

Tradition!

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Teveye, the father living in revolutionary times of rapid change, struggled with what to do about traditions in the much loved musical, Fiddler on the Roof. This Russian-Jewish story, later a Broadway play and then a movie, played to audiences of many other cultures around the world who understood the issues very well. The 20th century was beset with traditions biting the dust. Children were in rebellion everywhere and parents did not know what to do about it.

My own view of "tradition" is sourly expressed in my web site: "Tradition? The only good traditions are food traditions. The rest are repressive." Indeed, history will bear me out. Most traditions around the world have to do with what woman may not do---or what must be done to them to keep them "under control."

In an attempt to be unbiased, 20th century anthropologists have reversed what seemed to be cultural jingoism of their predecessors in criticizing the practices of the world's non-western societies. Western explorers and colonial conquerors were horrified by some of the practices they found: bound feet in China, the harems in the Muslim world, widows compelled to sacrifice themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres in India, forced child marriages everywhere, and widespread child slavery.

Fashions in scholarship change. By mid-20th century, Anthropology had swung the other way and tried to find reasons for native practices rather than judging them through our own biases. Political fashions entered too, and the new fog of political correctness blew in with Edward Said, who managed to bully a generation of Islamic scholars into fear of saying anything negative about Muslim culture.

The world has recently had an opportunity to see what kind of "traditions" the culture of Islam has resurrected from the past. Even Edward Said, were he still alive, could not paint them in rosy colors. Islamists resolutely target women, who, to avoid beating or worse, must be invisible, covered from head to toe in black, and hidden from the public arena. When monsters such as ISIS take territory, they resurrect such "traditions" as female slave markets, religiously-sanctified rape of girls as young as nine (citing the "tradition" of the Hadith), and decapitation by the sword and amputation of limbs for theft. Tradition!

And then there is African tradition. One infamous Africa scholar claimed that democracy should not be their model. The "great chief" model was a fine "tradition" that had always worked in Africa. How well it worked has been seen in a parade of villainous, thieving, dictatorships-for-life. Another scholar I heard at a conference lamented the demise of traditional village languages and scorned the popularity of English and French as languages of the colonialists. I asked him how tradition languages would allow people to talk to each other? He had no answer.

President Obama took on the "tradition" issue in his July visit to Kenya and Ethiopia, which set everybody back on their heels! He bluntly told his hosts (I am paraphrasing) that just because certain practices have been done for centuries does not make them right! It is not right, he said, to abuse half your population just because they are female. It is not right to marry off underage girls, to deprive them of education and afflict them with genital mutilation. This does nothing but keep your country from its full potential. It is not right to persecute people because of whom they love. (This is a very hot-button issue in Africa. Homosexuality can bring death sentences in many places, and at a minimum, is illegal everywhere. It was very bold of President Obama to even mention it in public.)

He went on to discuss another most pervasive issue. "Corruption is an old tradition, but it does not have to be permanent. I come from Chicago, which also had a tradition of corruption. It can be challenged and changed. You can change it too." He also discussed democratic elections, and the reluctance of some leaders to step down from power. Presidents for life, he noted, are not compatible with democracy."

Bravo, Mr. President!

Tradition? Bah, humbug!

680 words

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