

## Chapter 4

# Folk and Popular Culture

### 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?

(106)

In Chapter 1, *culture* was shown to combine three things: values, material artifacts, and political institutions. This chapter deals with the material artifacts of culture, the visible objects that a group possesses and leaves behind for the future. This chapter examines two facets of material culture: survival activities and leisure activities. Culture can be distinguished from habit and custom.

A **habit** is a repetitive act that a particular *individual* performs. A custom is a repetitive act of a group. A collection of social customs produces a group's material culture. 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. **Popular culture** is found in large, heterogeneous societies.

(107)

Landscapes dominated by a collection of folk customs change relatively little over time. In contrast, popular culture is based on rapid, simultaneous global *connections*. 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. The disappearance of local folk customs reduces *local diversity* in the world and the intellectual stimulation that arises from differences in background. The dominance of popular culture can also threaten the quality of the environment.

### Key Issue 1. Where Do Folk and Popular Cultures Originate and Diffuse?

- **Origin of folk and popular cultures**
- **Diffusion of folk and popular cultures**

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. Popular culture is most often a product of MDCs, whose industrial technology permits the uniform reproduction of objects in large quantities.

(108)

#### Origin of Folk Music

Music exemplifies the differences in the origins of folk and popular culture. Folk songs are usually composed anonymously and transmitted orally. A song may be modified from one generation to the next as conditions change, but the content is often derived from events in daily life that are familiar to the majority of the people.

by King James I. At this point, football was an English folk custom rather than a global popular custom.

**Globalization of Soccer.** The transformation of football from an English folk custom to global popular culture began in the 1800s. Sport became a subject that was taught in school. Increasing leisure time permitted people not only to view sporting events but to participate in them. With higher incomes, spectators paid to see first-class events.

(111)

Football was first played in continental Europe in the late 1870s by Dutch students who had been in Britain. British citizens further diffused the game throughout the worldwide British Empire. In the twentieth century, soccer, like other sports, was further diffused by new communication systems, especially radio and television.

**Sports in Popular Culture.** Each country has its own preferred sports. Cricket is popular primarily in Britain and former British colonies. Ice hockey prevails, logically, in colder climates. The most popular sports in China are martial arts, known as wushu, including archery, fencing, wrestling, and boxing. Baseball became popular in Japan after it was introduced by American soldiers after World War II. European colonists, primarily in Canada, picked up Lacrosse from the Iroquois and brought it to a handful of U.S. communities, especially Maryland, upstate New York, and Long Island.

Despite the diversity in distribution of sports across Earth's surface and the anonymous origin of some games, organized spectator sports today are part of popular culture.

## **Key Issue 2. Why Is Folk Culture Clustered?**

- **Influence of physical environment**
- **Isolation promotes cultural diversity**

Folk culture typically has unknown or multiple origins among groups living in relative isolation. A combination of physical and cultural factors influences the distinctive distributions of folk culture.

### **Influence of the Physical Environment**

Folk societies are particularly responsive to the environment because of their limited technology and the prevailing agricultural economy. Yet folk culture may ignore the environment. Broad differences in folk culture arise in part from physical conditions, and these conditions produce varied customs. Two necessities of daily life — food and shelter — demonstrate the influence of the environment on development of unique folk culture.

(112)

### **Food Preferences and the Environment**

Folk food habits are embedded strongly in the environment. Inhabitants of a region must consider the soil, climate, terrain, vegetation, and other characteristics of the environment in deciding to produce particular foods.

In Europe, traditional preferences for quick-frying foods in Italy resulted in part from fuel shortages. In Northern Europe, an abundant wood supply encouraged the slow stewing and roasting of foods over fires, which also provided home heat in the colder climate. Soybeans, an excellent source of protein, are widely grown in Asia. In the raw state they are toxic and indigestible. Lengthy cooking renders them edible, but fuel is scarce in Asia. Asians derive foods from soybeans that do not require extensive cooking.

According to many folk customs, everything in nature carries a signature, or distinctive characteristic, based on its appearance and natural properties. People may desire or avoid certain foods in response to perceived beneficial or harmful natural traits. People refuse to eat particular plants or animals that are thought to embody negative forces in the environment. Such a restriction on behavior imposed by social custom is a **taboo**. Other social customs, such as sexual practices, carry prohibitions, but taboos are especially strong in the area of food.

(113)

Hindu taboos against consuming cows can be explained partly by environmental reasons. A large supply of oxen must be maintained in India, because every field has to be plowed at approximately the same time: when the monsoon rains arrive. But the taboo against consumption of meat among many people, including Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, cannot be explained primarily by environmental factors. Social values must influence the choice of diet, because people in similar climates and with similar levels of income consume different foods. Religions sanctions have kept India's cow population large as a form of insurance against the loss of oxen and increasing population.

(114)

**Folk Housing and the Environment.** The house is a product of both cultural tradition and natural conditions. The type of building materials used to construct folk houses is influenced partly by what is available in the environment. The two most common building materials in the world are wood and brick; stone, grass, sod, and skins are also used. Even in areas that share similar climates and available building materials, folk housing can vary, because of minor differences in environmental features.

(115)

#### **Isolation Promotes Cultural Diversity**

Folk customs observed at a point in time vary widely from one place to another, even among nearby places.

#### **Himalayan Art**

In a study of artistic customs in the Himalaya Mountains, geographers P. Karan and Cotton Mather demonstrate that distinctive views of the physical environment emerge among neighboring cultural groups that are isolated. Each group reveals how their folk culture mirrors their religions and individual views of their environment.

**Buddhists.** In the northern region, Buddhists paint idealized divine figures, such as monks and saints. Some are depicted as terrifying or bizarre, perhaps reflecting the inhospitable environment.

**Hindus.** In the southern region, Hindus create scenes from everyday life and familiar local scenes, frequently representing the region's violent and extreme climatic conditions.

**Muslims.** In the western portion, Muslims show the region's beautiful plants and flowers because Islam prohibits displaying animate objects in art. In contrast with the Buddhist and Hindu regions, these paintings do not depict harsh climactic conditions.

**Animists.** Migrated to the eastern region, Animists paint symbols and designs that derive from their religion rather than from the local environment. The distribution of artistic subjects in the Himalayas shows how folk customs are influenced by cultural institutions like religion and by environmental processes such as climate, landforms, and vegetation.

#### **Beliefs and Folk House Forms**

The distinctive form of folk houses may derive primarily from religious values and other customary beliefs rather than from environmental factors.

**Sacred Spaces.** Houses may have sacred walls or corners. Sacred walls or corners are noted in China, parts of the Middle East, India, and Africa, among other places.

(116)

**U.S. Folk Housing**

Older houses in the United States display local folk-culture traditions. The style of pioneer homes reflected whatever upscale style was prevailing at the place on the East Coast from which they migrated.

Fred Kniffen identified three major hearths or nodes of folk house forms in the United States: New England, Middle Atlantic, and Lower Chesapeake.

Today, such distinctions are relatively difficult to observe in the United States. Rapid communication and transportation systems provide people throughout the country with knowledge of alternative styles. Furthermore, houses are usually mass-produced by construction companies.

(117)

**Key Issue 3. Why Is Popular Culture Widely Distributed?**

- **Diffusion of popular food, clothing, and housing**
- **Electronic diffusion of popular culture**

Popular culture varies more in time than in place. It diffuses rapidly across Earth to locations with a variety of physical conditions.

**Diffusion of Popular Food, Clothing, and Housing**

Some regional differences in food, clothing, and shelter persist in more developed countries, but difference is much less than in the past.

(118)

**Popular Food Customs**

People in MDCs are likely to have the income, time, and inclination to facilitate greater adoption of popular culture.

**Regional Variations.** Consumption of large quantities of alcoholic beverages and snack foods are characteristic of the food customs of popular societies. Americans choose particular beverages or snacks in part on the basis of preference for what is produced, grown, or imported locally. However, cultural backgrounds also affect the amount and types of alcohol and snack foods consumed.

Geographers cannot explain all the regional variations in food preferences.

**Wine Production.** The spatial distribution of wine production demonstrates that the environment plays a role in the distribution of popular as well as folk food customs.

(119)

Because of the unique product created by distinctive soil and climate characteristics, the world's finest wines are most frequently identified by their place of origin. Although grapes can be grown in a wide variety of locations, wine distribution is based principally on cultural values, both historical and contemporary. Wine production is discouraged in regions of the world dominated by religions other than Christianity.

### **Rapid Diffusion of Clothing Styles**

Individual clothing habits reveal how popular culture can be distributed across the landscape with little regard for distinctive physical features. In MDCs, clothing habits generally reflect occupations rather than particular environments.

A second influence on clothing in MDCs is higher income. Improved communications have permitted the rapid diffusion of clothing styles from one region of Earth to another. Until recently, a year could elapse from the time an original dress was displayed to the time that inexpensive reproductions were available in the stores. Now the time lag is only a few weeks. The globalization of clothing styles has involved increasing awareness by North Americans and Europeans of the variety of folk costumes around the world. The continued use of folk costumes in some parts of the globe may persist not because of distinctive environmental conditions or traditional cultural values but to preserve past memories or to attract tourists.

(120)

**Jeans.** An important symbol of the diffusion of western popular culture is jeans, which became a prized possession for young people throughout the world. Jeans became an obsession and a status symbol among youth in the former Soviet Union, when the Communist government prevented their import. The scarcity of high-quality jeans was just one of many consumer problems that were important motives in the dismantling of Communist governments in Eastern Europe around 1990. Ironically, as access to Levi's increased around the world, American consumers turned away from the brand.

### **Popular Housing Styles**

Housing built in the United States since the 1940s demonstrates how popular customs vary more in time than in place.

In contrast with folk housing that is characteristic of the early 1800s, newer housing in the United States has been built to reflect rapidly changing fashion concerning the most suitable house form. In the years immediately after World War II, most U.S. houses were built in a *modern style*. Since the 1960s, styles that architects call *neo-eclectic* have predominated.

**Modern House Styles (1945–1960).** Specific types of modern-style houses were popular at different times:

- **Minimal traditional:** Dominant in the late 1940s and early 1950s; small modest homes built to house young families and veterans returning from World War II.
- **Ranch house:** replaced minimal traditional in the 50s and 60s; took up a large lot that encourages the sprawl of urban areas.
- **Split level:** Popular variant of the ranch between the 50s and 70s; lower level contained the newly invented "family" room where the television was placed.
- **Contemporary:** Especially popular between the 50s and 70s for architect designed houses; frequently had flat or low-pitched roofs.
- **Shed:** Popular in the late 60s; characterized by high pitched roof.

(122)

**Neo-eclectic House Styles (Since 1960).** In the late 1960s, *neo-eclectic* styles became popular and by the 1970s had surpassed modern styles in vogue.

### **Origin of Popular Music**

In contrast to folk music, popular music is written by specific individuals for the purpose of being sold to a large number of people.

Popular music as we know it today originated around 1900. To provide songs for music halls and vaudeville, a music industry was developed in a district of New York that became known as Tin Pan Alley. After World War II, Tin Pan Alley disappeared as recorded music became more important than printed songsheets.

The diffusion of American popular music worldwide began in earnest during World War II, when the Armed Forces Radio Network broadcast music to American soldiers. English became the international language for popular music.

Hip-hop is a more recent form of popular music that also originated in New York. Whereas Tin Pan Alley originated in Manhattan office buildings, hip-hop originated in the late 1970s in the South Bronx. Hip-hop demonstrates well the interplay between globalization and local diversity that is a prominent theme of this book. Lyrics make local references and represent a distinctive hometown scene. At the same time, hip-hop has diffused rapidly around the world through instruments of globalization.

(109)

### **Diffusion of Folk and Popular Cultures**

The spread of popular culture typically follows the process of hierarchical diffusion from hearths or nodes of innovation. In contrast, folk culture is transmitted more slowly and on a smaller scale, primarily through migration (relocation diffusion).

### **The Amish: Relocation Diffusion of Folk Culture**

Amish customs illustrate how relocation diffusion distributes folk culture. Although the Amish number only about one-quarter million, their folk culture remains visible on the landscape in at least 19 states. The Amish have distinctive clothing, farming, religious practices, and other customs. The distribution of Amish folk culture across a major portion of the U.S. landscape is explained by the diffusion of their culture through migration. In Europe, the Amish did not develop distinctive language, clothing, or farming practices and gradually merged with various Mennonite church groups. Several hundred Amish families migrated to North America in two waves. Living in rural and frontier settlements relatively isolated from other groups, Amish communities retained their traditional customs, even as other European immigrants to the United States adopted new ones. Amish communities from such diverse areas as southeastern Pennsylvania to east-central Iowa are relatively isolated from each other but share cultural traditions distinct from those of other Americans.

(110)

### **Sports: Hierarchical Diffusion of Popular Culture**

In contrast with the diffusion of folk customs, organized sports provide examples of how popular culture is diffused. Many sports originated as isolated folk customs and were diffused like other folk culture, through the migration of individuals. The contemporary diffusion of organized sports, however, displays the characteristics of popular culture.

**Folk Culture Origin of Soccer.** Soccer is the world's most popular sport (it is called football outside North America). Its origin is obscure. Early football games resembled mob scenes. In the twelfth century the rules became standardized. Because football disrupted village life, King Henry II banned the game from England in the late twelfth century. It was not legalized again until 1603

- **Mansard:** The first popular neo-eclectic style, in the late 60s and early 70s; shingle-covered second story walls sloped inward and merged with the roofline.
- **Neo-Tudor:** Popular in the 70s; characterized by steep-pitched front-facing gables and half-timbered detailing.
- **Neo-French:** By early 1980 was the most fashionable style for new houses; dormer windows and high-hipped roofs.
- **Neo-colonial:** An adaptation of English colonial houses, continuously popular but never dominant.

### **Electronic Diffusion of Popular Culture**

Watching television is an especially significant popular custom for two reasons. First, it is the most popular leisure activity in MDCs throughout the world. Second, television is the most important mechanism by which knowledge of popular culture, such as professional sports, is rapidly diffused across Earth. In the twenty-first century, other electronic media have become important transmitters of popular culture.

### **Diffusion of Television**

Television technology was developed simultaneously in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, as well as the United States, but in the early years of broadcasting the United States held a near monopoly. Through the second half of the twentieth century, television diffused from the United States, first to Europe and other MDCs, then to LDCs. In 1954 the United States had 86 percent of the world's TV sets. In 1970, however, the share of the world's sets in the United States had declined to one-fourth. Still, in 1970, half of the countries in the world, including most of those in Africa and Asia, had little if any TV broadcasting. By 2005, international differences in TV ownership had diminished, although had not disappeared altogether.

### **Diffusion of the Internet**

The diffusion of Internet service is following the pattern established by television a generation earlier, but at a more rapid pace. In 1995, there were 40 million Internet users and Internet service had not yet reached most countries.

Between 1995 and 2000, Internet usage increased rapidly in the United States, from 9 percent to 44 percent of the population. But the worldwide increase was much greater in the rest of the world, from 40 million users to 361 million.

In 2008, Internet usage further diffused rapidly. World usage more than quadrupled in 8 years to 1.6 billion. U.S. usage increased to 74 percent, although the share of the world's Internet users found in the U.S. declined to 14 percent.

The diffusion of television from the United States to the rest of the world took a half-century, whereas the diffusion of the Internet has taken only a decade.

(125)

### **Diffusion of Facebook**

Facebook, founded in 2004 by Harvard University students, has begun to diffuse rapidly. In 2009, five years after its founding, Facebook had 200 million active users. As with television and the Internet, the U.S. had far more Facebook users than any other country. In the years ahead, Facebook will either diffuse to other parts of the world or it will be overtaken by other social networking programs.

(125)

**Key Issue 4. Why Does Globalization of Popular Culture Cause Problems?**

- **Threat to folk culture**
- **Environmental impact of popular culture**

The international diffusion of popular culture has led to two issues, both of which can be understood from geographic perspectives. First, the diffusion of popular culture may threaten the survival of traditional folk culture in many countries. Second, popular culture may be less responsive to the diversity of local environments and consequently may generate adverse environmental impacts.

**Threat to Folk Culture**

When people turn from folk to popular culture, they may also turn away from the society's traditional values.

**Loss of Traditional Values**

One example of the symbolic importance of folk culture is clothing. In African and Asian countries today, there is a contrast between the clothes of rural farm workers and of urban business and government leaders. Leaders of African and Asian countries have traveled to MDCs and experienced the sense of social status attached to clothes, such as men's business suits. Back home, executives and officials may wear Western business suits as a symbol of authority and leadership.

(126)

Wearing clothes typical of MDCs is controversial in some Middle Eastern countries. Fundamentalist Muslims may oppose the widespread adoption of Western clothes, especially by women living in cities. Women are urged to abandon skirts and blouses in favor of the traditional *chador*, a combination head covering and veil.

Beyond clothing, global diffusion of popular culture may threaten the subservience of women to men that is embedded in some folk customs. However, contact with popular culture also has brought negative impacts for women in LDCs. Prostitution has increased in some LDCs to serve men from MDCs traveling on "sex tours." International prostitution is encouraged in some countries as a major source of foreign currency.

**Threat of Foreign Media Imperialism**

Leaders of some LDCs consider the dominance of popular customs by MDCs as a threat to their independence. The threat is posed primarily by the media, especially news-gathering organizations and television.

**Western Control of Media.** Leaders of many LDCs view the spread of television as a new method of economic and cultural imperialism on the part of the more developed countries, especially the United States. Less developed countries fear the effects of the news-gathering capability of the media even more than their entertainment function. The news media in most LDCs are dominated by the government, which typically runs the radio and TV service as well as the domestic news-gathering agency. In many regions of the world the only reliable and unbiased news accounts come from the BBC World Service shortwave radio newscasts. Many African and Asian government officials criticize the Western concept of freedom of the press. They argue that the American news organizations reflect American values and do not provide a balanced, accurate view of other countries.

(128)

**Satellites.** In recent years, changing technology — especially the diffusion of small satellite dishes — has made television a force for political change rather than stability. A number of governments



in Asia have tried to prevent consumers from obtaining satellite dishes by its citizens, although foreigners and upscale hotels were allowed to keep them. Governments have had little success in shutting down satellite technology.

### **Environmental Impact of Popular Culture**

Popular culture is less likely than folk culture to be distributed with consideration for physical features. In a global economy and culture, popular culture appears increasingly uniform.

### **Modifying Nature**

Popular culture can significantly modify or control the environment. It may be imposed on the environment rather than springing forth from it, as with many folk customs.

**Diffusion of Golf.** Because of their large size (80 hectares, or 200 acres) golf courses provide a prominent example of imposing popular culture on the environment. Golf courses are designed partially in response to local physical conditions. Yet, like other popular customs, golf courses remake the environment.

(129)

### **Uniform Landscapes**

The distribution of popular culture around the world tends to produce more uniform landscapes. In fact, promoters of popular culture want a uniform appearance to generate “product recognition” and greater consumption. The diffusion of fast-food restaurants is a good example of such uniformity. The success of fast-food restaurants depends on large-scale mobility. Uniformity in the appearance of the landscape is promoted by a wide variety of other popular structures in North America, such as gas stations, supermarkets, and motels. These structures are designed so that both local residents and visitors immediately recognize the purpose of the building, even if not the name of the company.

### **Negative Environmental Impact**

The diffusion of some popular customs can adversely impact environmental quality in two ways: depletion of scarce natural resources and pollution of the landscape.

**Increased Demand for Natural Resources.** Diffusion of some popular customs increases demand for raw materials.

(130)

Increased demand for some products can strain the capacity of the environment, such as with increased meat consumption. With a large percentage of the world’s population undernourished, some question inefficient use of grain to feed animals for eventual human consumption.

**Pollution.** Popular culture also can pollute the environment. Folk culture, like popular culture, can also cause environmental damage, especially when natural processes are ignored. A widespread belief exists that indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere practiced more “natural,” ecologically sensitive agriculture before the arrival of Columbus and other Europeans. Geographers increasingly question this. Very high rates of soil erosion have been documented in Central America from the practice of folk culture.

The MDCs that produce endless supplies for popular culture have created the technological capacity both to create large-scale environmental damage and to control it. However, a commitment of time and money must be made to control the damage.

**Key Terms**

Custom (p.106)

Folk culture (p.106)

Habit (p.106)

Popular culture (p.106)

Taboo (p.112)

Terroir (p. 114)

**Test Prep Questions**

1) Which of the following characteristics is associated with groups that practice folk culture?

- A) urban
- B) isolated
- C) large
- D) heterogeneous

2) What two factors explain the spatial differences between folk and popular culture?

- A) origin and diffusion
- B) distribution and pattern
- C) origin and distribution
- D) diffusion and pattern

3) The spread of popular culture typically follows the process of \_\_\_\_\_ from hearths or nodes of innovation. In contrast, folk culture is transmitted through \_\_\_\_\_.

- A) relocation diffusion/hierarchical diffusion
- B) relocation diffusion/stimulus diffusion
- C) contagious diffusion/relocation diffusion
- D) hierarchical diffusion/relocation diffusion

4) Which of the following statements about the Amish is true?

- A) Because Amish communities are isolated from each other, they share few cultural traditions.
- B) While relatively small in population, the Amish are widely dispersed.
- C) In Europe, the Amish retained distinct cultural characteristics from other Mennonite groups.
- D) Amish culture spreads primarily through hierarchical diffusion.

5) Which of the following statements about soccer is false?

- A) It was outlawed in England by Henry VIII.
- B) It diffused to Europe by Dutch students who been to England.
- C) It was diffused by the British Empire rather than radio and television.
- D) It began as an English folk custom.

6) In the Himalayas, which of the following groups is forbidden by religion to depict animate objects in their art?

- A) Muslims
- B) Hindus
- C) Buddhists
- D) Animists

7) Which of the following is NOT a hearth of U.S. folk housing form?

- A) New England
- B) Middle Atlantic
- C) Lower Chesapeake
- D) Southern Coastal

- 8) What U.S. popular housing style was popular in the late 60s and characterized by a high pitched roof?
  - A) shed
  - B) split level
  - C) ranch
  - D) contemporary
  
- 9) Which of the following is NOT a way in which popular culture generally threatens folk culture?
  - A) threatening loss of folk clothing styles in favor of western attire
  - B) threatening military intervention to force popular culture on folk societies
  - C) threatening subservience of women embedded in some folk customs
  - D) threatening dominance of the news media in LDCs by MDCs
  
- 10) Which of the following is NOT an environmental impact of popular culture?
  - A) uniformity of the landscape
  - B) increased demand for resources
  - C) increase in efficiency in use of grain
  - D) increase in pollution to the environment

**Short Essay**

1) Explain the relationship between folk culture and the physical environment and provide examples.

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2) Compare and contrast folk housing styles with popular housing styles in the United States.

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3) What are the ways in which popular culture can have a negative impact on the environment?

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