

## EXAMINING CULTURAL SYNCRETISM AND MARITAL DYNAMICS IN SELECTED NOLLYWOOD FILMS

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### Abstract

This study investigates the impact of Western cultural influence on traditional Nigerian marriage institutions, focusing on the dynamics of cultural syncretism and its effects on marital relationships. Utilising Cultural Imperialism Theory as a theoretical framework, the research explores how Western cultural values and practices have been imposed upon and assimilated into Nigerian marriage institutions, resulting in shifts in cultural norms, values, and practices. The cases of and serve as focal points for this analysis. Through a critical evaluation of existing literature and empirical data, the study uncovers the intricate power dynamics at the intersection of Western and traditional Nigerian cultures, illuminating the tensions and contradictions that emerge from cultural syncretism. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of cultural imperialism in shaping marital dynamics in Nigeria, with significant implications for cultural preservation, cultural exchange, and social development.

### Introduction

The history of Western culture in Nigeria has its roots in the colonial period when the British government intruded into the country and whole of West Africa as Dare Arowolo observes that the:

Western civilisation and culture began to creep into African socio-cultural milieu, first, with the contact of Europeans with Africa, a consequence of Berlin conference in the quest for imperial pilfering of African resources and, later, consolidated by the unstoppable wave of globalisation (2)

It was the intrusion of the British people that marked the beginning of Western civilisation in Nigeria. The presence of British colonization of Nigeria lasted between the 19th century to 1960. In 1914, following the amalgamation of the southern and Northern protectorates into one political administration by the British people under the leadership of Fredrick lord Lugard, the Europeans intruded into the country with their selfish interest which according to Ojiakor, Crowder et al as paraphrased by Samuel C. Okeke and Nwachukwu J. Obiakor say "...that the Europeans (British) came into Nigeria in three forms: explorers, missionaries and traders" (24).

The missionaries would focus on ways to convert the people to the Western religion. Thus, the foreign language, educational system, culture and marital procedure began to envelop the Nigerian society. Western culture has a huge influence on the Nigerian marriage system through Islamic and Christian religious practices. Nigeria's Cultural Practices started deteriorating when Foreign religions crept into the country and officialised their ways of life.

First of all, the concept of Western culture refers to all the totality of ways of life in the Western part of the world, it encompasses the political, social, religious and cultural practices like arts, language, literature, norms, customs, dressing style and marriage system of the Europeans. The process of Western cultural encroachment can be termed Westernism. According to Christopher, Sibani:

Westernism is a coinage from the word westernize which refers to the act of bringing ideas or ways of life that are typical of Western Europe and North America to other countries. Therefore, Western culture connotes the knowledge, belief, morals and way of life of the Western world. (59).

The introduction of the Christian religion by the British missionaries catapulted many Nigerians to the faith. This was what brought about changes in religious practices and beliefs, as well as social norms, marital practices and language decline. The Nigerian traditional marriage system was not left untouched by Western culture. All over West African countries, the Western government was impacted negatively.

Stella and Tobias say that:

The agents of Western education and civilization in Igboland were the missionaries. Through evangelism they introduced western cultures and values, and the Igbo were made to accept them as a better way of life. (84)

We gullibly or freely embraced the unpredictable Western culture. However, some believe that Western education and religion may have been forcefully installed into Igboland and African nations at large, as Stella and Tobias further note:

They gradually imposed western culture on Igbo traditional culture. The viable approach adopted by the missionaries was the introduction of schools and this certainly radicalized the ground work of Igbo society. In fact, education in modern historiography has been acclaimed as being responsible for the massive conversion to Christianity (84)

The introduction of the Western marriage system (White wedding as it is called), which researchers have not emphatically traced its first history, has outrageously overgrown and dominated almost all the indigenous systems of African society, just as Blessing, Onyima notes that:

All over the world the introduction of Christianity through missionary activities has brought lots of changes in most indigenous/traditional societies and this is the root cause of the conflicts of values and the entrenchment of pluralistic values. (179).

This is because when two opposing forces come into contact with each other, the result is chaotic eruptions and controversy. Some Nigerian Nollywood films have always portrayed the influence of Western culture on the traditional marriage system of the Igbo society. Films like *Mr & Mrs* is a perfect paradigm of the above assertion. However, some Igbo people still stick to their pristine traditional marriage system. There is the adage “that Bitter cola lasts long in the mouth of those who know its value”. That is to say that the traditional Igbo marriage practices still exist in the minds of those who know their importance. The people who refuse to render themselves into perpetual Western cultural slavery embrace the Igbo version of marriage since it is one of the ways of cultural preservation. The influence of Western culture is drastically reshaping indigenous film industries and helps to increase the threats which the Western marriage system poses against the indigenous marriage lifestyles. Nigerian films such as *Mr & Mrs*, produced by Chinwe Egwuagu, directed by Ikehukwu Onyema and *Wrong Marriage* (2020), produced by Uchenna Mbunabo, highlight how today’s marriages imitate Western marital styles and how it affected the longevity of the legal Union. The main consequences of the above articulated is mostly divorce or break-up. This is because everyone abandons their roles as partners while trying to be more Europeanized than the Europeans.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cultural imperialism theory suggests that when Western cultures come into contact with non-Western cultures, they tend to dominate and overpower the native culture, leading to a loss of cultural identity and a homogenization of the world. The concept of cultural imperialism was developed by Edward Said in his book "Orientalism," published in 1978.

Relating it to the Nigerian traditional marriage system, this theory would suggest that the dominance of Western gender roles has led to a loss of the traditional roles and values that were once present in Nigeria.

Considering how Western gender roles and family structures have been imported into the Nigerian society. For example, traditional gender roles in Nigeria emphasised the importance of the extended family and collectivism, while Western culture has tended to emphasise the individual and nuclear families. This has led to changes in the way that families are structured and the way that men and women interact within themselves. This also has implications for other aspects of the traditional marriage system, such as inheritance and property rights.

Okey Ndibe states:

Traditionally, the extended family served as a primary source of support and guidance for the individual in Nigeria. However, the introduction of Western culture has led to the erosion of the extended family and the rise of the nuclear family. This has had a profound impact on the traditional marriage system, leading to conflicts between generations and a breakdown in the transmission of cultural values. (253)

Understanding the effect of the influence of Western culture on Nigeria's traditional marriage system, and for one to comprehend the possible ways of eradicating such influence from our culture. The traditional marriage system in Nigeria has long been rooted in indigenous customs, Values, and practices. However, globalisation and the increasing connectivity with the Western world have brought significant changes to the traditional marriage landscape. The Western culture has hurt traditional marriage in Nigeria as it has led to divorce, single Parenthood, and women's autonomy. The Advent and adoption of Western culture due to the coming of the colonial masters in Nigeria brought

with it the introduction of a foreign culture, which was accepted with open arms due to the fact that the administration of the country was in the hands of the colonial masters.

According to Berry and Sam, “acculturation is the process by which migrants to a new culture develop relationships with the new culture and maintain their original culture (97).

Therefore, Western culture brought Western Civilization and the issue of white weddings and made our traditional marriage loose it's potent, even after they have left, we still practice their marriage and that's why you will hear the Igbo's comparing traditional marriage to white wedding, some will even proudly tell you that they can forfeit their traditional marriage as long as he or she will be having their Church wedding, many will not even invite you to their traditional marriage as you will hear them say 'The traditional marriage is not a must, it's just few family and friends, I will be needing your presence in the wedding more', how pathetic!

J. Spiel Vogel Jackson confirms that “the development of the Western culture was the introduction of Christian influence in Nigeria over the Nigerian traditional cultural system” (24). The influence affected various aspects of life, including the marriage institution.

### **The Influence of Western Culture on the Nigerian Society**

Culture is a continuous process of change. It changes the same way as human beings change. It is dynamic, learned, acquired, transmitted or diffused through contact or means of communication, flowing from generation to generation. The Nigerian culture is observed to be fading out as a result of the acceptance and adaptation of the modernist solution to underdevelopment. Cultural imperialism is a term used to describe the imposition of Western culture on the cultures of people in developing countries. Cultural imperialism often refers to America's cultural influence on other countries, for better for worst.

Nigeria, which is made up of rich and diverse cultural values, is beginning to lose most of its cultural ideals, especially through the adoption of foreign culture showcased through the mass media. Nowadays, it is observed that our youth have abandoned our local attires, such as the ‘Adire’ and ‘Ankara’, for alien attires. It is common to see young people (youth) walking across the streets half-nude, putting on micro-mini skirts, handless tops, trousers and other outfits that are not part of our cultural identity.

Africans and indeed Nigerians have their traditional attire, especially the three major tribes in Nigeria, but how many youth proudly abide by the culture and wear such traditional attire today? A visit to the banks in the Igbo-speaking part of the country will give you a perfect example. In fact, it is mandatory in the banks that you wear a suit, except on Fridays when you are allowed to wear native attire. The question we must answer is whether wearing a suit is part of Nigerian culture or Western culture. Must we copy everything Western? Can't we promote our rich cultural and traditional outfits so our local industries can boom?

One of the negative roles the Western culture plays in today's society is the dominance and propagation of violence, particularly on television and the video film industry. A lot of the foreign film content on television is mainly scenes of violence. The actors who engage in murder and other violent acts are portrayed as heroes. Home video, which is very popular now with Nigerian films, also carries the same theme. Research has shown that children who watch violence on screen are most prone to violent behaviour in adulthood. According to Nnonyelu, “Nigeria's culture, following its contact with lifestyle constantly portrayed by the media, appears to have caved in and continues to do so as years go by” (99).

The tendency for people to imitate, emulate and copy what they see (in the media) is a major cause of this situation, especially as seen in the emerging culture of the country's youth. The youths try to sheepishly copy the lifestyle of the Western world as presented by the media. To dress, walk and do anything resembling the Western way of life is seen as a significant index of one's social standing. Ojiha observes that this can be attributed to the fact that “the closer a person's attitude is to western norms and values, the greater the opportunity open to the person and the higher the person's position on the social ladder”(48). The youths are deluded into thinking that they have vast individual choices and opportunities to believe, think, behave and dress as presented by the media. Unfortunately, the addiction to this borrowed lifestyle leaves the individual without an identified culture, and this alienates him/her from society.

The sad side of the exposure to foreign media on the culture of a society is that the glorification of the Western lifestyle goes hand in hand with the condemnation of the local culture. This creates a situation where Nigerians are becoming

more British or American than the Americans or British themselves, and this invariably creates marginal individuals to the extent that they are neither here nor there.

Nigerian marriage traditions require that an older sibling marry before the younger one. For some tribes, this is for men only, while for others, women are also part of it. The younger siblings will postpone their weddings until their older siblings have married. But these days, the reverse is the case; one hears the younger ones saying that overtaking is allowed.

However, in recent times, a new wave of marriage practice has begun to emerge among many educated Africans. This is marriage without family consent, contradicted as a result of the direct influence of the 'Christian-Western' culture brought about by well-travelled and educated Africans who see traditional practices as inhibiting and narrow-minded. Their newly adopted way of life, being responsible, stood between two traditional and cultural values.

This effect was a result of Western influence, which made most Nigerians believe that having many children usually contributes to poverty, as it concerns having many mouths to feed. Western culture also made Nigerian youths believe that marriage is not necessary, and this mostly affects most Nigerian women, as they believe that single parenthood is better than being married.

Okafor Benjamin affirms:

Nigerian families have changed significantly in the last few decades, and these changes have been largely driven by the influence of Western culture. Families are becoming smaller, with many couples choosing to have fewer children, and marriage is becoming less common as more people choose to remain single. There is also a growing trend of women entering the workforce, which has led to a shift in the balance of power within the family unit. (54)

In the core Nigerian society, a man is usually the bread winner of the family who provides and protects the home while the woman is the homemaker and caretaker of the family as well as ensuring there is peace in the family but the influence of western culture has made women abandon this culture and focus more on career pursuit and competing with the man leaving the home and kids without adequate care.

According to Amadiume:

Westernisation has led to a shift in the way that women are viewed in Nigerian society. In traditional Nigerian culture, women were seen as caretakers and homemakers, while men were seen as the primary breadwinners. However, with the influence of Western culture, women are now starting to challenge these traditional gender roles, and many are choosing to pursue careers outside of the home. (116)

Before the era of colonialism, traditional marriage in Nigeria was a very serious custom that the couple must perform all the marriage rites before they could be together as husband and wife, but after being influenced by Western culture, most Nigerians now see traditional marriage as an outdated ceremony and hold the Western white wedding as the most important one.

Affirming this, Adejoro, Babatunde, and Taiwo posit that:

The introduction of Western influences has led to a decline in the importance of traditional marriage customs, such as the payment of bride price and the ritual of a bride leaving her parents' home to live with her husband. Many young Nigerians now see these customs as outdated and irrelevant, and prefer to marry in a more modern, Western-style ceremony." (29)

Western culture made most of Nigerians believe that love is the first thing to be considered before getting married but in the Nigerians traditional marriage system before the Colonial era was based on arranged marriage. Arranged marriage was usually done to maintain friendship between either families or communities. And it was the duty of the parents to find a suitable spouse for their child.

Olukoju maintains that:

Westernization has also had an impact on the concept of love and marriage in Nigeria. In traditional Nigerian culture, love was not seen as a necessary component of marriage, and marriages were often arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. However, Western culture has introduced the idea of romantic love as a key factor in choosing a spouse, and many young Nigerians now place more importance on finding a partner whom they love and are compatible with. (73)

Another way that Western culture has caused harm to our way of marriage is the decrease in the importance of traditional marriage customs and rituals, such as bride price, as well as the practice of a bride moving in with her husband's family. Nowadays, most families do not allow their daughters to move in with their husband's family after the traditional marriage, and they believe that it is not right until the white wedding is completed.

Augustine Onyeka says that:

It is evident that Westernization has had a significant impact on the traditional marriage system in Nigeria. The shift towards a more modern, Western-style marriage system has led to a decrease in the importance of traditional customs and rituals, such as bride price and the practice of a bride moving in with her husband's family. While some have argued that this is a positive change, others have raised concerns about the loss of important cultural traditions. (531)

One other major change that has been brought about by the influence of Western culture is the idea of "love marriage" or "choice marriage." In traditional Nigerian society, marriages were typically arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, and there was little or no input from the individuals themselves. However, Western culture has introduced the idea that people should be able to choose their own partners based on love and compatibility. This has led to a shift in attitudes, with more and more Nigerians choosing to marry for love rather than for social or economic reasons.

One specific example of how this shift in attitudes has played out is in the area of bride price. Bride price is a traditional custom in which the groom's family pays a sum of money or goods to the bride's family in exchange for her hand in marriage. In the past, this custom was seen as an important part of the marriage process, as it was seen as a way to compensate the bride's family for the loss of her labour and her value to the family. However, as the idea of choice marriage has become more prevalent, many young Nigerians have begun to reject the custom of bride price. They see it as a relic of the past that is no longer relevant in today's society. Instead, they believe that marriage should be based on love and mutual respect, rather than on the exchange of goods or money. This has led to conflict between traditionalists and those who advocate for a more modern approach to marriage.

Ebere Onwudiwe states that:

The influence of Western culture has led to a shift in the way marriage is viewed and practised in Nigeria. The traditional practices of arranged marriage and bride price are being challenged by the notion of 'choice marriage,' which emphasises love and compatibility over social and economic factors. (223)

### **Synopsis of *Mr. and Mrs. and Wrong Marriage***

A marriage that started on love and trust suddenly nosedives into the ditch of wealth and opulence, and the marriage goes sour. An African woman's struggle to retain and sustain her marriage knows no bounds. Susan Abbah, a humble woman who maintains her duty as a wife, receives maltreatment and suppression from her husband, Kenneth Abbah, who feels that her family background is way below his, and he starts suppressing her and using her like a housemaid. Another side of the story has the family of Mr and Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown pays less attention to her family affairs but dedicates most of her time to her career as she leaves her husband and the kids under the care of the housemaid, whom her husband uses as a substitute for his wife. In *Wrong Marriage*, a couple struggles to fix and keep their marriage after the death of their son, which was a result of their carelessness, mostly on the side of the woman, who focuses more on her job than her marital life, leaving her husband lonely and depriving him of his marital rights, and this leads to the death of their son, David. The man struggles to fix their love while the wife finds it difficult to heal from the pain of being childless. As the man keeps having hope that reconciling with his wife is still possible, the wife, Olivia Bassey, finds it hard to forgive and accept her husband back, but only wants a divorce and to move on with her life. On the side of the husband, he finds it hard to move on.

### **Influence of Western Culture on *Wrong Marriage***

Western culture is deeply embedded in the life of the Nigerian marriage system today, mostly on the side of the women. One way that Western values have influenced some Nigerian women to prioritise their careers over their families is through the idea of individualism. In Western cultures, individualism is often valued over collectivism, and people are often encouraged to pursue their own goals and ambitions rather than putting the needs of the group first. This has influenced some Nigerian women to focus on their careers and personal success, even if it means sacrificing time with their families.

This individualistic mindset has led some Nigerian women to feel like they have to choose between their career and their family. In some cases, they may feel like they have to put their career first in order to be successful, and this can lead to tension within traditional families. In the traditional Nigerian family structure, women are often expected to be homemakers and caregivers, and when they prioritise their careers instead, it can be seen as going against cultural norms and expectations. In the movie *Wrong Marriage*, produced by Uchenna Mbunabo. The movie mirrors the lifestyle of a woman who is more concerned about her career and pays less attention to the feelings of her husband and the affairs of the family. This could be seen in her conversation with her husband; When her husband comes to her in the night and finds out that she is still working on her system in an attempt trying to finish an office work, but when she husband demands her to give him attention and leave the work, she tells him that she was made the managing director in a Male dominated entity, which shows that she is in race with men thereby neglecting her primary duties. For several nights, she denies her husband her attention and gives him excuses, which the man (Peter Bassey) gets tired of and decides to hang out with his friend Henry. In the process, he hooks up with a side chick to satisfy his sexual urge, which his wife has been denying him. Along the line, he realises that he could not cheat on his wife and goes home. On getting home, he still finds his wife working on her system in the middle of the night.

The couple keeps having issues because Susan Bassey, the wife, would not care about the affairs of her home or her husband's emotions and needs, but is more concerned about her work and how to outperform all the men in her office. This stems from her belief that a woman should be successful also and should not depend on her husband, trying to prove that she can be the best. Even when she gets promoted, the issue gets worse as she continuously gives excuses of having more work to do.

Furthermore, another way in which Western values have influenced some Nigerian women to focus on their careers is through the idea of material success. In Western cultures, success is often measured in terms of material wealth and possessions. This idea has influenced some Nigerian women to pursue careers that will bring them financial success, and this makes them pay less attention to family affairs. This can also create tension within families, as traditional values often prioritise family relationships over material success.

So, when a woman prioritises her career over her family, it can have a big impact on her husband and the kids. In many traditional Nigerian families, the husband is seen as the head of the household, and his wife is expected to support him and take care of the home and children. When a woman prioritises her career, it can be seen as a rejection of this traditional role, and it can put a strain on the marriage. It can also lead to resentment from the husband, who may feel like he is not being supported or respected.

It's also important to consider how a woman's career choices can affect her children. In a traditional Nigerian family, the mother is often seen as the primary caregiver, and children are expected to be close to their mothers. When a woman prioritises her career, it can lead to a lack of bonding and emotional support for her children. This can have a lasting impact on their development and can lead to feelings of abandonment and resentment. Additionally, children may feel like they are not a priority in their mother's life, which can lead to insecurity and low self-esteem.



**Plate 1: Mr Peter Bassey Bassey complaining to his wife that she gives him excuses anytime he needs her attention. 9\***

The picture above shows Mr Peter Bassey, the husband of Olivia Bassey in the movie *Wrong Marriage*, complaining that his wife does not give him any attention as all her attention is channelled towards her career.



**Plate 2: Mrs Olivia Bassey is trying to make her husband understand that she has been made the managing director in a male dominated entity; so she needs to keep up her game.**

This particular picture above in plate 2 shows Olivia, the wife, trying to give her husband reasons for her lack of attention. In as much as this is affecting her home she still wants to maintain her career status and doesn't care the damage it could course to her home that is why in her conversation with her husband where the husband told her that if she continues like that then their sexual life will be dead she said that it should die, this shows that most of her wifely duties do not matter to her anymore as long as her career is concerned.



**Plate 3: Mrs Bassey is filing for Divorce after the Death of their Son, who died as a result of their carelessness.**

This picture shows Mr and Mrs Peter Bassey in the lawyer's office, where Mrs Bassey is asking for a divorce after the death of their only son, David, who died as a result of the couple's carelessness. Their son David, was left alone at the poolside while the couple were busy arguing about who cheated and who did not cheat. And it was practically the fault of the wife because if she was performing her wifely duty as a core African woman who is supposed to be supportive and paying more attention to home affairs the husband wouldn't have gone out to find peace of mind and attention which later resulted to the argument that made them leave their son at the pool side and he jumped inside the pool to get his toy that fell inside the pool.

### **The Influence of Western Culture in Mr. and Mrs.**

The movie *Mr. and Mrs.* has a man who, at the initial stage, was in love with his wife during their courtship stage, but after their marriage, everything changed. The man's behaviour changed towards his wife; he started reminding his wife of how wealthy his family is and how poor the woman's family was before he married her. Mr Abbah, the husband, reduced his wife to a housemaid and limited her movement and eventually filed for a divorce. In the days of our forefathers, husbands and wives lived together in harmony and respected each other; there was no comparison of any family background or social status whatsoever. A man loves his wife and shows her much care and attention, and protects her at all times. A man who married a woman with a good character was seen as a lucky man. Also, back in those days, there were hardly any divorce cases. When a man and a woman unite as husband and wife, they live together forever because they know their duties and respect each other. But in many recent marriages, a little misunderstanding leads to divorce, not minding the effect the separation would have on the Children.

But westernisation has also made some men believe that one can only boast of their wife when she has a wealthy family background, as was seen in Kenneth Abbah's conversation with the lawyer, where he explains that the wife's lowly background affects his appreciation of her presence.

The second side of the movie has the family of Mr and Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown is a working-class woman who has little or no concerns about the affairs of her family and the feelings or well-being of her husband and kids, but pushes her responsibility as a woman to the hands of her house help. She goes to work very early in the morning and returns at a late hour with the excuse of having a lot of work in the office, and when she returns, she will claim to be very tired and can't do anything with her husband. Mr Brown followed her like a fool, and this made her believe that she had her husband under her control without knowing that the husband sleeps with the housemaid to keep himself busy since the wife is more concerned and interested in her career rather than her marriage.



***Plate 4: Mr Kenneth Abbah complaining that he does not eat stale food.***

The picture above shows Mr and Mrs Kenneth Abbah, with Mr Kenneth Abbah complaining that he doesn't eat stale food, while his wife explains to him that she woke up at 4 am to prepare the food. As much as Susan Abbah tries to explain herself, her husband doesn't cherish or value her effort and maltreats her like a nobody, and all because he feels that they are not of the same class.



***Plate 5: Mrs Brown asking the husband to see the Children's teacher who requested for her presence.***

Plate two shows the family of Mr and Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown, who leaves to work very early before the kids wake and comes back when they have slept, asked her husband to see the teacher of their children in school after dropping them off at school. She pushes her wifely duties to her husband and the housemaid. This makes the husband, in the end, find comfort in the housemaid since the wife is more concerned about her career.



***Plate 6: Mr Kenneth Abbah telling the lawyer that he cannot imagine himself going out with the daughter of a wash-man.***

This picture above shows how Mr Kenneth Abbah suppresses his wife and limited her movement all because of her family status. He feels that it's improper for him to go out with his wife whenever he has a meeting with his friends who are married to high class ladies only because his wife is the daughter of a washman.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers conclude that Western culture has hurt traditional marriage institutions in Nigeria, as it has contributed to the rise in divorce, single parenthood, and increased female autonomy that often challenges traditional marital structures. The study also concludes that Western culture has significantly influenced traditional marriage practices in Nigeria, leading to noticeable changes in marital values, roles, and expectations. Furthermore, the researcher posits that the reinforcement of traditional marital values through adequate marriage counselling can help revive and preserve African cultural values as they relate to marriage and family life.

### Recommendations

The study therefore recommends that further research should be conducted to identify the factors that have prevented traditional marriage institutions from being completely eroded by Western cultural influence. The study also recommends that Nigerian movie producers should endeavour to expose the effects of Western influence on the traditional Nigerian marriage system by producing films that promote cultural values, highlight the challenges posed by excessive Westernisation, and suggest possible ways of preserving and embracing indigenous cultural practices.

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