

Folk and Popular Culture

What did you do today? Presumably, your first activity was to get out of bed—for some of us, the most difficult task of the day. Shortly thereafter, you got dressed. What did you wear? That depended on both the weather (shorts or sweater) and the day's activities (suit or T-shirt).

After work or school, you returned home (house, apartment, or dorm room). You then ate dinner (pizza or salad). After studying or finishing some work, you may now have some free time during the evening for leisure

KEY ISSUES

- 1 Where Do Folk and Popular Cultures Originate and Diffuse?
- 2 Why Is Folk Culture Clustered?
- 3 Why Is Popular Culture Widely Distributed?
- 4 Why Does Globalization of Popular Culture Cause Problems?



activities (watching television, listening to music, or playing or watching sports).

This narrative may not precisely describe you, but you can recognize the day of a “typical” North American. However, the routine described and the choices mentioned in parentheses do not accurately reflect the practices of many people elsewhere in the world. People living in other locations often have extremely different social customs. Geographers ask why such differences exist and how social customs are related to the cultural landscape.

As you watch television in your single-family dwelling, wearing jeans and munching on a pizza, consider the impact if people from rural Botswana or Papua New Guinea were suddenly placed in the room. Despite striking differences in social customs across the landscape, you might be surprised to find that your visitors are familiar with most of your customs, as Earth becomes more and more a “global village.” Your visitors might be inclined within a short period of time to change their customs—or to strongly condemn yours.

Playing the pan flute near Lake Titicaca, Peru.



CASE STUDY / Food Preferences

In the popular culture of twenty-first century America, food preferences seem far removed from folk traditions. Yet even hamburgers, subs, pizzas, “French” fries, and the other staples of a contemporary globalized culture all have place-specific origins.

In folk cultures, certain foods are eaten because their natural properties are perceived to enhance qualities considered desirable by the society. The Abipone Indians of Paraguay eat jaguars, stags, and bulls to make them strong, brave, and swift. The Abipones believe that consuming hens or tortoises will make them cowardly. The Ainu people in Japan avoid eating otters because they are believed to be forgetful animals and consuming them could cause loss of memory. Before becoming pregnant, the Mbum Kpau women of Chad do not eat chicken or goat. Abstaining from consumption of these animals is thought to help escape pain in childbirth and to prevent birth

of a child with abnormalities. During pregnancy, they avoid meat from antelopes with twisted horns, which could cause them to bear offspring with deformities. What foods do you avoid?

Food customs are inevitably affected by the availability of products, but people do not simply eat what is available in their particular environment. Food habits are strongly influenced by cultural traditions. What is eaten establishes one’s social, religious, and ethnic memberships. The surest way to identify a family’s ethnic origins is to look in its kitchen.

According to the nineteenth-century geographer Vidal de la Blache, “Among the connections that tie [people] to a certain environment, one of the most tenacious is food supply; clothing and weapons are more subject to modification than the dietary regime, which experience has shown to be best suited to human needs in a given climate. ■

In Chapter 1, *culture* was shown to combine three things—values, material artifacts, and political institutions. Geographers are interested in all three components of the definition of culture. They search for where these various elements of culture are found in the world and for reasons why the observed distributions occur.

This chapter deals with the material artifacts of culture, the visible objects that a group possesses and leaves behind for the future. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine three important components of a group’s beliefs and values, including language, religion, and ethnicity. Chapter 8 concludes the emphasis on the cultural elements of human geography by looking at the political institutions that maintain values and protect their artifacts.

Culture follows logically from the discussion of migration in Chapter 3. Two locations have similar cultural beliefs, objects, and institutions because people bring along their culture when they migrate. Differences emerge when two groups have limited interaction. In this chapter, two facets of material culture are examined.

- Material culture deriving from the survival activities of everyone’s daily life—food, clothing, and shelter.
- Culture involving leisure activities—the arts and recreation.

Each cultural group provides for the activities of daily life in distinctive ways. And each cultural group has its own definition of meaningful art and stimulating recreation.

Culture can be distinguished from habit and custom.

- A **habit** is a repetitive act that a particular *individual* performs, such as wearing jeans to class every day.
- A **custom** is a repetitive act of a *group*, performed to the extent that it becomes *characteristic* of the group—American university students wear jeans to class every day.

Unlike custom, habit does not imply that the act has been adopted by most of the society’s population. A custom is therefore a habit that has been widely adopted by a group of people.

A collection of social customs produces a group’s material culture—jeans typically represent American informality and a badge of youth. In this chapter, *custom* may be used to denote a specific element of material culture, such as wearing jeans, whereas *culture* refers to a group’s entire collection of customs.

Material culture falls into two basic categories that differ according to scale—folk and popular.

- **Folk culture** is traditionally practiced primarily by small, homogeneous groups living in isolated rural areas and may include a custom such as wearing a sarong (a loose skirt made of a long strip of cloth wrapped around the body) in Malaysia or a sari (a long cloth draped so that one end forms a skirt and the other a head or shoulder covering) in India (Figure 4-1).
- **Popular culture** is found in large, heterogeneous societies that share certain habits (such as wearing jeans) despite differences in other personal characteristics. The *scale* of territory covered by a folk culture is typically much smaller than that covered by a popular culture.

Geographers focus on two aspects of *where* folk and popular cultures are located in *space*. First, each cultural activity, like wearing jeans, has a distinctive spatial distribution. Geographers study a particular social custom’s origin, its diffusion, and its integration with other social characteristics.

Second, geographers study the relation between material culture and the physical environment. Each cultural group takes particular elements from the environment into its



FIGURE 4-1 Vietnamese folk songs. Singers perform Quan Ho folk songs as part of the annual Lim Festival.

culture and in turn constructs landscapes (what geographers call “built environments”) that modify nature in distinctive ways.

Geographers observe that popular culture has a more widespread distribution than folk culture. The reason *why* the distributions are different is interaction, or lack of it. A group develops distinctive customs from experiencing local social and physical conditions in a *place* that is isolated from other groups.

Even groups living in proximity may generate a variety of folk customs in a limited geographic area, because of limited communication. Landscapes dominated by a collection of folk customs change relatively little over time. In contrast, popular culture is based on rapid simultaneous global *connections* through communications systems, transportation networks, and other modern technology. Rapid diffusion facilitates frequent changes in popular customs. Thus, folk culture is more likely to vary from place to place at a given time, whereas popular culture is more likely to vary from time to time at a given place.

In Earth’s *globalization*, popular culture is becoming more dominant, threatening the survival of unique folk cultures. These folk customs—along with language, religion, and ethnicity—provide a unique identity to each group of people who occupy a specific *region* of Earth’s surface. The disappearance of local folk customs reduces *local diversity* in the world and the intellectual stimulation that arises from differences in backgrounds.

The dominance of popular culture can also threaten the quality of the environment. Folk culture derived from local natural elements may be more sensitive to the protection and enhancement of the environment. Popular culture is less likely to reflect the diversity of local physical conditions and is more likely to modify the environment in accordance with global values.

KEY ISSUE 1

Where Do Folk and Popular Cultures Originate and Diffuse?

- Origin of Folk and Popular Cultures
- Diffusion of Folk and Popular Cultures

Each social custom has a unique spatial distribution, but in general, distribution is more extensive for popular culture than for folk culture. Two basic factors help explain the spatial differences between popular and folk cultures—the process of origin and the pattern of diffusion. ■

Origin of Folk and Popular Cultures

A social custom originates at a hearth, a center of innovation. Folk customs often have anonymous hearths, originating from anonymous sources, at unknown dates, through unidentified originators. They may also have multiple hearths, originating independently in isolated locations.

In contrast to folk customs, popular culture is most often a product of MDCs, especially in North America, Western Europe, and Japan. Popular music and fast food are good examples. They arise from a combination of advances in industrial technology and increased leisure time. Industrial technology permits the uniform reproduction of objects in large quantities (CDs, T-shirts, pizzas). Many of these objects help people enjoy