. "I Got Caught Up in Tribal Warfare in Papua New Guinea." VICE. September 22, 2014. Accessed December 19, 2015. <http://www.vice.com/read/papua-new-guinea-tribe-war-475>.



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Essential Questions:

- Where in the world are there threatened cultures? Are there patterns to be seen?
- What mechanisms can the UN put into place to protect the human right to culture?
- When should the UN step in in terms of infringement of human rights?
- What aspects of culture, like language, art, or other traditions, should be targeted as essential to protect?
- How can the roles of states and Non-Governmental Organizations be change to better accommodate cultures worldwide?
- How can passive erosive forces be addressed by global organizations, such as the UN, when such organizations undoubtedly perpetuate globalization's very existence?
- Can the existing framework or international law and norms tackle a complex issue such as maintaining the global cultural diversity?



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