The ancient tradition of painting and decorating the surfaces of earthen buildings is dying or virtually extinct in many parts of the world. But in the southern province of Nahouri, Burkina Faso, in west Africa, the women of the Kassena people still decorate their earthen houses with painted designs that reflect objects from their everyday life and their surrounding environment.

In the village of Pè, women artisans have formed an association, called Artisans de la Terre, for making baskets, soap and pottery and for painting murals. When they are not working in the fields, they work together to create their wares and decorations. Using traditional materials and techniques, they paint a few houses in the village every year. They accomplish this in the time between the harvest and the planting of new crops.
The women make the plasters and paints by mixing clay-rich earth, found in nearby deposits, with cow dung and plant juices. They apply the plaster layers with their hands, then polish the surfaces with smooth, flat stones. Black clay and white sawdust are used as colors on a red limestone background. The women paint the designs in black and fill in the empty spaces with white. They use paint brushes that are fashioned from millet stalks and chicken or goose feathers. The work is done while the plaster is fresh, creating a sort of fresco technique. The paintings are repeated on interior and exterior walls of the houses in the village, and each has its own significance. They describe the life of the village and the life-giving role of the women; the patterns depict broken calabash, a sawbuck, guns, tigers, millet fields, serpents, the sun and the cycles of the moon. Outsiders have difficulty distinguishing these patterns, but the Kassena easily interpret this symbolic language. The patterns are specific to a very small area within a few miles of different symbols might be used to communicate similar ideas.

By continuing to practice the tradition of decorating houses with specific designs, the Kassena...
Cement blocks are being used in construction. Rectangular buildings are more and more common.

As the population of the villages moves to the cities to seek work and becomes more integrated into the modern work force, fewer and fewer women remain to carry on the tradition of decorating the houses. According to the older women, the younger women are ignorant and do not take the time to learn the techniques and the vocabulary of the painting. If the tradition dies, so will a form of cultural expression and a way of living that is rooted in a sense of place.

The growing economic needs of these people must be balanced by an awareness of the value of their traditional culture. The women who continue to paint are providing this balance. The text is not only preserving the patterns and the decorations on the walls, but also preserving a way of life.

Traditions cannot survive, of course, without the culture from which they spring. But how can the culture survive without the traditions that define and express it?

Notes
1. Barlitz Faas, formerly called Upper Volta, gained its independence in 1960. The area is formed from two languages, Mande and Diula (mainly in the city), and Balanta (the Mande language), "the house of the forefathers."
2. The Kono ethnic group occupies a small region in southeastern Burkina Faso. In the northern Cape, the Kono are known.
3. Calabashes are gourds that are used as drinking bowls, containers, and drums.