

# CULTURE

## Culture

**Culture is a term used by social scientists for a people's whole way of life. In everyday conversation, the word *culture* may refer to activities in such fields as art, literature, and music. But to social scientists, a people's culture consists of all the ideas, objects, and ways of doing things created by the group. Culture includes arts, beliefs, customs, inventions, language, technology, and traditions.**

Culture consists of learned ways of acting, feeling, and thinking, rather than biologically determined ways. Some simple animals act on the basis of information carried in their *genes*, the parts of a cell that determine inherited traits. This biologically inherited information even includes the animal's ways of obtaining food and shelter. But human beings can experiment, learn, and work out their ways of doing these things, a process that never ends.

**Culture is a set of simple extensions of various parts of the body. The Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud compared it to such devices as artificial limbs, eyeglasses, and false teeth. Like these devices, culture enables people to do things their muscles and senses alone would not allow them to do. For example, human beings do not need fangs if they have arrows. They need not be able to run fast if they have tamed the horse. Without culture, the astronauts could not have reached the moon nor survived there. The human body needs oxygen and a certain range of temperature to live. However, cultural devices have enabled human beings to overcome some of the limitations of their bodies and stay alive in harsh environments.**

## Characteristics of culture

The British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor introduced the term culture as scientists use it today. In his book *Primitive culture* (1871), Tylor defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Those units are called *cultural traits*. They may include a customary burial place for the dead; device, such as a plough; or a gesture, such as a handshake. A group of related traits is called a *culture pattern*. For example, the related customs of dating, courtship, and marriage form a culture pattern.

**Every family has a cultural tradition of its own. This tradition includes many traits that the family shares with others who live in the same area and belong to the same social class. In addition, the family has its own set of cultural traits. Business companies, villages, and other social groups also have their own cultural traditions. Social scientists sometimes use the term *subculture* for a set of cultural traits found only in one group. Many occupational groups, such as doctors and truckdrivers, and ethnic groups, have their own subculture and also share the culture of the majority group.**

**Environmental differences are related to cultural variation.**

**People do not realize how greatly culture influences their behaviour until they come across other ways of doing things. Only then can they see that they have been doing things in a cultural way rather than in a "natural" way. For example, many Westerners believe it is natural to look directly into a person's eyes while talking. But the people of some Asian nations think it is rude to do so.**

People feel most comfortable within their own culture, and they prefer the company of others who share their culture. When people have to deal with persons of another culture, even small differences in behaviour make them uneasy. The difficulty or uneasiness that people undergo when they leave their own culture and enter another is called *culture shock*. The attitude that a person's own culture is the best and most natural is called *ethnocentrism*.

**Every culture changes continually. The rate of change may be slow or rapid. Because a culture consists of many related parts, a change in one part affects many others. Some social scientists believe that many social problems come about because some parts of a culture change more slowly than others.**

**In recent times, much cultural lag has occurred in customs, ideas, and other non-material parts of a nation's culture. Science and technology change so rapidly that they sometimes have outrun non-material culture.**

**Contact with other cultures.**

Any contact between two societies with different cultures causes change in both societies. Each borrows cultural traits from the other, particularly if a newly learned trait seems better than a traditional one. As a result, cultural traits and patterns tend to spread from the society in which they originated. This spreading process is called *diffusion*.

Cultural diffusion is the process by which cultural traits and patterns spread from

the cultures in which they originated.

**Prolonged contact between cultures brings *acculturation* a process in which people of one culture adopt traits from another. During the centuries, the Romans adopted many features of Greek culture, including Greek art, literature, and religion.**

**In most cases of acculturation, both cultures borrow from each other. Cultures change through contact with one another.**

Another process, called *assimilation* involves borrowing that is more one-sided. Assimilation takes place when immigrants or other newcomers adopt the culture of the society in which they have settled. Assimilation may lead to the disappearance of a minority group. The minority group disappears because its members lose the cultural characteristics that had set them apart.

A subculture is a group of people whose cultural traits set them apart within a culture or society. The people shown on the left are Amish. Many members of this North American Protestant group wear plain clothes and drive horses rather than cars. Their simple way of life makes them a subculture within modern society.

**For example, Hong Kong blends Eastern and Western ways of life. This fast-food restaurant in Hong Kong sells American-style hamburgers and soft drinks.**

**People borrow devices from other cultures, particularly if a new device seems better than a traditional one. These men are using a traditional dugout canoe powered by a modern outboard motor.**