

Speaking of Culture

SPEAKING OF CULTURE

Nolan Weil



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A Note to Students

NOLAN WEIL

If you are a student, you may be reading this book because you are enrolled in:

- IELI 2470—Cross-Cultural Perspectives, or perhaps
- IELI 2475—Cross-Cultural Explorations

These courses are designed to fulfill General Education breadth requirements in social sciences at USU (Utah State University). As the USU Catalog states:

General Education breadth requirements are intended to introduce students to the nature, history, and methods of different disciplines; and to help students understand the cultural, historical, and natural contexts shaping the human experience.

The title of this book is *Speaking of Culture* and its purpose is to define culture and other concepts associated with it. My hope is that the readings in this book will help

you to better understand the breadth of the concept of culture and provide you with a vocabulary for discussing it more articulately.

Culture is one of those broad concepts that is used widely, although somewhat imprecisely, in everyday English. It also cuts across many academic disciplines, and this book draws on many of them. It touches, for instance, on anthropology, biology, history, mythology, political science, psychology, and sociology.

This book will not be the only material you will study in IELI 2470/2475. Your professor may provide you with additional readings and/or encourage you to do independent research on topics of interest. You may watch culturally relevant movies or documentaries. You will, I hope, also have grand conversations with your peers.

My name, by the way, is Nolan Weil. I have been a professor in the Intensive English Language Institute (IELI) since 2004 and have taught this course or similar courses many times over the years. Perhaps I will be your teacher for this course, or perhaps you will have another professor from IELI. If I am your teacher, you will get to know me better as we meet regularly face-to-face throughout the semester. If I am not your teacher, you may know me perhaps only as the voice behind this text.

Introduction

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This introduction to the book will give you a brief survey of the topics covered in each chapter. Identify two chapters that you think might be particularly interesting. Why do you think so? Be prepared to discuss your choices with other readers.

The word *culture* is among the most frequently used words in English. We use it frequently in daily speech and encounter it often in both popular and academic texts. Directly or indirectly, it is the subject matter of many university courses. Even when it is not the exclusive focus, it plays a role in many discussions across the humanities and social sciences. But most of the time, we use it without defining it or even thinking much about exactly what we mean by it.

Despite the ease with which we use the term, culture is

not a simple concept. The primary purpose of this book is to promote a better understanding of the scope of the idea. Indeed, the word has a very wide range of meanings, and they are not all consistent with one another. For one thing, it has a relatively long history, and its primary uses have changed markedly over several centuries. Even in my lifetime (I was born in 1953) the ways in which scholars have defined culture have only become more diverse.

To come to grips with culture then will require that we give an account of the various ways that culture has come to be defined. It also goes without saying that one cannot define any concept without introducing still other associated concepts, so this book is rich in such secondary concepts.

We begin our mission of defining culture in Chapter 1 with a brief recounting of the history of the word. We point to its Latin root and recount the senses attached to it in 18th century France, and later, in 19th century England, before 20th century anthropologists made it a central concept of their discipline. We round out the chapter by calling attention to the proliferation of definitions of culture over the last 50 years. We end by introducing seven themes that Faulkner, Baldwin, Lindsley and Hecht (2006) have identified as encompassing all of the most common ways in which scholars have sought to define culture.

In Chapter 2, we put definitions of culture on the shelf temporarily, and put on the hat of the physical anthropologist. Our purpose is to emphasize the idea that culture, as anthropologists originally conceived it, is characteristic of the human species. That being the case, we want to remind readers of the antiquity of our species because it lays a foundation for putting human culture into a historical perspective in the chapter that follows. We

also want to shine a light on the relationship between human diversity and geography and advance the argument that “race” is, biologically speaking, a meaningless category. Concepts such as those of race and ethnicity are often seen as bound up with culture, but my hope is that readers leave Chapter 2 with a sense that when it comes to humanity, the only “race” is the “human race.”

In Chapter 3, we return to an explicit focus on culture, defining it as a product of human activity. We learn that the first modern humans came into a world already swimming in culture. Their hominid precursors, for example, were already tool users. The first half of the chapter features a discussion of the material culture of the Paleolithic, a time stretching from roughly 50,000 to 10,000 years ago. You will no doubt marvel at the remarkable tools of stone, bone, horn and ivory, and the various other artifacts that are hard to describe as anything less than art. The second half deals with the remarkable similarities in the world’s mythologies, tracing their major themes back to Africa, and proposing that a major innovation that took place roughly 40,000 years ago may have given rise to most of the world’s mythologies as they have come down to us today.

Chapter 4 might best be regarded as a bridge from the Paleolithic to the present. There is no grand theory in the chapter and no technical terminology to master. It merely begins with a quote from a renowned folklorist, who declared that “Material culture records human intrusion in the environment” (Henry Glassie, 1999: 1). Taking inspiration from the quote and from Glassie’s descriptive approach to material culture, I was moved to write a simple homely narrative based on my travels across several regions of the country. I caught hold of the first

impressions that came to mind when I recalled several memorable travels. These recollections were of waterscapes and landscapes, and the most obvious intrusions were boats and buildings.

Structural definitions of culture often consist of lists of elements that refer to products of thought (or those things that can be expressed by means of language) and those things which are recognizable primarily as actions (i.e. performances, or ways of doing things). The intent of Chapter 5 is to define a handful of terms that are generally regarded as aspects of culture: beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions, and rituals. This certainly does not exhaust the list of elements typically mentioned as integral to culture, but they are terms that we routinely fall back on when challenged to define culture. They are also terms that we find difficult to differentiate. What, for example, is the difference between a custom and a tradition? Although it may be a fool's errand, we will do our best to distinguish this handful of interrelated terms one from another.

In Chapter 6, we take a closer look at several ways in which anthropologists have put beliefs and values to work in the service of cultural inquiry. We look at the theory of Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck, known as Values Orientation Theory, which proposes that human societies can be compared on the basis of how they answer a limited number of universal questions. We then summarize the results from another approach to universal values, that of Geert Hofstede, who has proposed a theory purporting to identify different orientations across national cultures. We contrast that with a Chinese Values Survey reflecting a Confucian worldview. We wrap up the chapter with a critique of Hofstede's theory, motivated by a suspicion

that the persistence of the theory is due more to charisma than to the veracity of the theory.

Chapter 7 takes up the theme of culture as group-membership, questioning the labeling of large national groups as cultures on the grounds that few people in today's multicultural societies actually live in groups where everyone shares the same culture. In other words, we argue, culture is not something that is contained within groups. We define some social categories often discussed by sociologists including race, ethnicity and social class. We then examine group-membership as historians and political scientists have often discussed them through the lens of nationalism.

Chapter 8 explores some relationships between religion and culture, not the least of which is the fact that the word "religion," like the word "culture," comes to us from the Latin. Therefore, like the word, "culture," the word "religion" does not have exact equivalents in many languages. Throughout the chapter, we will touch on many of the world's historically prominent religions. Along the way, we will see that while some religions are rooted in particular shared beliefs, other religions place more emphasis on everyday practices. In the end, exploring all the various aspects of religion might lead us to wonder whether "religion" and "culture" aren't simply two different terms for referring to the same things. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that ordinary speakers of English could get by without distinguishing that which is simultaneously religious and cultural from that which is "merely" cultural.

In Chapter 9, we explore the roots of American culture. In doing so, we employ many of the elements of culture discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, most particularly: beliefs, values, and folkways. But whereas Chapter 5 focused on

defining the terms, and Chapter 6 looked into beliefs and values as cultural universals, Chapter 9 examines some beliefs and values particularly associated with the United States. We start with a conventional depiction of the United States as exemplifying values such as individualism, freedom, equality, and beliefs in change and progress, and as embracing norms of competitiveness, informality, and so on. We continue by challenging that as perhaps too much of a stereotype. Then, drawing on the “nation” concept from Chapter 7, we take a historical view of the United States as a country of eleven nations all exerting regional influence, and four dominant cultures dueling for political authority.

This book does not explicitly cover all of the seven themes introduced in Chapter 1. There isn’t really much about culture as process or culture as refinement. And culture as power and ideology is only suggested in Chapter 9. However, perhaps there is enough here for every student to gain some small measure of appreciation for the many ideas we might want to keep in mind when speaking of culture.

References

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What is Culture?

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

Here are some questions and some tasks to guide you in your reading of the chapter. If you can address everything on this list, you will be off to a good start.

1. Simply stated, what is culture?
2. How has the meaning of the word changed over time? Trace its evolution over the centuries.
3. Contrast Sir Edward Tylor's 19th century view of culture with that of Franz Boas at the beginning of the 20th century. How are they similar? How are they different?
4. What is the significance of Kroeber and Kluckhohn's classic work published in 1952?
5. List the seven themes that seem to capture the

scholarly literature on culture. Which theme(s) do you find most compelling?

Culture, simply defined

Trying to settle on a simple definition of culture is not an easy task. Maybe you will feel the same as you work your way through this chapter. You will see, for example, that the idea of culture has changed many times over the centuries and that in the last 50 years, scholars have made the idea more and more difficult to understand. But in this chapter, I will try to offer the simplest definition that seems reasonably up to date. Scholars might object that this definition is too simple, but I hope it will be useful for the purpose of furthering cross-cultural understanding. In that spirit, we shall regard 'culture' simply as a term pointing to:

all the products of human thought and action both material and non-material, particularly those that exist because we live in groups.

Or to repeat the same idea in a slightly different way:

culture consists of all the things we make and nearly everything that we think and do, again, to the extent that what we make, think and do is conditioned by our experience of life in groups.

The first thing to emphasize is that we are not born with culture, like we are born with blue or brown eyes, or black hair. We are born into culture, and we learn it by living in human social groups. The way this idea is often expressed is to say that culture is something that is transmitted from one generation to the next. This is how we become ‘enculturated.’

But we humans are clever animals, so although much of what we make, think, and do is a result of the cultural environment into which we were born, not every material object that a person may make, or every thought, or every action is the result of enculturation. Think about it for a moment. While much of what we call culture is transmitted from generation to generation, new items of culture are invented from time to time. That is to say, sometimes, some of us make things, think things, or do things that are new and different. We are then either honored as innovators or even geniuses, or we are punished as heretics or criminals, or dismissed as eccentric, depending on how open or how closed our societies are to change.

Of course, few things are ever entirely new. For the most part, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Still, suppose some clever person creates a completely unique tool to serve some entirely personal purpose of no interest or use to another living person. Then by our definition of culture (above), that tool would seem to have all the marks of culture except one; it would play no role in the life of any group. The same would go for an idea. Any idea not shared by one’s fellow group members would not seem to belong to culture. And similarly, a completely idiosyncratic practice marks a person as merely different,

if not strange, not as a person participating in a shared cultural practice.

Having proposed a brief, simple and fairly modern definition of culture that not every scholar of culture would find satisfactory, let us next survey some of the complications one finds in academic studies of culture.

Brief history of a concept

Since this discussion is intended for an international audience, it is important to know that the English word ‘culture’ does not refer to a universal concept. In fact, it may not even have direct counterparts in other European languages closely related to English. For example, even though the German word ‘*Kultur*’ and the Polish word ‘*kultura*’ resemble the English ‘culture’, there are important differences in meaning, and in more distant languages like Mandarin Chinese (*wen hua*), we might expect the differences to be even greater (Goddard, 2005). What this means is that if you are a speaker of Mandarin, you cannot rely on a simple translation of the term from a bilingual dictionary or Google Translate.

Scholars often begin their attempts to define culture by recounting the historical uses of the word. As Jahoda (2012) has noted, the word ‘culture’ comes originally from the Latin, *colere*, meaning “to till the ground” and so it has connections to agriculture. Now for historical reasons, a great many English words have Latin and French origins, so maybe it is not surprising that the word ‘culture’ was used centuries ago in English when talking about agricultural production, for example, ‘the culture of barley.’ Gardeners today still speak of ‘cultivating’ tomatoes or strawberries, although if they want to be more

plain-spoken, they may just speak of ‘growing’ them. Moreover, biologists still use the word culture in a similar way when they speak of preparing ‘cultures of bacteria.’

Later, in 18th century France, says Jahoda, culture was thought to be “training or refinement of the mind or taste.” In everyday English, we still use the word in this sense. For instance, we might call someone a cultured person if he or she enjoys fine wine, or appreciates classical music, or visiting art museums. In other words, by the 18th century, plants were no longer the only things that could be ‘cultivated’; people could be ‘cultivated’ as well.

Still later, culture came to be associated with “the qualities of an educated person.” On the other hand, an uneducated person might be referred to as “uncultured.” Indeed, throughout the 19th century, culture was thought of as “refinement through education.” For example, the English writer Matthew Arnold (1896, p. xi) referred to “acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world.” If Arnold were still alive today, he would no doubt think that the person who reads Shakespeare is ‘cultured’ while the one who watches *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy* is not.

Near the end of the 19th century, the meaning of culture began to converge on the meaning that anthropologists would adopt in the 20th century. Sir Edward Tylor (1871, p. 1), for instance, wrote that:



Sir Edward Tylor

Culture, or civilization ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Notice that Tylor viewed culture as synonymous with civilization, which he claimed evolved in three stages.

CAUTION: Today we generally regard Tylor's theory as mistaken, so please do not get too excited about the details that follow, but according to Tylor, the first stage of the evolution of culture was "savagery." People who lived by hunting and gathering, Tylor claimed, exemplified this stage. The second stage, "barbarism," Tylor said, described nomadic pastoralists, or people who lived by tending animals. The third stage, the civilized stage, described societies characterized by: urbanization, social stratification, specialization of labor, and centralization of political authority.

As a result, European observers of 19th century North America, noticing that many Indian tribes lived by hunting and gathering, thought of America as a "land of savagery" (Billington, 1985). Presumably, tribes that

farmed and tended sheep were not savages but merely barbarians. But by this definition, many early English settlers in North America, as well as some populations still living in England, in so far as they lived mainly by farming and tending animals, could rightly be called barbarians. In fact, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, many ‘cultured Europeans’ did regard Americans in the colonies as barbarians.

Now just to be clear, Europeans were not the only people with an inflated sense of their own superiority. In China, those living within the various imperial dynasties thought of people living far away from the center of the empire as barbarians. Moreover, they regarded everyone outside of China as barbarians. And this included the British.

But let’s return to Sir Edward Tylor and the elements that he identified as belonging to culture—knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and so on. This view of culture is certainly not far from 20th and 21st century views. But contemporary cultural scholars find Tylor mistaken in equating culture with civilization. Among the first scholars to drive this point home was Franz Boas.

Franz Boas and the birth of American anthropology



Franz Boas

Franz Boas is widely regarded as the father of cultural anthropology in the United States. Boas was a German of Jewish heritage (though from a not religiously observant family). Educated in Germany, Boas was exposed to two competing intellectual traditions, the *Naturwissenschaften*

(natural sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences). Boas embraced both, as a student of physics on the one hand and geography on the other. In 1896, Boas immigrated to the United States (Liron, 2003). Without the contributions of Boas, American anthropology might have developed very differently.

Unlike the British scholars of the time, Boas insisted that the study of culture should be based on careful observation, not speculation, which was the tendency of writers like Matthews and Tylor. Boas spent many years studying Native American cultures, and over the course of his career, he collected volumes of information on linguistics, art, dance, and archaeology. Boas' studies convinced him of the sophistication of Native cultures, so in contrast to Tylor, Boas and his students rejected the idea of indigenous cultures as inferior stages along the route to civilized refinement presumably represented by "Western" cultures (Franz Boas, 2017).

In fact, Boas is responsible for a number of tendencies in American anthropology:

For one thing, as we have just suggested, Boas rejected the idea that culture was something that evolved within societies by stages from lower forms to higher. Instead, he argued that culture was a historical, not an evolutionary development. Boas insisted that cultural ideas and practices diffused across groups who were living in proximity and interacting within similar environments. For Boas cultural developments were in many ways just accidents of history (Franz Boas, 2017).

Moreover, Boas was a vehement opponent of the scientific racism of the era (Liron, 2003). Scientific racists pushed the idea that race was a biological characteristic and that it was possible to explain human behavior by appealing to racial differences. During the 19th and 20th centuries, scientific racism had many proponents, not just in Europe and North America but as far away as China and Japan (Dikötter, 1992). Many anthropologists in Boas' day busied themselves in activities like describing and measuring the skulls of various groups of people and using this data to draw conclusions about the intellectual and moral characteristics of people. Boas, however, conducted his own studies of skeletal anatomy, and argued that the shape and size of the human skull was greatly affected by environmental factors like health and nutrition (Franz Boas, 2017).

For better or for worse, Boas is also responsible for transforming culture into a count noun, or a noun with both singular and plural forms. Before Boas, culture was an abstract idea, like beauty, knowledge, or love—which are not things we think of as being countable in the way that tables or chairs, or books are. But after Boas, one

could refer to “cultures,” that is, groups sharing a common set of ideas, beliefs, practices, etc.

Finally, we also owe the notion of cultural relativism to Franz Boas. Cultural relativism is the idea that cultures cannot be objectively evaluated as higher or lower, better or worse, right or wrong. From the perspective of the cultural relativist, cultures can only be judged on their own terms. For the cultural relativist, the job of the anthropologist is to understand how a culture works, not to make aesthetic or moral judgments about other cultures. (Cultural relativism though was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it may have helped students of culture combat their own ethnocentrism. After all, most of the practices of any given culture are surely neither right nor wrong relative to those of another culture but only different. On the other hand, a cultural relativist would be forced to admit that there was nothing morally wrong with chattel slavery as practiced across wide regions of the country in 19th century America. That idea clearly offends the moral intuitions of most contemporary Americans.)

Franz Boas had an extraordinary influence on American anthropology. He not only introduced important ideas and methods but also nurtured a generation of students that would turn anthropology into a thriving and popular academic field. Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, and Margaret Mead were just a few of Boas’ most well-known students (Franz Boas, 2017).

Later 20th & 21st century developments

Academic interest in culture flourished in the 20th century and still continues today. Scholars who try to define the subject often begin with the classic work of Kroeber and

Kluckhohn who in 1952 reviewed over 160 definitions from the literature of their day. And as if 160 definitions were not enough, Kroeber and Kluckhohn went on to offer their own:

Culture consists of patterns ... of ... behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional, ... historical ... ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952: 181)

Since Kroeber and Kluckhohn, scholars have continued to revise old definitions and invent new ones. A recent survey identified 313 definitions in the scholarly literature comprising seven distinct themes! These included definitions framed in terms of:

1. *Structure/pattern* – culture as a system or framework of elements (e.g., ideas, behavior, symbols, or any combination of these or other elements)
2. *Function* – culture as a means for achieving some end
3. *Process* – culture as an ongoing process of social construction
4. *Product* – culture as a collection of artifacts (with or without deliberate symbolic intent)
5. *Refinement* – culture as individual or group cultivation to higher intellect or morality

6. *Group membership* – culture as signifying a place or group of people, including a focus on belonging to a place or group
7. *Power or ideology* – culture as an expression of group-based domination and power

(Faulkner, Baldwin, Lindsley & Hecht, 2006: 29-30)

Given so many themes, you might feel like agreeing with Jahoda (2012: 299) who complained that:

more than half a century after Kroeber and Kluckhohn, and a literature that could easily fill a sizeable library, the most striking feature of these definitions is their diversity.

But perhaps this laundry list of themes need not be confusing. Perhaps they are not even as inconsistent as they might seem. I am reminded of the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

Six blind men confronting an elephant for the first time, came away from the experience with six different descriptions owing to their different angles of approach. One blind man, reaching up to touch the animal's broad side, concluded that the elephant was like a wall. Another man running into a leg, decided that an elephant was like a tree. A third man seizing the elephant's trunk, proclaimed the elephant to be a snake, while the fourth man grasping the tail, declared the elephant to be more like a rope. Meanwhile, a fifth man grasping the ear was sure the elephant was like a fan, while the sixth man encountering a tusk was equally sure the elephant was a spear. Only by bringing all of the separate parts of the

elephant together could anyone hope to acquire a complete and coherent impression of an elephant. Perhaps culture is a bit like this. Our concept of it is enriched when we are able to see it from many different angles.



Blind monks examining an elephant by Itcho Hanabusa (1652-1724)

Still maybe some of the themes of Faulkner and colleagues seem more basic than others, so in rounding out this chapter, I attempt a final synthesis bringing together the simple definition with which I started the chapter and relating it to the seven themes of Faulkner et al.

Final reflections

How does the simple definition of culture offered at the beginning of the chapter intersect with those of Faulkner and colleagues? If you go back and review the simple definition carefully, you will see that it encompasses items

1 and 4 from the list, with a nod to item 6 as well. It emphasizes that culture is a product of human making. It allows that those products can be material artifacts, or merely expressions of cognitive activities, i.e., thoughts, or both. A story passed along by word of mouth is a product of thought. Retelling the story to an audience is an action. A story written down on a scroll or printed in a book means that the thoughts of the story-teller are preserved in material form. In emphasizing that culture consists of elements, we have tried to reduce those elements down to two basic categories: thought and action. In later chapters, we will expand upon each category.

Our definition does not rule out the possibility that some elements of culture, what we call material culture, can remain long after the people that produced it are gone, e.g., stone tools from prehistoric times. On the other hand, it implies that material artifacts do not come into being without human intervention. Somebody made the stone tools. And it leaves open the possibility that some elements of culture are behavioral; in other words, they are performances that require no props, e.g., shaking hands in greeting. Finally, my simple definition acknowledges that in so far as people are not solitary animals but live in groups, culture is a collective phenomenon. We will revisit all of these themes in the chapters that follow.

As for definitions that emphasize culture as a function or culture as a process, my definition is silent. I would say, of course, one can look at culture from a functional point of view, or one can emphasize the processual aspects of cultural phenomena. But are these not secondary considerations? Don't they follow only after some initial observation and description? We find a stone arrow head buried in the ground. Isn't the first order of business to

gaze in wonder at the object, to describe it and name it? Of course, we soon want to know: What was this used for? What was its function? In what ways does it fit together with other objects? And how was it made? And knowing full well that crafting a tool requires learning, we wonder, how did novices learn this craft, by what process? But in the interest of brevity, I have purposely tried not to cram every conceivable qualification into the basic definition.

Looking over Faulkner et al's list for other items about which our opening definition is silent, we also note the preservation of one of the oldest notions of culture, culture as refinement. With the career of Franz Boas freshly in mind, we might imagine that Boas would wonder how such an anachronism appears in our modern context. (An anachronism is something old-fashioned, something belonging to an earlier time and place than the one portrayed.) However, while Tylor may have been wrong to think that the culture of Native Americans or Africans was rudimentary compared to that of Englishmen, perhaps we should not be too quick to banish the idea of refinement as an integral aspect of culture. One could well imagine our stone-age tool master, for instance, becoming better and better at the craft and teaching others the finer points of arrowhead making. Indeed, human culture may have built into it the urge to perfection, and so the idea of culture as refinement need not necessarily be an elite pretension of either Western (or imperial Chinese) "high society."

Finally, there is the idea that culture is an expression of group-based domination and power. In my first reflections on this theme I was inclined to say that surely this does not reflect the most basic definition of culture but is instead an observation about a dynamic that might come about when populations grow and splinter into

multiple groups that inevitably vie with each other. (Come to think of it, isn't that exactly what a study of Neolithic China will reveal.) And so I may be forced to acknowledge that perhaps culture as power and domination over others deserves a more prominent place in my scheme of things, but for now I will have to leave things stand as they are, i.e., incomplete.

To sum it all up, the English word, "culture," has a long history, and it has also undergone many modern developments. In contemporary discourse, it continues to be used in all the old ways, even as it has acquired new meanings. It is a product of human thought and action. Some products are tangible and some are not. Culture is learned. Culture is passed from one generation to another. Sometimes culture is invented anew. Culture is the instrument by means of which humans both adapt to the physical environment and regulate their lives in groups. Culture is not fixed once and for all but changes in response to changing circumstances. Culture can be a source as well as an instrument of conflict. Culture is complicated.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

Keep in mind the proposal of Faulkner, Baldwin, Lindsley and Hecht that scholarly definitions of culture tend to fall into one (or more) thematic categories:

1. Structure

2. Function
3. Process
4. Product
5. Refinement
6. Group Membership
7. Power/Ideology

For each group of passages below, name the category from above that best describes the theme that the passages suggest.

Group 1: Culture as _____

- *the moral and social passion for doing good; it is the study and pursuit of perfection, and this perfection is the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality (Harrison, 1971)*
- *the attainment of higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations (Gramsci, 1981)*

Group 2: Culture as _____

- *what happens when people makes sense of their lives and the behavior of other people with whom they have to deal (Spindler and Spindler, 1990)*
- *how information is transmitted, particularly in teaching and learning (Bonner, 1980)*

Group 3: Culture as _____

- *a community or population sufficiently large enough to be self-sustaining,*

i.e., large enough to produce new generations of members without relying on outside people (Jandt, 2016)

- *people who share learned patterns of behavior (Winkelman, 1993)*

Group 4: Culture as _____

- *a contested zone in which different groups struggle to define issues in their own interests (Moon, 2002)*
- *a field on which a cacophonous cluster of diverse voices plays itself out (Shore, 1996)*

Group 5: Culture as _____

- *the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar and Porter, 1991)*
- *an organized group of learned responses characteristic of a particular society (Linton, 1955)*
- *a commonly shared system of symbols, the meanings of which are understood on both sides with an approximation to agreement (Parsons, 1964)*

Group 6: Culture as _____

- *that which gives people a sense of who they are, of belonging, of how they should behave, and of what they should be doing (Harris & Moran, 1996)*
- *means and mechanisms through which the general biological nature of the individuals comprising the society is regulated, their behavior is programmed and directed ... (Markarian, 1973)*

Group 7: Culture as _____

- the artifacts that are produced by society, e.g., clothing, food, technology, etc. (Barnett & Kincaid, 1983)
- popular production of images . . . as part of a larger process which . . . may be called popular culture (Fabian, 1999)

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The Human Family

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

There are several important arguments in this chapter. If you follow them carefully, you may come away with all the necessary resources to address the following questions and tasks.

1. What does it mean to say that human diversity is geographically structured?
2. Explain the essential difference between the Multiregional Origin Hypothesis and the Recent African Origin Hypothesis. How does your previous understanding of human origins compare with these explanations?
3. List at least three genetically determined traits discussed in the chapter. Which two seem linked to geography and climate? Which one might be due

mainly to chance?

4. Explain the connection between geography, human nutritional requirements, and skin color.
5. How has the concept of race changed since the time of Carl Linnaeus?

Origins and Diversity of Humanity

In the chapter after this one, we will trace human culture back to its earliest origins and then linger for a while in the Upper Paleolithic, which lasted from about 50,000 to 10,000 years ago. But in this chapter, we will set the stage for that story by looking at the origins and diversity of *Homo sapiens*, which is the scientific name of our species.

Although we humans are not the only species to exhibit culture, we depend on it in a way that no other species does. Moreover, human culture is certainly as old as the human species itself. But how old is that? And how do we explain human diversity? Finally, how did our species come to be distributed across the whole earth?

Anyone who has ever visited an ethnically diverse city like New York, London, Toronto, or Sydney, is surely impressed by the diversity of people living in these cities. These cities, and others like them, have attracted migrants from every corner of the world. Noticing this diversity may naturally make some of us curious. Where is this or that person from? Or to be more precise, where are the person's ancestors from (for the person in question may be truly from New York, having been born there and having never lived anywhere else). Sometimes it is hard to guess from a

person's appearance where his/her ancestors are from originally. But sometimes it is not so hard. Where do you suppose the ancestors of the people depicted below probably originated?



Indeed, a person's physical appearance can be a good clue from where in the world the person's ancestors came. We see a person with a particular face, and we think — India, while for others, we think — China, or Africa, or Europe. Sometimes we can be even more precise—that person looks Somali, we think (if we are familiar with Somalis), while another we guess is an Eastern European of some sort. Of course, we can be mistaken, but those of us who have met people from many different places may become quite good at guessing a person's ancestral origins. On the other hand, many people in the world today have mixed ancestry, which complicates the point I

am trying to make. You may be wondering, “just what is that point?”

Only that humans exhibit a lot of genetic diversity (for it is our genes that determine our physical characteristics) and also that genetic diversity is geographically structured, which is the geneticist’s way of saying that people from particular regions resemble each other more than they resemble people from other regions. In the past, this observation led both laymen and scholars to believe that people could be neatly classified into easily distinguishable groups, called ‘races.’

Today, most biologists believe that (biologically speaking) the only race is the human race. What does this mean? Where did our respective ancestors come from in the first place? Did our ancestral groups just spring into existence independent of all other groups? Or is each group a branch from the trunk of one great tree, which came from a single seed? In other words, if we trace our ancestry back far enough, will we discover that we really belong, not to different regional tribes, but to one original tribe?

The academic discipline most intimately connected with the search for answers to questions about human origins is physical anthropology (also known as biological anthropology). We thus begin our cross-cultural explorations by first situating ourselves as a species.

Where did we all come from?

Scientific knowledge of human origins is based on the study of skulls and other skeletal remains, many of which were unearthed in the 20th century. In the last 30 years, advances in molecular genetics have also advanced our knowledge. Based on this material, many



Artist's depiction of *Homo erectus*

anthropologists have concluded that our first fully human (but not quite modern) ancestors appeared in Africa about 2 million years ago. We know them as *Homo erectus* (“upright man”). We call ourselves *Homo sapiens* (“wise man”), meaning that while we might see these distant cousins as somehow human, we do not see them as belonging to our species. But their exact relationship to us has been a subject of controversy over the last half-century, as scholars have debated two competing theories for explaining how human beings populated the planet. Let’s look at these two theories.

The Multiregional Origin Hypothesis

There are many variations of the *Multiregional Origin Hypothesis*, making it hard to construct a simple narrative, but the basic story goes something like this.

As suggested above, *Homo erectus*, first appeared in Africa about 2 million years ago. From fossil evidence, we

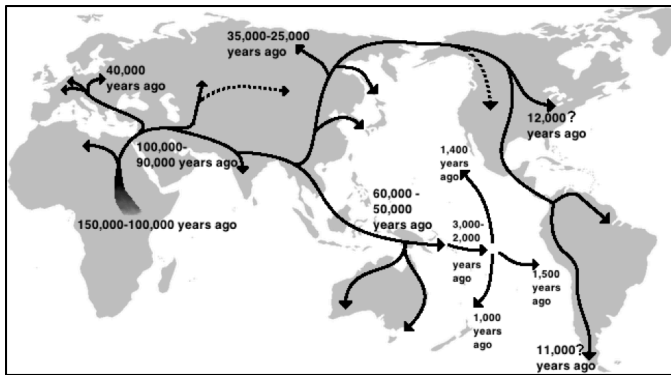
guess that some groups migrated out of Africa reaching Indonesia, China, and Georgia about 1.7 million years ago. Other groups may have wandered into Europe about 1.5 million years ago. According to multi-regionalists, (e.g., Thorne & Wolpoff, 2003), as *Homo erectus* spread across Asia and Europe, they established separate regional populations. These populations gradually evolved with some gene mixing occurring when migrating groups sometimes came into contact with one another. Multi-regionalists propose that *Homo erectus* gradually evolved to eventually become *Homo sapiens*. If this theory is correct, say the multi-regionalists, it explains why *Homo sapiens* appeared suddenly across Europe, Asia and Australia about 50,000 years ago.

The Recent African Origin Hypothesis

Not every anthropologist accepts the *Multiregional Origin Hypothesis*. Supporters of the *Recent African Origin Hypothesis* agree that various species of the genus *Homo*, including *Homo erectus* first appeared in Africa and that some groups migrated out of Africa. They doubt, however, that Asian populations of *Homo erectus* gave rise to *Homo sapiens*. Instead, they argue, there were many migrations of various archaic humans out of Africa over 1.5-2.0 million years, none of which gave rise to *Homo sapiens*. According to the *Recent African Origin Hypothesis*, our immediate ancestors evolved—perhaps from *Homo erectus*, yes, although not of the world travelling Asian variety, but instead from those *Homo erectus* who had remained, evolving, in Africa (Cann & Wilson, 2003).

According to the *Recent African Origin Hypothesis*, our closest ancestors originated in East Africa about 150,000 –

200,000 years ago and migrated out of Africa in several waves beginning about 100,000 years ago. Some of these waves may have died out. But one wave, which began about 90,000 years ago, carried early humans out of Africa, possibly through present day Yemen. Over the next 15,000 years, groups of early moderns followed the coast of the Indian Ocean, around the Indian subcontinent as far as present day Indonesia and southern China. By about 65,000 years ago, some groups reached Australia, Borneo and New Guinea. About 50,000 years ago, after the climate in Europe began to warm following an Ice Age, some groups moved north and east across the European continent (Oppenheimer, 2003).



Map of hypothesized global migrations of humans out of Africa



Artist's depiction of Neanderthal Man

On these migrations, *Homo sapiens* may have encountered various hominid cousins, including *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthal man). Some geneticists believe modern humans may carry a small amount (~2.5%) of Neanderthal DNA (Green, et al., 2010). Otherwise

there is not much evidence of interbreeding between moderns and archaic humans. Eventually, all representatives of the genus *Homo* other than *Homo sapiens* disappeared; we do not know exactly why.

About 40,000-45,000 years ago, modern humans began spreading north throughout Asia. Then beginning about 25,000 years ago, some groups crossed over a Bering land bridge from Siberia to Alaska. Gradually, over the next 10,000 years, these migrants from Asia spread throughout all of North and South America. Of course, not everyone left Africa. Some descendants of groups that left may have even returned. We do not know all of the details, but over the past 30 years, a lot of evidence has been discovered that supports the *Recent African Origin* hypothesis (Oppenheimer, 2003). Today, it is probably fair to say, it is the consensus view among anthropologists although few would say the matter is completely settled.

If the *Recent African Origin* theory is correct, it means every living human being can trace his/her ancestry to Africans who left Africa roughly 90,000 years ago. In other words, there is a fundamental sense in which deep down

we are all African, and ultimately as different as we may seem to be, we are all one big family.

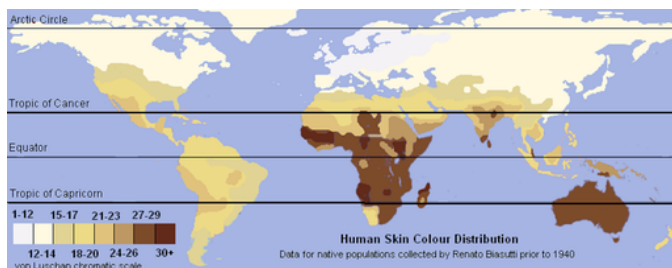
But why do we all look so different on the surface?

If our ancestors all came from Africa, you may be wondering, why do we all look as different as we do? To answer this question, we have to draw on principles from evolutionary biology and population genetics.

To survive, a species must be well adapted to its environment. Some species occupy a very narrow geographic range; we say it is specialized. For example, the koala lives only in Australia and eats primarily the leaves of eucalyptus trees. Koalas do not exhibit much variation and cannot live in very many places. Other species, however, are generalized; they inhabit a wide range of environments and exhibit a greater degree of variation. We humans are an example of a generalized species. We inhabit environments from the tropics to the arctic, from deserts to rainforests, and from sea level to high mountains. Many of the traits we possess are what biologists call polymorphic, that is they exist in many different forms, which allow us to adapt to a wider range of environments (Feder and Park, 1993: p. 328).

One trait that shows great variation in humans is skin color. If we look at a map showing the distribution of skin color across the world today, we find that darker skin is concentrated near the equator while lighter skin is concentrated in the northern latitudes. If the recent African origin theory is correct, our earliest modern human ancestors evolved in Africa for about 100,000 years

before leaving on their journeys to the far ends of the earth. Those ancient ancestors were most certainly black, having evolved in the intense equatorial sun.



Global human skin color distribution

Black skin provides some protection against sunburn and skin cancer. That much is true. But this is probably not the reason our African ancestors evolved dark skin.

More important may have been a connection between skin color, ultraviolet radiation (UV), and an important vitamin. According to Jablonski & Chaplin (2010), dark skin is the body's way of preserving folate (Vitamin B), which is rapidly destroyed by UV radiation leading to folate deficiency, a major cause of birth defects, developmental disorders, and various degenerative diseases (Lucock et al., 2003). Light skinned people would not have thrived in such an environment; therefore, the frequency of genes for light skin would have been greatly reduced or eliminated from the gene pool.

When the earliest migrations out of Africa took humans around the coast of India, the selective pressures (with regard to skin color) remained the same. Indeed, people indigenous to southern India tend to be quite dark. But as human populations moved northward, selective pressure for dark skin diminished. In fact, populations in the

northern most latitudes encountered a different kind of adaptive challenge. Adequate Vitamin D synthesis requires exposure to UV radiation. Humans in the northern latitudes needed to absorb all the UV light they could for Vitamin D synthesis. Since white skin allows in more UV while dark skin filters it out, populations that settled in the north underwent selection for white skin. Dark skinned people in the far north would have suffered from rickets, a bone disease caused by Vitamin D deficiency. The fact that some northern people (like the Inuit) are darker than we would expect is explained by their diet of fish and marine mammals, which is rich in Vitamin D. Because the Inuit got adequate Vitamin D from their food, they did not depend on sunlight for Vitamin D synthesis and so did not face selective pressure for lighter skin.

Populations that settled in the middle latitudes (between 23° and 46°) evolved yet another adaptive trait. In the middle latitudes, UV radiation varies greatly by season, so people indigenous to the middle latitudes evolved white skin with the ability to tan (i.e., become darker). In essence, they could change their color considerably, becoming several shades darker in summer, and getting pale again with the winter. In the modern era, of course, people of all colors have migrated, or been otherwise displaced, to places not originally inhabited by their ancestors. Cultural adaptations compensate for any environmental disadvantages associated with particular skin colors. For instance, white people in sun-drenched regions shield themselves from UV radiation with clothing, and black children in sun-deprived regions may drink milk, which in places like the U.S. is routinely fortified with Vitamin D.

Body build is another trait that may have undergone

selection. People like the Maasai of Kenya, who live in a hot climate, are often long limbed and slender, which promotes heat loss. People like the Inuit (mentioned above), who live in a cold climate, are often stocky with short fingers and toes, a body build that helps preserve body heat. Similarly, people whose ancestors settled in cold or dry areas often have long noses to warm or moisten the air before taking it into the lungs. People whose ancestors stayed in hot humid places (where the air is already warm and moist) have noses that are short and broad.

So one explanation for human physical variation is *natural selection*, which is the idea that the environment (e.g., geography and climate) selected particular traits and not others. Why? Because those traits enabled the individuals that possessed them to reproduce more successfully and therefore to pass these genetically determined traits to their offspring. As our African ancestors settled in different regions over tens of thousands of years, they gradually acquired physical traits well suited to their environments. They began to look more and more like the people that today we would tag as Indian, and Chinese, and Northern European, and for that matter African too.

But while natural selection shapes the physical characteristics of populations, random processes also play a role. *Gene flow* and *genetic drift* are random processes that also surely affected our ancestors on their global migrations. For much of human history, humans lived in small, geographically separated groups of interbreeding individuals. Sometimes, different populations came into contact and interbred. When this occurred, there was *gene flow*, or the mixing of genes between two populations.

Gene flow served to reduce the genetic variation between interbreeding groups. Physical differences between the groups became blurred as a result of mixing.

On the other hand, sometimes a population may have split into two or more groups, each of which went its own way. This led to *genetic drift*. Especially when populations are small, chances are that the frequencies of particular genes in populations that split will be quite different. For example, it is not likely that the (many) genes that control height will be equally distributed when a relatively small population splits into two groups. One group may retain more of the genes that contribute to a taller stature, and after several generations, the average height of one group will tend to be greater than that of another (Feder & Park, 1993).

In conclusion, nearly 100,000 years of migrations have shaped from an original population of Africans an assortment of regional groups differing phenotypically from each other in ways shaped by geography, climate, and chance. At the same time, Africans themselves have also continued to evolve. Today Africa remains the continent with the greatest amount of genetic (and linguistic) diversity anywhere on the earth, further lending support to the idea that it all started in Africa.

Race is not a biologically meaningful concept

The topic of race is a sensitive one because race is historically tied to issues of inequality and oppression that still trouble us today. But what is race? Simply stated, race involves the idea that humans can be classified into a few basic groups based on genetic and physical traits, ancestry, or social relations. Today scholars think of race as a *folk*

concept, not a scientific concept although once upon a time, the concept was treated with great scientific authority.

It is true that most groups tend to classify other groups in relationship to themselves. A group with limited knowledge and experience of another group living nearby may merely create a simple category that distinguishes the in-group from the out-group. For instance, the Abenaki who inhabited the northern regions of North America, and referred to themselves as *Alnôbak*, “real people,” referred to their neighbors in the arctic as Eskimo, “eaters of raw flesh,” or so it is widely believed. Meanwhile, the ‘Eskimo’ called themselves Inuit, or ... you guessed it, “real people.” Each group thought of itself as “real people,” while they thought of the other group as, well, perhaps not real people.

On the other hand, complex societies with considerable knowledge of other people may produce elaborate systems of classification. It is often said that Europeans had no particular awareness of race until the 1700s; however, a variety of cultural documents from the European Middle Ages show that during the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries, Europeans were already creating a discourse of race even before the development of an explicit vocabulary of race (Heng, 2011).

Europeans had, of course, long been familiar with the peoples of Africa and the Middle East. But from the 15th-18th centuries, Europeans also began to encounter many of the world’s other peoples for the first time, especially in the Americas, Australia and the Pacific Islands. These encounters along with the rise of science set the stage for the development of scientific attempts to explain human diversity, and the concept of race became a subject of scientific interest.

Scientists such as the Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist, Carl Linnaeus, laid the foundation for a scientific racism that would last well into the 20th century. In 1735, Linnaeus invented a system for classifying living organisms that would greatly influence European ideas about race. Linnaeus classified humans into four racial types based on skin color and facial and bodily features. He named the types after their assumed place of origin, associating each type with a color: Africanus (black), Asiaticus (yellow), Americanus (red), and Europeaeus (white). He even described behavioral traits he thought distinguished each race. While biologists still regard the Linnaean system as useful for classifying living organisms generally, modern biologists eventually rejected Linnaeus' classification of humans by racial type (Jandt, 2016, pp. 9-10).

For centuries though, racial classification was considered scientifically legitimate. Moreover, Europeans' embrace of scientific racism assured them of their own racial superiority. From the 16th to the mid-20th century, scientific racism made it easy for Europeans to justify their colonial domination and exploitation of indigenous populations in North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands. The history of nations in the 'New World,' from the United States to Brazil, is still tarnished by the legacy of black slavery, justified by a theory of race reinforced by the science of the day. Unfortunately, even after slavery was finally ended, racist assumptions continued, casting a long shadow over the lives of the descendants of enslaved peoples.

In the mid to late 20th century, Western nations began the slow and painful work of confronting and redressing

racial injustices of the past. Biologists, working with the benefit of advanced technologies, particularly in the field of genetics, began to realize that the centuries old theory of race was genetically incoherent. Today, the scientific consensus is that while human diversity is undeniable, traditional systems of racial classification have no biological basis (Feder & Park, 1993).

Nevertheless, it is difficult for many people to accept that when we think we see people of different races, we are deceived. To understand how this is so, we should realize that despite the visibility of a few (genetically determined) traits, humans vary (genetically) in many other ways that are not visible. And if we are going to find a genetic basis for race, we should look at all of our genes, not just the ones that result in a few visible traits. For a theory of race to have any genetic basis, geneticists should be able to find large groups of people that are genetically homogeneous within their group but heterogeneous with respect to contrasting groups. This is just not the case. A tremendous amount of genetic variability is actually shared among supposed racial groups, and genetic variation between individuals of the “same racial group” is sometimes greater than the genetic variation between individuals of two “different racial groups.” In other words, geneticists are not able to find any non-arbitrary way to draw boundaries around groups (Marks, 2010).

But surely, some people may still argue, the fact that one person’s skin is as black as mahogany while another’s is almost as white as snow is evidence of some typological difference. Indeed, skin color, in particular, continues to be a salient feature for many, even if they agree that skin color is just one trait among many. For any reader that is not persuaded by the arguments against the reality of race

articulated above, Relethford (2009, p. 21) has suggested that comparing traits such as skin color to height might help us understand the problem better. Borrowing from Relethford's argument, we might note, for instance, that like skin color, height too is a continuous variable. In other words, people come in all sizes from very short to very tall and everywhere in between just as people come in many different shades of color. In daily conversation, we may use crude labels such as "short," "medium," and "tall," but do we think that these represent three precisely defined groups. In most places in the world, 198 cm would certainly be tall. But how about someone who is 218 cm. Suddenly, we might feel the need for a new category—"very tall." And where exactly should we draw the line between tall and very tall: 207 cm, 208 cm, or 207.5 cm? And how many categories would we feel we needed to cover people of every height? Relethford's point is that we know that the labels we use in everyday life are subjective and imprecise, but no one thinks that terms like "short," "medium," and "tall" refer to discrete groups, and that human beings comes in only three, or five, or seven varieties of height.

In the end, Relethford says:

Race is a crude first-order approximation to human biological variation that is arbitrary in terms of the number and definition of races. As such, race may not provide the best way of describing or analyzing human variation.

This does not contradict what we have said earlier, that human variability is geographically structured, and that based on a person's appearance, we can often guess at the

geographical origins of his/her ancestors. But that is not the same thing as saying that the person in question belongs to some genetically coherent category that one could call a race. In the end, there is only one race, the human race.

Final Reflection

Although socially constructed concepts of race do not appear to rest on firm biological foundations, race will no doubt continue to occupy a prominent place in the social and political discourse, especially in countries with colonial legacies or histories stained by slavery and racial injustice. And scientific or not, the social construction of race is often a basis for the formation of identity, although whether that identity can in every instance be legitimately called a cultural identity is another matter for debate.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

1. Now that you have finished reading Chapter 2 what is your response? What was familiar to you? Did anything surprise you?
2. How was the origin of humans explained in the community where you grew up? Was there more than one explanation?
3. How much attention do people where you are from pay to skin color? Is skin color seen as a basis for differentiating people in any way? If so, how?

4. What is the writer's point of view on race? Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?

For Further Reading

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3

Origins and Early Developments of Culture

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This chapter is full of details. The questions and tasks below will help you pick out the most important ones. Of course, main ideas are important as well. As you pick out details, be sure to ask what it all adds up to.

1. Identify two ways in which human culture differs from the culture-like behavior of other animals.
2. List all of the tools named in the chapter. Identify the material they were made from and their use. Identify a major innovation in tool making that increased the effectiveness of single tools.
3. Make a list of all the objects mentioned in the reading

that we moderns might regard as art. Indicate their place of discovery, material, and a notable fact about each item.

4. Explain the bold new theory of Michael Witzel. In what way does Witzel's theory draw on ideas from Chapter 2?

Culture as a product of human activity

Once upon a time, social scientists regarded humans as the only species to exhibit culture. But if language and tool use are both signs of culture, we must acknowledge that other species may also possess some rudiments of culture. Whales and dolphins, for instance, may have some capacity for language. And chimpanzees have been observed making tools, “fishing rods” so to speak, for retrieving termites from their nests. Bottle-nosed dolphins also appear to be tool-users. They have been observed to break off pieces of sea sponge and use them in order to probe for fish along the sea bottom. Ethologists have even observed that some species of songbirds, and some species of fish too, exhibit “socially learned cultural traditions” (Mesoudi, 2011: 195-196).

However, no other species demonstrates the cultural virtuosity of human beings. For one thing, the cultures of non-human species do not seem to show the same tendencies of development and innovation from one generation to the next, as human culture does. For example, the combining of two or more separate elements into entirely new tools or practices does not seem to occur

among non-humans, whereas it is a hallmark of human cultural development.

In the last chapter, we placed humanity in a biological context. If the Recent African Origin theory is correct, we said, our earliest ancestors came from Africa and spent 90,000 years migrating to every habitable continent on earth. Along the way, they assumed a variety of different regional appearances. But as they migrated to geographic and climatic regions that sometimes differed from the lands of their ancestors, they met new environmental challenges. New environments required the invention of new tools and new ways of doing things. In turn, the continual development of culturally transmitted knowledge and skill enabled people to become ever more able to thrive in new environments.

In this chapter, we return to our story of human migrations out of Africa and across the globe. This time, however, we will focus on the origins of culture. As you read, keep in mind the seven themes introduced in Chapter 1. In this chapter, we shall frame culture as a product of human activity. But be on the lookout for other themes that may enter the discussion, in particular themes that call attention to functions and processes.

Paleolithic material culture

Our knowledge of pre-historic culture is limited. We can only guess at the beliefs and the daily social interactions of early humans. Our best knowledge of pre-historic life comes from the discoveries of archaeologists who have uncovered many material objects buried or even laying about in old river beds and elsewhere. Sometimes the skeletal remains of early humans are found nearby. Of

course, such found objects are limited to those made of materials able to resist the natural forces of decomposition. Among the most plentiful objects are stone tools, the most important of which seem to have served the purpose of securing and processing food. To the casual modern observer, the tools seem rough and unsophisticated. However, careful study of them suggests that their creation required careful planning, detailed knowledge of various materials, and skillful craftsmanship.

To convince yourself that the knowledge and skill of early humans is deserving of admiration and respect, imagine the following situation. You (and a group of friends) are dropped off in a remote wilderness, naked, and with none of the tools or materials you now take for granted. (OK, you may have some matches since it is almost certain you would not know how to start a fire without them.)

All around you is everything you need to survive: rock, wood, edible plants and animals. How will you get food? How about some clothing? You probably will not even know what plants you can eat. You might have some idea what animals you could eat. Suppose you are lucky enough to catch a fish, or a rabbit, perhaps a deer. What will you do with it? With no metal knives, you will have to reinvent stone blades for skinning and cutting up the deer. Stone blades will also be your best bet for scraping the deerskin to make leather for clothing. Good luck (unless you already know something about both stone tools and leather making).

Of course, the exercise imagined above is clearly unfair. If you had been born in the Upper Paleolithic (say 40,000 years ago), you would have been born into a group of

people who already had all the necessary tools for hunting, skinning, butchering, and everything else necessary for survival. You would have grown up under the watchful eye of people who knew how to make and use the tools. You probably would have learned by watching and doing, and those more skillful than you would have guided you (Barham, 2013).

When our ancestors left Africa 90,000 years ago, they already possessed technologies for exploiting the environment. At that time, our people, *Homo sapiens*, were not the only cultural species in the world. Our close cousins, *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalensis* were still around, and there is evidence that both of them knew how to control fire. They were makers and users of tools as well. Even the much earlier *Homo habilis* may have been a toolmaker. Maybe even *Australopithecus*. Many of the tools that *Homo sapiens* used had already been in use for over 2 million years. In other words, our ancestors came from a long line of hominid species that survived by means of cultural know-how. So our ancestors ventured forth out of Africa with the best (Stone Age) technology of the day. Encountering new environments and new needs, they refined those tools and developed new ones too (Brown, 1990).

Archaeologists refer to the time between 50,000 and 10,000 years ago as the Upper Paleolithic. It was a remarkably creative period of human cultural development (Feder & Park, 2007). Let's have a look now at some of the material culture typical of the Upper Paleolithic.

Stone tools

Stone tools were among the most important early tools. Items like the ones shown below enabled early humans to secure protein rich diets. Hammerstones and hand axes were the oldest stone tools in the ancient human “toolkit.”

Hammerstones were used for smashing animal bones to get the nutritious marrow inside (“Stone Tool Technology,” 2015). Hammerstones were also used to manufacture sharp



stone tools such as hand axes, and a wide variety of other stone blades and projectile points. Toolmakers used a technique known as knapping. By striking a hard sedimentary rock, such as flint, a toolmaker fractured the stone to create a sharp edge. By carefully chipping the edges of the entire rock, the knapper created large hand axes and various smaller blades of stone. Hand axes and blades were used for jobs like cutting meat, scrapping animal skins to make leather for clothing, and for carving or whittling wood (“Stone Age Tool Makers,” 2010; “Stone Tool Technology,” 2015).

A major innovation involved the insight that blades could be attached to shafts and handles. We call this technology hafting. For example, a projectile point, such as the one shown above, was attached to a long, straight shaft, fashioned from an appropriate tree branch. This involved considerable knowledge of materials and design. The shaft had to be notched to create a slot to insert the projectile point. A sticky material needed to be added to help hold the stone projectile point in place. This required

some knowledge of natural glues and how to get them, e.g., the resins of tree bark, or bitumen from tar pits. The point also had to be tightly bound to the shaft. This was usually done with strips of leather or sinews. Toolmakers learned that if the leather was soaked in water, and tightly wrapped around the point and shaft, the leather would shrink as it dried, creating a very tight wrap, holding the point firmly in place (Barham, 2013).

Besides stone, early humans also used bone to make things like knives, fishhooks, harpoons, and sewing needles. Of course, materials like stone and bone remain long after other types of materials have decomposed. The



Harpoons carved from bone

animal skin clothing, for instance, is long gone even though the needles used to make it can still be found. And speaking of clothes, early humans were not so busy with survival that they had to neglect fashion. They may have adorned their clothing with beads, made from soapstone through which they punched small holes (Feder & Park, 2007; “Great Human Odyssey,” 2015).

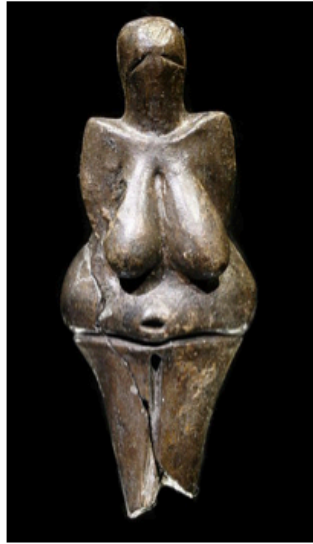
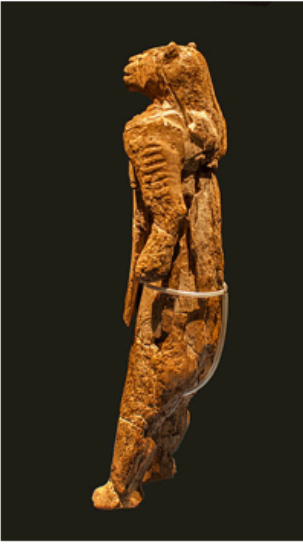


Bone Needles

Carved Figurines

In a sense, our species simply improved upon the tool making traditions of earlier hominids. On the other hand, as far as we know, we were the first to create objects of art. Carved figurines are found in abundance in the Upper Paleolithic. Examples include items like the Löwenmensch, found in a cave in Germany. The Löwenmensch, carved from wholly mammoth ivory, is about 35,000-40,000 years old (“Lion-Man,” 2017). The “Venus of Dolní Věstonice,” (2017) depicting a nude female was found in the Czech Republic. It is the oldest known ceramic figurine at about 25,000-30,000 years old. More well-known perhaps is the “Venus of Willendorf,” (2017), discovered in Austria. Carved out of limestone, it is about 27,000-29,000 years old. In fact, many figurines resembling, in form, these Venus figurines have been discovered, so many that we could regard the artifact as an Upper Paleolithic meme. The “Venus of Brassempouy,” (2017), made of ivory and discovered in a cave in France, is one of the earliest realistic representations of a human face. It is about 25,000 years old. Notice the hairstyles on

the Venuses. Don't they suggest that hairstyling is a thoroughly ancient cultural practice? ("Great Human Odyssey," 2015).



Löwenmensch (upper left); Venus of Dolní Věstonice (upper right); Venus of Willendorf (lower left); Venus of Brassempouy (lower right)

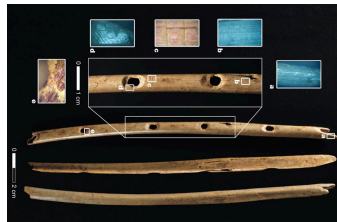
Painting

Painting too is an ancient achievement. There is evidence of it in every part of the world. Perhaps the oldest and most remarkable paintings are those that have been discovered in caves in France and Spain. Particularly awesome are the 30,000-32,000-year-old paintings discovered in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in France. In the interest of preserving and protecting the site, the cave is no longer open to the public, but today, tourists can visit a facsimile of the cave, where full-scale replicas of the paintings are on display. The museum faithfully reproduces the ambience of the cave its silence, darkness, temperature, humidity and acoustics ("Chauvet Cave," 2017). The documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* by the renowned German cinematographer, Werner Herzog, is also a great way to experience the mystery of the Chauvet Cave.



Paleolithic animals depicted with stunning realism (Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave, France)

Hundreds of animals of at least 13 different species are depicted with astounding realism. The paintings have a 3-dimensional quality that suggests movement, and some animals are even depicted interacting, for example, wholly rhinoceroses butting horns. Of course, we do not know what the artists of the Upper Paleolithic thought about their painting. Was it simply an expression of aesthetic sensibility? Or was it connected with ritual and magic intent, as some interpreters have suggested? There is



Flute, discovered in Hohle Fels Cave (Germany), carved from wing bone of a griffon vulture

more to know about the material culture of the Upper Paleolithic than we can summarize here. There is evidence, for instance, that the first musical instruments may have emerged at that time. Indeed, flutes made of bone and even ivory, some as old as 40,000 years, have been discovered in caves in southern Germany (Conard, Malina & Münzel, 2009).

Although this discussion has featured the Upper Paleolithic of Europe as a center of pre-historic art, we cannot conclude that therefore the early humans of Europe were more advanced than people elsewhere on the earth. It may simply be that Europe provided an environment more conducive to the preservation of artifacts such as cave paintings. In fact, in 2014 a cave painting depicting a pig, and dated at 35,000 years old, was discovered in Indonesia, and other paintings have been discovered in Australia, depicting animals thought to have become extinct 40,000 years ago. The Australian finds though have not been definitively dated, and it is possible that scientists are wrong in their estimates of the time of extinction of the depicted animals. But it seems possible if not probable that people all over the world were painting during the Upper Paleolithic.

In conclusion, with the tool use of Paleolithic humans, we see cultural continuity with the hominids that came before us. But we see evidence of a dramatic development of culture in *Homo sapiens* beginning about 40,000 years ago with the rise of art and music. If culture is defined as “refinement,” it was surely in full swing in the Upper Paleolithic.

Origins of mythology

While some products of human activity can be classified as material culture, other products are non-material. Stone tools, for instance, that remain long after their creators are gone, are obviously material. Music, on the other hand, is ephemeral. We suppose, quite reasonably, that flute music drifted through the valleys of Ice Age Europe only because we have found flutes, and where there were flutes (a material product), there must have been music (a non-material product). Was there also spoken language? There is certainly no good reason to doubt it. Then how about stories? Music and stories would be examples of cultural products that are non-material.

If anything, storytelling may be more ancient than painting, sculpting, and music. Even more surprising is that just as all humans may have come from an original population of Africans, there may have also been a single African source for all of our collective creation myths. Creation myths are stories that seem intended to answer our deepest human curiosities. On the surface, at least, these myths seem to answer questions such as:

- Where did this world in which we find ourselves come from?
- How did it arise?
- How did we humans come to be here?
- What will become of us?

In this section, we'll summarize a remarkable piece of scholarship by Michael Witzel (2012) on the origins of the world's mythologies. Witzel's work was inspired, in part, by the Recent African Origin hypothesis. In brief, Witzel

claims that when humans left Africa, they did so telling a particular story about the origins of the world, (today we would call it the universe). The story told of the beginnings of the earth and everything in it, as well as the sky above. It included a recounting of the appearance of generations of humans, and it ended with a final destruction.

But before we examine Witzel's ideas about the origin of world mythology, let's sample some of the creation stories of various peoples around the world.

Stories of creation – A sampling

In the beginning, neither heaven nor earth had names. Apsu, the god of fresh waters, and Tiamat, the goddess of the salt oceans, and Mummu, the god of the mist that rises from both of them, were still mingled as one. There were no mountains, there was no pastureland, and not even a reed-marsh could be found to break the surface of the waters.

It was then that Apsu and Tiamat parented two gods, and then two more who outgrew the first pair. These further parented gods, until Ea, who was the god of rivers and was Tiamat and Apsu's great-grandson, was born. Ea was the cleverest of the gods, and with his magic Ea became the most powerful of the gods, ruling even his forebears.

Apsu and Tiamat's descendants became an unruly crowd. Eventually Apsu, in his frustration and inability

to sleep with the clamor, went to Tiamat, and he proposed to her that he slay their noisy offspring. Tiamat was furious at his suggestion to kill their clan, but after leaving her Apsu resolved to proceed with his murderous plan. When the young gods heard of his plot against them, they were silent and fearful, but soon Ea was hatching a scheme. He cast a spell on Apsu, pulled Apsu's crown from his head, and slew him. Ea then built his palace on Apsu's waters, and it was there that, with the goddess Damkina, he fathered Marduk, the four-eared, four-eyed giant who was god of the rains and storms.

Enuma Elish – *Babylonia, 1100 BCE in writing; possibly existed from c. 1800 BCE, (Creation Stories from Around the World)*

* * *

There was neither “being” [sat] nor “nonbeing” [asat] then, nor intermediate space, nor heaven beyond it. What turned around? Where? In whose protection? Was there water?—Only a deep abyss.

There was neither death nor immortality then, nor was there a mark of day and night. It breathed, windless, by its own determination, this One. Beyond this there was nothing at all. Darkness was hidden by darkness, in the beginning.

A featureless salty ocean was all this (universe). A germ,

covered by emptiness, was born through the power of heat as the One. Desire arose then in this (One), in the beginning, which was the first seed of mind. In “nonbeing” the seers found the umbilical cord [relationship] of being, searching (for it) in their hearts with planning. Obliquely stretched out was their cord.

Was there really “below”? Was there really “above”? There were the ones bestowing seed, there were “greatnesses” [pregnancies]. Below were their own determinations, above was granting.

Who then knows well, who will proclaim here, from where they have been born, from where (came) this wide emanation? Later than its emanation are the gods. Who then knows from where it developed?

From where this emanation developed, whether it has been created or not—if there is an “overseer” of this (world) in the highest heaven, he alone knows it—or (what) if he does not know?

Rig Veda – India, c. 1000 BCE, (Witzel, 2012: 107)

* * *

Verily, at first Chaos [void] came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever sure foundation of all ... and Eros (Love), fairest among the deathless gods... From Chaos came forth Erebus [darkness] and black Night;

but of Night were born Aether and Day, who she conceived and bore in union with love from Erebus. And Earth first bore starry heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side.

Theogony—Greece, c. 700 BCE, (Witzel, 2012: 108)

* * *

In the beginning the Elohim made the sky and the earth, but the earth was shapeless and everything was dark. The Elohim said “Let there be light,” and there was the light that made day different from night. And that was the first day.

The Elohim said, “Let there be a dome to separate the heavens from the waters below,” and there were the heavens. And that was the second day. The Elohim said, “Let the waters of the earth gather so that there are seas and there is dry land,” and so it was. The Elohim said, “Let there be vegetation on the land, with plants to yield seeds and fruits,” and so it was. And that was the third day.

The Elohim said, “Let there be light in the heavens, and let them change with the seasons,” and so there were stars. Then the Elohim made a sun and a moon to rule over the day and to rule over the night. And that was the fourth day.

The Elohim said, "Let there be creatures in the waters, and let there be birds in the skies," and so there were sea monsters and sea creatures and birds. The Elohim blessed them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply". And that was the fifth day.

The Elohim said, "Let the earth have animals of various kinds", and so it was. Then the Elohim said, "Let us make humans after our own likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle and creeping things of the land, and over all the earth." The Elohim said to these humans, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, ruling over the fish and the birds and the animals of the land. We have given you every plant and tree yielding seed. To every beast and bird of the Earth we have given every green plant for food." And that was the sixth day.

And on the seventh day the making of the heavens and earth was finished, and the Elohim rested.

The Elohim – Hebrew, c. 600 BCE, (Creation Stories from Around the World)

In a time when Heaven and Earth still were without form, was called the great beginning. The tao began in the great emptiness... Then "breaths" were born from space and time. What was light moved and formed the

sky (easily); what was heavy, the earth ... this process
was difficult.

Huainan zi – China, c. 150 BCE, (Witzel, 2012: 107)

* * *

Once there was the age when Ymir lived.

There was neither sand, nor sea, nor salty waves,

Not was Earth found, not Upper Heaven,

A yawning gap [abyss], and grass nowhere.

Edda – Iceland, c. 1177 CE, (Witzel, 2012: 109)

* * *

lo dwelt within the breathing space of immensity.

The Universe was in darkness, with water everywhere.

There was no glimmer of dawn, no clearness, no light.

And he began by saying these words—

That he might cease remaining inactive:

“Darkness become a light-possessing darkness.”

And at once light appeared

...Then (he) looked to the waters which compassed him about, and spake a fourth time, saying:

“The waters of Tai-kama, be ye separate. Heaven be formed.” Then the sky became suspended.

“Bring forth thou *Tupua-horo-nuku*.”

And at once the moving earth lay stretched abroad.

Maori – New Zealand, compiled 1840-50s, (Witzel, 2012: 109)

* * *

The first world was Tokpela [Endless Space].

But first, they say, there was only the Creator, Taiowa. All else was endless space. There was no beginning and no end, no time, no shape, no life. Just an immeasurable

void that had its beginning and end, time, shape, and life in the mind of Taiowa the Creator.

Then he, the infinite, conceived the finite. First he created Sótuknang to make it manifest, saying to him, "I have created you, the first power and instrument as a person, to carry out my plan for life in endless space... Go now and lay out these universes in proper order so they may work harmoniously with one another according to my plan.

Sótuknang did as he was commanded. From endless space, he gathered that which was to be manifest as solid substance, molded it into forms, and arranged them in nine universal kingdoms: one for Taiowa the Creator, one for himself, and seven universes for the life to come...

Hopi – Arizona, compiled in 1950s, (Waters & Fredericks, 1977)

Similarities among creation stories

Upon first reading, the stories may seem quite different. But perhaps you noticed that beyond the differences in style, and in particular details, the basic theme is the same. Each myth, for instance, begins in much the same way. The world comes into existence out of chaos, formlessness, and darkness. Or, in some cases, out of primordial sea. At

first, the world comes about not by an act of creation, but as an emergence, an emanation.

Some accounts are more abstract and philosophical. The passage from the Rig Veda, for instance, begins in philosophical abstraction making the distinction between “being” [sat] and “nonbeing” [asat]. Moreover, it remains reflective, never quite becoming something the reader can easily visualize. (If you need to be convinced, please read it again.)

Other accounts, like the Babylonian Enuma Elish or the Greek Theogony portray the emergence of the world using more sensual, anthropomorphic images. However, the basic theme is the same. You may have noticed in many of these stories that powerful beings, such as gods, come only after the world has emanated out of the void:

- *Apsu, the god of fresh waters, and Tiamat, the goddess of the salt oceans, and Mummu, the god of the mist that rises from both of them, were still mingled as one. There were no mountains, there was no pastureland, and not even a reed-marsh could be found to break the surface of the waters. It was then that Apsu and Tiamat parented two gods, and then two more who outgrew the first pair.* (Enuma Elish)
- *Later than its emanation are the gods.* (Rig Veda)
- *... at first Chaos [void] came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever sure foundation of all ... and Eros (Love), fairest among the deathless gods... From Chaos came forth Erebus [darkness] and black Night...* (Theogony)

And notice how many of the narratives emphasize the emergence of mind or a primordial consciousness arising out of the void:

- *Desire arose then in this (One), in the beginning, which was the first seed of mind. (Rig Veda)*

Sometimes this emergence is characterized in terms of breath or breathing:

- *The Tao began in the great emptiness... Then “breaths” were born from space and time. (Huainan Zi)*

Breathing, or mind are sometimes characterized as co-existent with the void:

- *Io dwelt within the breathing space of immensity. (Maori)*
- *There was no beginning and no end, no time, no shape, no life. Just an immeasurable void that had its beginning and end, time, shape, and life in the mind of Taiowa the Creator. (Hopi)*

In some versions of the story, the qualities of the material world are sometimes brought into existence by an act of imagination:

- *Then he, the infinite, conceived the finite. (Hopi)*

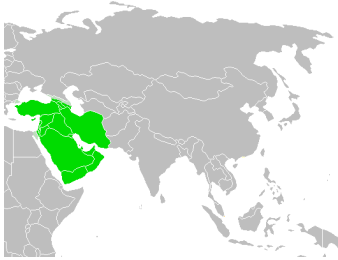
In other versions, the qualities of the world are brought about by an act of speech:

- *And he began by saying these words—That he might cease remaining inactive: “Darkness become a light-possessing darkness.” And at once light appeared ...etc. (Maori)*
- *... but the earth was shapeless and everything was dark. The Elohim said “Let there be light,” and there was the light that made day different from night. (Hebrew)*

Accounting for common motifs

What do we make of these worldwide similarities? Are they simply coincidental? Scholars of comparative mythology have proposed several possible theories.

1. Diffusion



Witzel has hypothesized that the Lurasian myth complex originated in Southwest Asia

One theory is that individual motifs spread outward from an early civilization, such as Egypt or Mesopotamia to the older hunter and gatherer cultures living on the frontiers of the empire. These tribal peoples then adopted the “parent” myths and developed their own local variations of the

myth based on their own local experiences.

Witzel acknowledges that some religious mythologies, e.g., Judeo-Christian-Islamic and Buddhist are known to have spread regionally in this way. However, he notes that the many myths continue according to a complex sequence of episodes. In literature, we would call this a plot. Witzel questions whether an entire myth complex could really successfully spread worldwide across such great distances to end up as far away from the early centers of civilization as South America and the Pacific Islands.

2. Myths as universal features of human psychology

Other scholars see myths as expressions of universal patterns of human thought (Campbell, 1949; Jung, 1953). According to this theory being human naturally involves universal experiences: of human relationship, of nurturance, of struggle for survival, of conflict, of passing through life stages, of death, and so on. Moreover, humans evolved as language using and concept-forming animals, and as creators of symbolic forms of expression. As a result, certain thoughts and images arise spontaneously in human imagination by virtue of our common humanity.

Supporters of this theory suggest that the motifs expressed in myths arose independently in many different places around the world because human experience, out of which the mythical imagination arises, is similar everywhere. But the myths differ in specific details because the imagery is also influenced by local geography and history. (Hmmm, a kind of Multiregional Origins hypothesis?)

Witzel agrees that humans may be biologically structured, with the kind of brain that produces similar images in people everywhere. However, he argues, it is hard to believe that the motifs would be organized everywhere into the same long, elaborately structured tales. Instead, Witzel offers a third explanation.

3. Creation myths all arose from a single (very) ancient source

Witzel has argued that an original mythology sprang up in ancestral Africa. From there, it was told and retold by our

ancestors as they began their global migrations out of Africa 90,000 years ago. Ah-ha, the Recent African Origin hypothesis applied to mythology. Witzel's argument is quite persuasive and seems to be supported by major discoveries over the last 30 years in linguistics, population genetics, and archaeology.

Based on extensive study of the themes and storylines across mythologies all over the world, Witzel has identified two classes of myths. He calls these two types *Gondwana* and *Laurasian*. Of the two, the Gondwana type appears to be older and less elaborately developed. Gondwana mythology is still found today among people in sub-Saharan Africa, and in Melanesia, Australia, and the Andamanese Islands. Laurasian mythology is found across Europe, Asia, northern and eastern Africa and the Americas. (Witzel hypothesizes an even earlier, Pan-Gaian mythology, ancestral to both the Gondwanan and Laurasian but doubts that we have the means to learn very much about it.)

Witzel thinks the Laurasian myth probably diverged from the Gondwana myth at least 40,000 years ago, originating somewhere in southwestern Asia, before spreading to northern and eastern Africa, Europe, northern and eastern Asia, and eventually throughout the Americas. If Witzel is correct, Laurasian mythology thrived long before the great early civilizations and the major religious traditions of the world. In other words, the world's mythologies did not spread outward from the great civilizations. On the contrary, the first great civilizations (including those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and China) adopted oral traditions that were already tens of thousands of years old by the time these early civilizations arose. Today we engage with Laurasian

mythology when we study the literature of classical civilizations. And many of the motifs are still discernable in the great religious traditions of today, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The Laurasian “Novel”

氏 古 盤



Pangu

"Laurasian novel": Plot

Primordial Creation
Father Heaven, Mother Earth
Separation of Heaven and Earth
Creation of Land
Demiurge or Trickster
Generations, 4 Ages, 5 Suns
The Creation of Humans
Descent of Noble Lineages
A Flood
Age of Heroes
Final Destruction

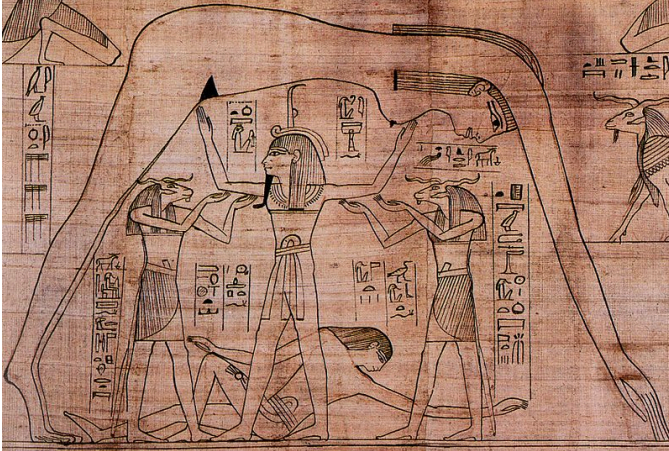
The Laurasian Novel

Witzel characterizes Laurasian mythology as a sort of first novel. By this he means that the creation myths found among people everywhere in the world all seem to be variations on one basic plot as shown in the sidebar. Although particular elements may be minimized or missing

in some myths, or more elaborately developed in others, the basic storylines are remarkably similar. The Laurasian novel begins with the primordial creation, the earth emerging finally out of chaos, darkness, or water. In versions where the earth emerges out of water, an "earth diver" pulls the earth up out of the sea. In some versions, the earth comes out of a great, cosmic egg (for example Pangu in Chinese mythology).

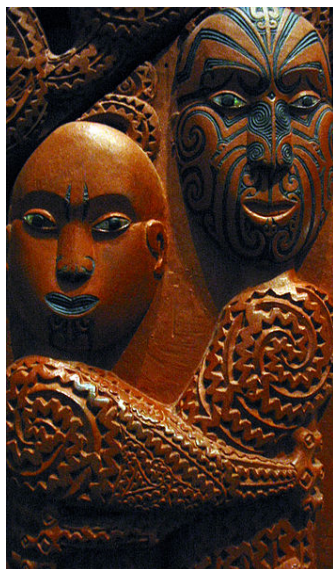
In some versions, the earth is formed when a giant who existed before the world emerged is killed and carved into pieces and whose body parts become the heavens and earth (Pangu again, or Ymir in Norse mythology, and Kronos in Greek mythology). In many creation myths, the earth is closely associated with the idea of a Great Mother and in many myths is personified by woman. At the same time, the sky makes an appearance as the counterpart of the earth, and the idea, the image, of a Sky Father is born. Interestingly, in the Egyptian relief from the Book of the Dead of Nesitqnebtashru (below), the usual arrangement is reversed. The sky is the goddess, Nut (held up by the air god, Shu, and two ram-headed deities). The Earth God,

Geb, reclines beneath. Originally, however, Nut was regarded as goddess of the nighttime sky, so this may depict the situation at night, when the daytime sky is overshadowed by the darkness of earth (Campbell, 1988, cited in Witzel, 2012: 380).



Egyptian relief from the Book of the Dead of Nesitanebtashru

But first in the imagination of some early storytellers, the father is laying with the mother in sexual union and they must be pulled apart. The sky is pushed into place sometimes by the children, the offspring of the original parents. The theme is illustrated (right) in a Maori carving depicting the primal couple, the earth mother—Papa, and the sky father—Rangui, locked together in a tight embrace.



Maori primal couple, Papa and Rangui

Sometimes the sky is propped into place by a world tree, or a stone pillar, or a world mountain. The cosmos is beginning to take the shape that we know. Now there is an earth and sky, but it is often a watery earth, and so the early storytellers must make provisions for the creation of dry land.

In many myths, there is a demiurge, a being who must form the whole of the material world, who must prepare the world for habitation. The demiurge may come out of the mind of a Supreme Being and be sent to build the world and put into it all of the things, animate and inanimate. The demiurge brings light to the world and sets the sun in place. Once there is a sun and an alternation of day and night, the earth is ready to support life. The earth then receives moisture (water); in some traditions, there is

the slaying of a dragon and the earth is fertilized in its blood.

The demiurge, sometimes known too as a trickster, not only prepares the world but brings human life into it as well. The trickster also brings culturally important elements to humans such as “fire” and “the heavenly drink,” (i.e., alcoholic drink). But the creation of humans and many of these cultural developments do not emerge until later in the story, so as with any good novel, we can leave the trickster, lurking in the background as we turn to the next important chapter in our Laurasian novel.



The Fall of the Titans, oil painting by Cornelis van Haarlem (1588–1590)

Back to the two original gods, Earth and Sky. Earth and Sky produce children. These are the first gods and goddesses, and the story progresses through an epic spanning four or five generations of gods/goddesses and their exploits. These are tales of conflict and treachery

among the gods but in the process the lands of the earth are laid out and the earth is peopled. In some versions of the story an original giant, sometimes one of the primordial gods is cut into pieces, and scattered to form the dry land. Themes of incest among the various gods or deities and continuing competition and conflict dominate many versions of the Laurasian novel. There is often warfare between two groups of gods who sometimes agree to share power; sometimes, defeated gods leave the inhabited center of the world. In Greek mythology, for example, the younger generation of gods, the Olympians,

go to war with the older generation, the Titans, to see who will reign over the universe.

After several generations of gods, human beings make their appearance and the plot follows the succession of noble lineages of humans. The first humans are semidivine. Across the globe, from Egypt and Mesopotamia and on to India, China, Japan, and Polynesia, and into the Americas, there are stories



Huitzilopochtli, Aztec god of the sun

of noble lineages; often the characters in these lineages trace their ancestry to a sun deity. A common feature of these stories is that after one or two generations, the descendants of the sun deity lose their immortality; i.e., humans become mortal.

In some myths, there is a competing storyline though. Many creation stories involve the creation of humans from clay. In other stories humans come from trees, maize, an egg, or a gourd. However, according to Witzel, this particular storyline is more representative of Gondwana mythology. Witzel surmises that Laurasian mythology is intimately tied to shamanism—a male vocation—and that when older Gondwana motifs find their way into the Laurasia storyline, it may be because of the co-existence in various cultures of “grandmothers tales,” motifs kept alive through stories told by women.

A dramatic chapter in the story of humans comes after humans have lived for many generations on the earth.

Somehow humans displease or anger a powerful being who destroys most of humankind in a great flood. The Laurasian saga then continues with the reemergence of humans and there are many overlapping tales of heroes. Some heroes are semidivine, and their exploits coincide with those of the gods. Sometimes, there is an age of heroes after the gods.

Finally, the Laurasian novel ends in a final destruction of the world. Even the gods are destroyed. The Ragnarök in Norse mythology is one of the most detailed stories of the final destruction. Odin and Thor and all the major gods and their adversaries, Fenrir, the wolf and the giant poisonous serpent, Jörmungandr are all destroyed. The sun turns black, the earth sinks into the sea, the stars vanish, steam rises, and flames touch the heavens. After the destruction, the world resurfaces new and fertile. Some surviving gods return and the world will be populated anew by two human survivors. The final destruction is thus paired with the hope for a new, more perfect world. In many myths, the world is created anew and there are a series of Four or Five Ages, each age ending in a final destruction.



The Ragnarök in Norse mythology is one of the most detailed stories of the final destruction.

Final Reflection

What does this discussion about an apparently very old plot have to do with us today? Well if Witzel is correct, the basic storyline of creation and human origins found in both oral and literary traditions worldwide was conceived a very long time ago, and we humans have been telling various versions of this same story for over 100,000 years. Following the stories of our own traditions back to their earliest origins, we all find ourselves, perhaps, sitting in the same circle. In this chapter, we have suggested that the well-known creation myths found in the literature and oral traditions from every corner of the world are a dramatic reminder of the power of cultural transmission in shaping the human imagination.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

1. Review the seven themes of culture from Chapter 1. Which themes do you think are reflected (either explicitly or implicitly) in this chapter? Make a case for several of the themes, i.e., explain how they are relevant to the chapter.
2. Read through the myths again in the *Stories of Creation* section. Which, if any, were you already familiar with? Which were new? Which one do you find the most interesting? Why?
3. In what way is culture different from civilization? (This question is not answered directly in the chapter. You must infer it.)
4. In what way(s) has your knowledge of culture changed after reading this chapter? What did you already know? What was new? Did anything surprise you?

Video Clips & Documentaries

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4

Material Culture

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This chapter is more impressionistic than the preceding ones. Don't expect to find answers to the following questions in the text. The best way to get something from the chapter is to read yourself into the text.

1. In your own words, explain the point that Henry Glassie is making in the quote that kicks off the chapter. Take it apart and explain phrase by phrase with concrete examples that might illustrate Glassie's meaning.
2. This chapter discusses the differences (rather than the similarities) in material culture from one region to another in the U.S. What are some factors that seem to affect material culture?
3. How is material culture a reflection of the life of

particular places?

The things we make

“Material culture records human intrusion in the environment,” says Henry Glassie (1999: 1) in his book *Material Culture*. “It is the way we imagine a distinction between nature and culture, and then rebuild nature to our desire, shaping, reshaping, and arranging things during life. We live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realize through it our grandest aspirations.”

In many ways, material culture is the most obvious element of culture. Of particular interest to the cross-cultural explorer is the way that material culture changes as one crosses otherwise invisible cultural boundaries. In traveling from one place to another, it is often the visible change in the manmade environment that first alerts the traveler to the fact that she has crossed from one cultural environment to another. This is not to ignore differences one might notice in spoken (or written) language, or the behavioral routines of people. There may be those too, of course.

Taking to the road

Reflecting on Glassie’s characterization of culture as a record of “human intrusion in the environment,” I am reminded of my encounters with these intrusions in my many travels—east, west, north, and south—across the

United States. Traveling by car in 1985 from my hometown of Toledo, Ohio on the west end of Lake Erie through Pennsylvania, upstate New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire to the coast of Maine, I heard English everywhere, of course. But when I arrived in Maine, the accent of the natives was obviously different from my northern Ohio, mid-Western accent. It amused me, for I had previously traveled in the Deep South and was familiar with the many accents of Southerners, but I had never spoken with a native resident of Maine. However, what impressed me more were the differences in cultural landscapes.

In many respects, Maine was strangely familiar to me although the geography is hardly the same as Ohio's. Let me explain. Northern Ohio is situated in a region of Ohio known as the Lake Plains. Largely flat, much of northern Ohio lies on the southern shores of Lake Erie, claiming about 312 miles (502 km) of Lake Erie's shoreline. On the other hand, Maine, the northeastern most state of the U.S., is on the Atlantic coast and has a rugged, rocky coastline. Both states have river systems that flow into large bodies of water. The rivers of northern Ohio flow into Lake Erie. The rivers of Maine flow to the Atlantic. Both states have flourishing marine cultures. But it is not the geography I want to focus on.

What struck me just as much as the differences in geography were the differences in the marine cultures of Ohio and Maine. Of course, whether traveling the shoreline of Lake Erie or the Atlantic coast of Maine, one sees many boats. But my impression as a traveler was that the proportion of boats of different types seemed quite different.

On Lake Erie one sees huge lake freighters, especially near big industrial cities like Toledo and Cleveland.



“As the big freighters go, it was bigger than most, with a crew and good captain well seasoned” (song lyric from *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*)

I am old enough to remember when the Edmund Fitzgerald went down in a ferocious storm on Lake Superior on November 9, 1975. It was subsequently immortalized by Canadian folk-rock singer Gordon Lightfoot in a song called *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald*.



Powerboats docked in Skyway Marina, Toledo, Ohio

Commercial fishing boats are also sometimes spotted in the Great Lakes too. Otherwise, the Great Lakes seascape is dominated by recreational craft. Powerboats seem most popular although sailboats can be seen as well. Marinas in Ohio are generally laid out in a series of piers. Since there are no appreciable tides in the Great Lakes, Lake Erie boaters can tie their boats at docks near shore and walk right to them.



Marinas lining the shore of Lake Erie in Sandusky, Ohio

The impression is quite different along the Maine coast. Large ships, while sometimes spotted, are more often seen only on the distant horizon. On the other hand, commercial fishing is the lifeblood of coastal Maine, and the lobster boat is an especially common sight. I saw them everywhere.



Lobster boat on Maine coast

There are many recreational boats too, and these certainly include powerboats, but somehow powerboats do not dominate my recollections of the Maine coast as they do that of Lake Erie. Instead, sailboats seem somewhat more prevalent. And because there are substantial tides along the Atlantic coast, boats are anchored to the sea floor at some distance from shore rather than tied to docks on the edge of the shoreline. A boat owner typically needs to use a small rowboat (or dinghy) to get to the boat (unless she wants to swim). One is also much more likely to encounter a sea kayak in the waters off the Maine coast than in Lake Erie.



Northeast Harbor, Mt. Desert Island, Maine



Sea kayaking is popular along the Maine coast

Heading Inland

Leaving the shores of Lake Erie and the coast of Maine and traveling inland, both states quickly undergo a cultural metamorphosis. We leave the vehicles and implements of the sea behind and encounter those of the farm and small town. In this sense, whether in Ohio or in Maine, one moves from one cultural setting to another by traveling just a few miles inland. But as we did with coastal Ohio and coastal Maine, let's compare a couple of material features found in abundance in both rural Ohio and rural Maine.

Whether traveling across Ohio or Maine one cannot go far without seeing a barn. Barns in both Ohio and Maine are generally of two basic types. There are barns with simple gabled roofs and gambrel style barns. Other shapes are sometimes found as well, but the simple gable and the gambrel are typical. Perhaps gambrel barns are more numerous in Ohio than in Maine although I cannot prove it. Barns are often painted red and sometimes white, or maybe not painted at all. But whether red, white, or unpainted, what is notable is that the siding on the barns in Maine is sometimes nailed horizontally, while in Ohio, the boards are often wider, and they are nailed vertically. If there is a reason for these differences other than simple local custom, I do not know. But it does not really matter, for what concerns us here is the raw visual encounter.



Red barn with simple gabled roof



Barn with gambrel-style roof

Another obvious example of “human intrusion in the environment” is the existence of houses (and other buildings: churches, stores, government buildings, etc.) Houses in both states come in many styles. The ways of building in both states have been influenced by other regions, of course, and by historical developments in architecture. This makes it hard to summarize similarities and differences in the ways of building.

But crossing Maine, the traveler will surely see an abundance of variations on the simple, classic, cuboid

designs found throughout New England, including the Cape Cod and the Saltbox.



Cape Cod style house



Saltbox style house

Moreover, it would not be hard to find houses sided with cedar shakes.



Cedar siding is common on traditional New England houses.

Nevertheless, except for differences in geography, it might be hard for the traveler to tell from a casual observation of houses whether she is in Ohio or in Maine. And frankly, as an Ohioan, I would be hard pressed to name the typical architectural style in Ohio. According to Zillow, an online real estate database company, the most prevalent architectural style in Maine is the Cape Cod design, whereas in Ohio, it is Colonial. In this respect, Ohio resembles Massachusetts or Connecticut more than Maine does. Indeed, architectural preferences in Ohio are somewhat more similar to those of New England generally, than to those of other Midwestern states, such as Minnesota or Nebraska (Home architecture, 2017).



Historic Moss-Foster house, Colonial Revival style home in Sandusky, Ohio

From one end of the country to another

For a more obvious contrast in American architectural styles, the traveler can head south and west from Ohio, down the Mississippi River to New Orleans where the dominant building style is French.



French Quarters in New Orleans

Continuing west into Texas, the traveler begins to encounter Spanish architecture. Further west still, in New Mexico, the cultural landscape features an abundance of buildings in the Native American Pueblo style. Perhaps nothing captures the differences between Texas and New Mexico better than touring the campuses of the University of Texas, in Austin and the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque.



Battle Hall, University of Texas, Austin



Zimmerman Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

While the Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico was built in 1938, one finds examples of the indigenous architecture that inspired it 60 miles west of Albuquerque atop a 365-foot high mesa in the village of Sky City in Ácoma Pueblo, home to the Ácoma people. According to legend, the Ácoma people have lived there

since before the time of Christ. Archaeologists cannot be certain of that but have confirmed that the site has been inhabited since at least 1200 CE, making it perhaps the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States (Minge, 2002).



Ácoma Pueblo, village of Sky City, New Mexico

Final reflection

So far, we have barely scratched the surface in pointing out some architectural differences across broad regions of the United States. Our purpose, however, is not to make an exhaustive study of American architectural styles. It is only to illustrate Glassie's characterization of material culture as "human intrusion in the environment" and to call attention to the ways in which that intrusion differs according to local customs, heritage, needs, and tastes.

Buildings are obviously large intrusions in the natural environment, and we have not even begun to look at all the various kinds of structures that comprise the built environment from churches, synagogues, and mosques to government buildings, storefronts, and stadiums. Of course, material culture also includes the associated furnishings, appliances, tools, implements, and personal possessions within buildings.

We are surrounded by material culture. As Boivin (2008: 225) reminds us: “From the moment we are born, we engage in an ongoing and increasingly intensive interaction with environments that are to varying degrees natural and human-made.” They are environments that we have shaped and that in turn have shaped us, “and yet,” notes Boivin, “in many ways, we have barely begun to study its role in our lives.”

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5

Culture as Thought and Action

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

The following task will help you gain a better grasp of some commonly mentioned elements of culture. Define the following terms. For each term provide the information indicated.

1. Belief: basic definition – three types – characteristics of each type – unique examples from your own experience
2. Value: basic definition – examples from the reading – unique examples from your own experience
3. Norm: basic definition – two types – definition of each type – difference between each type – example of each from text – unique example of each

4. Custom: basic definition – several characteristics
5. Tradition: basic definition – several characteristics – difference between custom and tradition
6. Ritual: basic definition – six genres of ritual – unique example from your own experience of each genre

Non-material aspects of culture

Social scientists have long distinguished material from non-material culture despite the fact that they are closely intertwined. Material culture consists of tangible objects that people create: tools, toys, buildings, furniture, images, and even print and digital media—a seemingly endless list of items. As we saw in Chapter 3, material culture can tell us a lot about the activities of people as remote in time as the Upper Paleolithic (and earlier). In fact, material culture is almost all we have to inform us about human culture in the deep past before the existence of written records. While material culture provides clues about the lives of the people who create and use it, material culture alone is silent about many other details, for much of human culture is non-material.

Non-material culture includes such things as: beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions, and rituals, to give just a few examples. In this chapter, we will discuss these typical categories of thought and action often associated with the concept of culture.

Beliefs

A belief is a propositional attitude, a settled way of thinking. Beliefs when publicly expressed generally take the form of declarative statements. As Schwitzgebel (2015) has pointed out, the vast majority of our beliefs are actually quite mundane. We rarely bother to express them at all, and we certainly never question them. Here are a couple of examples of some pretty mundane beliefs:

- All people have heads.
- The hand on the end of my arm is my hand (not someone else's).

Mundane beliefs are, for the most part, universally shared by all normally functioning people. Of course, not all beliefs are universally shared. Some beliefs are purely personal. Mary may believe, with good reason, that eggs give her indigestion. George may believe, without very good evidence, that the best way to guarantee rain is to wash his car. Personal beliefs may be well founded or not so well founded. At any rate, mundane beliefs and purely personal beliefs are of no particular cross-cultural interest.

Of greater interest for students of culture are the beliefs (and systems of beliefs) that are widely shared among members of particular communities of people. While mundane beliefs may be universally shared across most cultures, culturally shared beliefs tend to have boundaries. The members of one group may consider their own, shared cultural beliefs as self-evidently true, while members of other groups might consider the same beliefs as questionable, if not strange and arbitrary. Culturally relevant beliefs govern every conceivable aspect of social

life: religious, political, economic, and domestic to mention only a few.

Values

Cultural values are closely associated with both the beliefs and norms of a cultural community. Values can be defined as the abstract concepts or standards that represent the ideals of a group. They point to what the group most regards as right, good, beautiful, desirable, etc. Values are often identified in discourse by means of words or phrases, e.g., “freedom,” “equality,” “filial piety,” “respect for elders.” Values, though, go hand in hand with beliefs. Think of a value, when articulated, as a short hand way of referring to a belief. But of course, a value is hardly a value unless it is acted upon. In other words, we generally think of a value as a guide to conduct.

What purpose do values serve? – we might want to ask. For one thing, shared cultural values may help promote group cohesion. They encourage group members to behave in ways that the group considers appropriate, proper, honorable, praiseworthy, and the like. As is true also with beliefs and norms though, not everyone necessarily adheres to the widely shared values of a culture to the same degree, and sometimes not at all. In fact, some cultural values may even be in conflict with other values.

Cross-cultural comparisons of values using questionnaires have been particularly popular with social scientists for well over a half-century. Later in our explorations, we will examine several different frameworks that social scientists have proposed for studying differences in values across cultures.

Norms

Norms are the expectations or rules, formal or informal, about how one should behave in a particular social situation. Sociologists since the time of William Graham Sumner (1906) have generally distinguished two different types of norms: folkways and mores. Folkways are a loose collection of usual or customary ways in which the members of a particular cultural community behave. Examples include: how people greet one another, how they dress, what they eat, how they prepare it, and how they eat it, how they handle inter-personal conflict, etc. Mores (pronounced “more-rays”) are stricter than folkways. They are the standards of moral conduct and ethical behavior that the people in a cultural community expect of one another. They include such things as rules against killing, rules about who can or cannot have sex with whom, and so on.

The mores of a society are enforced in various ways. The most important mores are upheld by means of laws, which are explicitly stated rules. People who violate laws may have to pay a penalty, for example, going to jail, or paying a monetary fine. Other mores may not be strictly against the law but are nevertheless strongly endorsed by a society. Such mores may be upheld mainly by means of social sanctions, which are ways of communicating disapproval or putting pressure on people who violate a community’s mores. For example, people who violate mores for which there are no formal laws may find that the people of a community make life uncomfortable for them. The community may publically condemn the person (“shaming”) or avoid interacting with the person (“shunning”).

One way to look at the difference between folkways and mores is to say that folkways reflect what a cultural community regards as appropriate or inappropriate, polite or rude. Mores, however, reflect what a community considers as morally or ethically right or wrong.

Customs and Traditions

Customs and traditions are two more terms often employed in discussing culture. A custom is a widely accepted way of doing something, specific to a particular society, place or time, and that has developed through repetition over a long period of time. So defined, it is hard to see how customs differ from folkways as discussed above. I am not sure they do. Whether a practice is called a folkway or custom might revolve around whether the practice is being discussed by a sociologist or a social historian.

But what is a tradition? David Gross (1992: 8) defines tradition as “a set of practices, a constellation of beliefs, or mode of thinking that exists in the present, but was inherited from the past.” Gross further elaborates, writing that a tradition “can be a set of observances, a collection of doctrines or teachings, a particular type of behavior, a way of thinking about the world or oneself, a way of regarding others or interpreting reality.”

Gross (1992: 12) acknowledges that customs and traditions have much in common and that therefore the differences between them are easily blurred. He insists, however, that from the perspective of society as a whole, customs are less important than traditions. Compared with traditions, Gross claims, customs involve “mostly superficial modes of behavior” that “are not as heavily

invested with value.” For example, says Gross, long standing forms of greeting, like bowing in Japan, or shaking hands in the U.S. are “relatively insignificant social habits,” better characterized as customs than as traditions. Still, Gross admits, “the boundary separating custom from tradition is not always easy to discern.”

To call any practice a tradition, however, is often taken to imply that the practice is not just of great value but also ancient, something that has been passed down through many generations unchanged. Scholarly studies of tradition, however, contradict this widely held assumption. Although some traditions may have ancient roots, rarely, if ever, does any practice remain fixed for all time. Times change, and traditions disappear or are significantly transformed.

Even more startling, traditions are often invented and passed off as ancient, when in fact they are fully modern. As Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have argued, the invention of tradition is a hallmark of that “recent historical innovation, the ‘nation,’ with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest.” Although today’s nation-states are modern inventions, they “generally claim to be the opposite ... namely rooted in the remotest antiquity,” representing human communities that are entirely ‘natural’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983: 13-14).

Rituals

Rituals are sequences of actions involving gestures, objects, and sometimes the utterance of words performed in prescribed ways and carried out at specific times and

places. When I ask American students to identify rituals, they sometimes give examples such as:

- gathering to watch fireworks on the 4th of July
- “trick or treating” on Halloween
- gathering around the TV on Thanksgiving to watch parades and football
- enjoying Thanksgiving dinner, including turkey and other dishes typical of the occasion

But these not good examples of ritual as most anthropologists would define it.

True, some activities that are not clearly rituals, may seem to have some ritual-like characteristics, an observation that prompted Catherine Bell in her book, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, to propose a distinction between ritual and ritual-like activities.

According to Bell, ritual-like activities have some characteristics of ritual. Routines of greeting and parting, and table manners, for instance, are performative and exhibit formality both of which are characteristic of ritual. On the other hand, the American celebration of Thanksgiving is ritual-like because of its appeal to tradition.

As for full-fledged rituals, scholars have found it convenient for the purpose of study to group them into categories according to shared characteristics. Religious studies scholar, Catherine Bell, has identified six basic categories of ritual.

Rites of passage (or life-cycle rites) are ceremonies that call attention to major events in the social life of individuals, such as birth, the transition from childhood to

adulthood, marriage, and death. Rites of passage can also mark initiation into religious communities, for example, baptism in Christian communities. Clubs, fraternities, and secret societies often put new initiates through ritual ordeals before accepting them into the new community.

In some societies, rites of passage may be short and simple while in others they may be lengthy and complex. In rural China, says Bell (2009: 96), birth rituals are often still observed in all their traditional complexity. When a young woman marries, she is brought to live with the husband's family, and she may be considered an outsider of little importance until she bears a son to carry on the family name. Her mother-in-law may engage in rituals involving presentation of offerings to special maternal deities. Pregnancy and childbirth are also surrounded by a seemingly endless series of ritual observances. (This is not generally the case, however, in modern, urban China.)

Calendrical rites fall into two subcategories. **Seasonal celebrations** are associated with cycles of planting and harvesting among agriculturalists and with grazing and moving the herd among pastoralists. In many societies, sowing seeds is accompanied by offerings to ancestors or deities, and harvesting often involves giving the first yield to the gods or ancestors. Communal feasting is also common, accompanied by music, dance, and a relaxing of social restraint. **Commemorative celebrations** revolve around remembrance or re-enactment of events with religious significance, or importance for national heritage. The rite of Holy Communion in the Catholic Church, for instance, is performed in remembrance of the Last Supper.

Rites of exchange and communion involve the making of offerings to a god or gods, sometimes with the

expectation of getting something in return, like a good harvest. Offerings may also be made to praise or please or appease a god or deity. In some cultures, the offering consisted of the sacrifice of an animal (e.g., the ancient Hebrews), and some cultures have even practiced human sacrifice (e.g., the Aztecs).

Rituals of affliction involve actions taken to diagnose and deal with the unseen causes of misfortune or to alleviate physical or mental illnesses. Many pre-modern cultures believe such problems are caused by things like evil spirits, spirits of the dead, magic or witchcraft. Rituals of affliction often involve not just the afflicted but entire communities and have as their objective the idea of purification or exorcism.

Rituals of feasting, fasting, and festivals are focused on public displays of cultural and religious commitment and sentiment. A good example of ritual fasting is the worldwide Muslim communal fasting during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink anything from the time the sun rises until it sets. (Exceptions are made for the elderly, the sick, and for pregnant women, as well as for people traveling.) After Ramadan, Muslims celebrate Eid al Fitr, literally the “feast of breaking the fast.” Well known festivals include Carnival in places like New Orleans and Brazil and water festivals that take place in many countries in East and Southeast Asia (e.g., China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand).

Political rites are ceremonial practices that display and promote the power of political institutions. The coronation of the Queen of England would be an example. National salutes might also count as political rites, e.g., the American pledge of allegiance, or to give a more sinister

example, the “Heil Hitler” salute in pre-World War II Germany. Revolutionary or anti-establishment gestures could also be counted as political rites, for instance, cross-burning by the KKK.

Most of us living in modern secular societies are not generally surrounded by rituals to the same extent as people in traditional societies often are or were. In the United States, for example, except for people who may belong to a religious tradition in which ritual is important, we tend to observe just a few rites to mark major life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death (Bell, 2009).

Final reflection

The terms covered in this chapter are among the most common terms used in enumerating what we have called non-material aspects of culture. But to reiterate a point made at the beginning of the chapter, it is not always possible to separate material and non-material culture. For instance, while we have defined a custom as a widely accepted way of doing something, that doing may very well include a material object. For instance, it might be customary to send a friend or relative a birthday greeting—an action, but that greeting may take material form—a birthday card. Or let’s take ritual as an example. Although a ritual is an action, ritual actions often employ ritual objects: incense, candles, chalices, prayer beads, bells, gongs, drums, and so on.

Not only can it be difficult to separate material and non-material culture, it is also not always easy to distinguish between some categories of non-material culture discussed in this chapter. For instance, we have already discussed the difficulty of distinguishing between a

custom and a tradition. Is there a difference between a custom and a norm? If there is, it is surely subtle and unimportant for our purposes. On the other hand, there clearly is a difference between a law (at least in the modern sense of the term) and a more.

At this point, I would invite you, dear reader, to go through the list of terms introduced in the chapter and provide original examples of beliefs, values, norms, customs, traditions, and rituals that you consider to be elements of a cultural community that you are familiar with.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

1. Identify at least three beliefs that are important in a cultural community that you identify with. Try to discover beliefs that govern different aspects of life, e.g., political, economic, social, or some other. Can you name an associated value for each belief?
2. See if you can discover a cultural belief that is at odds with one of your own deeply held personal beliefs.
3. We often belong to more than one cultural community. Sometimes the beliefs of one community are in conflict with the beliefs of another community. Can you identify any such situation in your own experience?

For Further Research

1. Culture is not something fixed. Cultures can change over time. Can you discover a custom that has changed in the lifetime of someone that you know (e.g., a parent

or grandparent)?

2. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have argued that what we regard as ancient traditions are sometimes more recent than we think. Can you discover any tradition that is actually more recent than people commonly believe?

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6

Beliefs, Values, and Cultural Universals

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This chapter delves into two theories of cultural values in more detail. The following tasks invite you not only to restate ideas from the chapter but also to apply the theories to communities of your own choosing.

1. What are the five questions that every society must answer, according to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck?
Identify the three potential responses to each question.
2. List and define Hofstede's six dimensions of culture.
Choose two national cultures that interest you.
Compare and contrast them using Hofstede's model.
3. Identify four problems that critics have identified with

Hofstede's theory.

4. Do you think it is possible to identify national values, or do you think values differ significantly from person to person and place to place? Explain.

Value Orientations Theory

The Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Value Orientations theory represents one of the earliest efforts to develop a cross-cultural theory of values. According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), every culture faces the same basic survival needs and must answer the same universal questions. It is out of this need that cultural values arise. The basic questions faced by people everywhere fall into five categories and reflect concerns about: 1) human nature, 2) the relationship between human beings and the natural world, 3) time, 4) human activity, and 5) social relations. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck hypothesized three possible responses or orientations to each of the concerns.

Table 6.1 – Summary of Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Values Orientation Theory

<i>Basic Concerns</i>	<i>Orientations</i>		
Human nature	Evil	Mixed	Good
Relationship to natural world	Subordinate	Harmony	Dominant
Time	Past	Present	Future
Activity	Being	Becoming	Doing
Social relations	Hierarchical	Collateral	Individual

What is the inherent nature of human beings?

This is a question, say Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, that all societies ask, and there are generally three different responses. The people in some societies are inclined to believe that people are inherently evil and that the society must exercise strong measures to keep the evil impulses of people in check. On the other hand, other societies are more likely to see human beings as born basically good and possessing an inherent tendency towards goodness. Between these two poles are societies that see human beings as possessing the potential to be either good or evil depending upon the influences that surround them. Societies also differ on whether human nature is immutable (unchangeable) or mutable (changeable).

What is the relationship between human beings and the natural world?

Some societies believe nature is a powerful force in the face of which human beings are essentially helpless. We could describe this as “nature over humans.” Other societies are more likely to believe that through intelligence and the application of knowledge, humans can control nature. In other words, they embrace a “humans over nature” position. Between these two extremes are the societies who believe humans are wise to strive to live in “harmony with nature.”

What is the best way to think about time?

Some societies are rooted in the past, believing that people should learn from history and strive to preserve the

traditions of the past. Other societies place more value on the here and now, believing people should live fully in the present. Then there are societies that place the greatest value on the future, believing people should always delay immediate satisfactions while they plan and work hard to make a better future.

What is the proper mode of human activity?

In some societies, “being” is the most valued orientation. Striving for great things is not necessary or important. In other societies, “becoming” is what is most valued. Life is regarded as a process of continual unfolding. Our purpose on earth, the people might say, is to become fully human. Finally, there are societies that are primarily oriented to “doing.” In such societies, people are likely to think of the inactive life as a wasted life. People are more likely to express the view that we are here to work hard and that human worth is measured by the sum of accomplishments.

What is the ideal relationship between the individual and society?

Expressed another way, we can say the concern is about how a society is best organized. People in some societies think it most natural that a society be organized hierarchically. They hold to the view that some people are born to lead and others to follow. Leaders, they feel, should make all the important decisions. Other societies are best described as valuing collateral relationships. In such societies, everyone has an important role to play in society; therefore, important decisions should be made by

consensus. In still other societies, the individual is the primary unit of society. In societies that place great value on individualism, people are likely to believe that each person should have control over his/her own destiny. When groups convene to make decisions, they should follow the principle of “one person, one vote.”

In an early application of the theory, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck interviewed members of five cultural groups in the American Southwest: 1) Navajo people traveling around the Southwest seeking work, 2) white homesteaders in Texas, 3) Mexican-Americans, 4) Mormon villagers, and 5) Zuni pueblo dwellers. Researchers have found the framework useful in making sense of diverse cultures around the world.

As Hill (2002) has observed, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck did not consider the theory to be complete. In fact, they originally proposed a sixth value orientation—Space: here, there, or far away, which they could not quite figure out how to investigate at the time. And Hill has proposed a number of additional questions that one might expect cultural groups to grapple with:

- Space – Should space belong to individuals, to groups (especially the family) or to everybody?
- Work – What should be the basic motivation for work? To make a contribution to society, to have a sense of personal achievement, or to attain financial security?
- Gender – How should society distribute roles, power and responsibility between the sexes? Should decision-making be done primarily by men, by women, or by both?
- The Relationship between State and Individual–

Should rights and responsibilities be granted to the nation or the individual?

Today, the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck framework is just one among many attempts to study universal human values. Others include those of Hofstede (1997), Rokeach (1979), and Schwartz (2006).

Hofstede's dimensions of culture theory

Geert Hofstede articulated a Dimensions of Culture theory in the 1980s, and has updated and revised it over the years. Hofstede's theory currently gets a lot of attention in basic texts that include discussion of cultural values. Based on survey data collected from IBM employees, Hofstede has argued that his theory is particularly useful for highlighting similarities and differences between national cultures. Hofstede initially identified four dimensions.

Power Distance

Power distance is a measure of the degree to which less powerful members of society expect and accept an unequal distribution of power. There is a certain degree of inequality in all societies, notes Hofstede; however, there is relatively more equality in some societies than in others. Countries vary along a continuum from countries where power distance is very low to countries where power distance is very high. Measured on a scale of 1-100 for instance, Denmark scores very low and Mexico scores quite high. The U.S. falls somewhere in between.

Countries with lower PDI values tend to be more egalitarian. For instance, there is more equality between

parents and children with parents more likely to accept it if children argue with them, or “talk back” to use a common expression. In the work place, bosses are more likely to ask employees for input, and in fact, subordinates expect to be consulted. On the other hand, in countries with high power distance, parents expect children to obey without questioning. People of higher status may expect conspicuous displays of respect from subordinates. In the workplace, superiors and subordinates are not likely to see each other as equals, and it is assumed that bosses will make decisions without consulting employees. In general, status is more important in high power distance countries.

Table 6.2 – Power distance index (PDI) for 50 countries and 3 regions (Hofstede, 1997: 26)

<i>Country/ Region</i>	<i>PDI</i>	<i>Country/ Region</i>	<i>PDI</i>	<i>Country/ Region</i>	<i>PDI</i>	<i>Country/ Region</i>	<i>PDI</i>
Malaysia	*104	France	68	South Korea	60	Australia	36
Guatemala	95	Hong Kong	68	Iran	58	Costa Rica	35
Panama	95	Colombia	67	Taiwan	58	Germany	35
Philippines	94	Salvador	66	Spain	57	Great Britain	35
Mexico	81	Turkey	66	Pakistan	55	Switzerland	34
Venezuela	81	Belgium	65	Japan	54	Finland	33
Arab countries	80	East Africa	64	Italy	50	Norway	31
Ecuador	78	Peru	64	Argentina	49	Sweden	31
Indonesia	78	Thailand	64	South Africa	49	Ireland	28
India	77	Chile	63	Jamaica	45	New Zealand	22
West Africa	77	Portugal	63	USA	40	Denmark	18
Yugoslavia	76	Uruguay	61	Canada	39	Israel	13
Singapore	74	Greece	60	Netherlands	38	Austria	11
Brazil	69						

* A country may score above 100 if it was added after a formula for the scale had already been fixed.

Table 6.3 – Individualism index (IDV) for 50 countries and 3 regions (Hofstede, 1997: 53)

Country/ Region	IDV	Country/ Region	IDV	Country/ Region	IDV	Country/ Region	IDV
USA	91	Germany	67	Turkey	37	Thailand	20
Australia	90	South Africa	65	Uruguay	36	Salvador	19
Great Britain	89	Finland	63	Greece	35	South Korea	18
Canada	80	Austria	55	Philippines	32	Taiwan	17
Netherlands	80	Israel	54	Mexico	30	Peru	16
New Zealand	79	Spain	51	Yugoslavia	27	Costa Rica	15
Italy	76	India	48	East Africa	27	Indonesia	14
Belgium	75	Japan	46	Portugal	27	Pakistan	14
Denmark	74	Argentina	46	Malaysia	26	Colombia	13
France	71	Iran	41	Hong Kong	25	Venezuela	12
Sweden	71	Jamaica	39	Chile	23	Panama	11
Ireland	70	Arab countries	38	West Africa	20	Ecuador	8
Norway	69	Brazil	38	Singapore	20	Guatemala	6
Switzerland	68						

Individualism vs. collectivism

Individualism vs. collectivism anchor opposite ends of a continuum that describes how people define themselves and their relationships with others. Countries that score higher on individualism measure are considered by definition less collectivistic than countries that score lower. In more highly individualistic societies, the interests of individuals receive more emphasis than those of the group (e.g., the family, the company, etc.).

Individualistic societies put more value on self-striving and personal accomplishment, while more collectivistic societies put more emphasis on the importance of relationships and loyalty. People are defined more by what they do in individualistic societies while in collectivistic societies, they are defined more by their membership in particular groups. Communication is more direct in individualistic societies but more indirect in collectivistic societies. The U.S. ranks very high in individualism, and South Korea ranks quite low. Japan falls close to the middle.

Masculinity vs. femininity

Masculinity vs. femininity refers to a dimension that describes the extent to which strong distinctions exist between men's and women's roles in society. Societies that score higher on the masculinity scale tend to value assertiveness, competition, and material success. Countries that score lower in masculinity tend to embrace values more widely thought of as feminine values, e.g., modesty, quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and greater concern for the disadvantaged of society. Societies high in masculinity are also more likely to have strong opinions about what constitutes men's work vs. women's work while societies low in masculinity permit much greater overlapping in the social roles of men and women.

Table 6.4 – Masculinity index (MAS) for 50 countries and 3 regions (Hofstede, 1997: 84)

Country/ Region	MAS	Country/ Region	MAS	Country/ Region	MAS	Country/ Region	MAS
Japan	95	USA	62	Singapore	48	South Korea	39
Austria	79	Australia	61	Israel	47	Uruguay	38
Venezuela	73	New Zealand	58	Indonesia	46	Guatemala	37
Italy	70	Hong Kong	57	West Africa	46	Thailand	34
Switzerland	70	Greece	57	Turkey	45	Portugal	31
Mexico	69	India	56	Taiwan	45	Chile	28
Ireland	69	Argentina	56	Panama	44	Finland	26
Jamaica	68	Belgium	54	France	43	Yugoslavia	21
Germany	66	Arab countries	53	Iran	43	Costa Rica	21
Great Britain	66	Canada	52	Peru	42	Denmark	16
Philippines	64	Malaysia	50	Spain	42	Netherlands	14
Colombia	64	Pakistan	50	East Africa	41	Norway	8
Ecuador	63	Brazil	49	Salvador	40	Sweden	5
South Africa	63						

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance measures the extent to which people value predictability and view uncertainty or the unknown as threatening. People in societies that measure high in uncertainty avoidance prefer to know exactly what to expect in any given situation. They want firm rules and strict codes of behavior. They dislike ambiguity. People

from countries that score low on uncertainty avoidance generally have a higher tolerance for ambiguity. They are happy to have few rules and prefer less structured rather than more tightly structured contexts. In educational settings, people from countries high in uncertainty avoidance expect their teachers to be experts with all of the answers. People from countries low in uncertainty avoidance don't mind it when a teacher says, "I don't know."

Table 6.5 – Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)/ 50 countries and 3 regions (Hofstede, 1997: 113)

<i>Country/Region</i>	<i>UAI</i>	<i>Country/Region</i>	<i>UAI</i>	<i>Country/Region</i>	<i>UAI</i>	<i>Country/Region</i>	<i>UAI</i>
Greece	112	Costa Rica	86	Ecuador	67	Indonesia	48
Portugal	104	Turkey	85	Germany	65	Canada	48
Guatemala	101	South Korea	85	Thailand	64	USA	46
Uruguay	100	Mexico	82	Iran	59	Philippines	44
Salvador	94	Israel	81	Finland	59	India	40
Belgium	94	Colombia	80	Switzerland	58	Malaysia	36
Japan	92	Venezuela	76	West Africa	54	Great Britain	35
Yugoslavia	88	Brazil	76	Netherlands	53	Ireland	35
Peru	87	Italy	75	East Africa	52	Hong Kong	29
Panama	86	Pakistan	70	Australia	51	Sweden	29
France	86	Austria	70	Norway	50	Denmark	23
Chile	86	Taiwan	69	South Africa	49	Jamaica	13
Spain	86	Arab countries	68	New Zealand	49	Singapore	8
Argentina	86						

Long-term vs. short-term orientation

Long-term vs. short-term orientation is a 5th dimension developed some years after the initial four. It emerged as a result of an effort by a research group (The Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) to develop a universal values framework with a non-Western bias. According to Hofstede (1997: 161), the resulting Chinese Values Survey overlapped with three of Hofstede's dimensions: power distance, individualism, and masculinity although not with the uncertainty avoidance dimension. In addition, the group found a unique factor not reflected in Hofstede's work, which they called Confucian dynamism. Hofstede has since incorporated Confucian dynamism into his own theory as long-term vs. short-term orientation. Long-term orientation is associated with thrift, savings, persistence toward results, and the willingness to subordinate oneself for a purpose. Short-term orientation is associated with less saving, a preference for quick results, and unrestrained spending in response to social pressure (often referred to in English as "keeping up with the Joneses").

Table 6.6 – Long-term orientation (LTO) for 23 countries
(Hofstede, 1997: 166)

Country	LTO	Country	LTO	Country	LTO	Country	LTO
China	118	India	61	Poland	32	Zimbabwe	25
Hong Kong	96	Thailand	56	Germany	31	Canada	23
Taiwan	87	Singapore	48	Australia	31	Philippines	19
Japan	80	Netherlands	44	New Zealand	30	Nigeria	16
South Korea	75	Bangladesh	40	USA	29	Pakistan	0
Brazil	65	Sweden	33	Great Britain	25		

Indulgence vs. self-restraint

Indulgence vs. self-restraint represents another new dimension. People living in countries that score high on indulgence are more likely to value the free gratification of human desires. Enjoying life and having fun are important to them. On the other hand, people in countries high on restraint are more likely to believe that gratification should be curbed and that it should be regulated by strict social norms (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010: 281).

Table 6.7 – Indulgence vs. Restraint. Ranking of 40 countries from most to least indulgent (reproduced from Jandt, 2016: 175)

<i>High-Indulgence Countries</i>		<i>High-Restraint Countries</i>	
1 Venezuela	11 Australia	74 Morocco	83 Iraq
2 Mexico	12 Cyprus	75 China	85 Estonia
3 Puerto Rico	12 Denmark	76 Azerbaijan	85 Bulgaria
4 El Salvador	14 Great Britain	77 Russia	85 Lithuania
5 Nigeria	15 Canada	77 Montenegro	88 Belarus
6 Colombia	15 Netherlands	77 Romania	88 Albania
7 Trinidad	15 USA	77 Bangladesh	90 Ukraine
8 Sweden	18 Iceland	81 Moldova	91 Latvia
9 New Zealand	19 Switzerland	82 Burkina Faso	92 Egypt
10 Ghana	19 Malta	83 Hong Kong	93 Pakistan

Critique of Hofstede's theory

Among the various attempts by social scientists to study human values from a cultural perspective, Hofstede's is certainly popular. In fact, it would be a rare culture text that did not pay special attention to Hofstede's theory. The current text is a case in point. However, Hofstede's theory has also been seriously questioned, and we will summarize some of the most common criticisms below.

First, Hofstede's methodology has been criticized. To begin with, the way in which the questionnaire was developed has been described as haphazard (Orr & Hauser, 2008). Indeed, the questionnaire was not even originally developed to explore cultural values but instead to assess job satisfaction within IBM. It is hard to believe that questions framed to explore workplace attitudes are

relevant to broader cultural attitudes outside of the work place.

Critics also point out that Hofstede's conclusions are based on insufficient samples (McSweeney, 2002). Although 117,000 questionnaires were administered, only the results from 40 countries were used. Furthermore, only 6 countries had more than 1000 respondents, and in 15 countries, there were fewer than 200 respondents. Surely it is not appropriate for 200 people to speak on behalf of a country of millions.

Critics have also been skeptical about the assumption that IBM employees are representative of national cultures as a whole. And even within IBM, the surveys were administered only to certain categories of workers, i.e., "marketing-plus-sales," leaving out many other employee categories, including blue-collar workers, full-time students, retired employees, etc. (McSweeney, 2002). Hofstede has suggested that restricting the sample in this way effectively controls for the effects of occupational category and class, insuring that the relevant variable of comparison is nationality. However, it seems hard to escape the conclusion that since the study consisted solely of IBM employees, the results may have more to say about IBM corporate culture than about anything broader. Moreover, we should not forget that when Hofstede's research was first conducted, IBM employed mostly men, so women's perspectives are also largely missing (Orr & Hauser, 2008).

Hofstede's theory has also been faulted for promoting a largely static view of culture (Hamden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1997). As Orr and Hauser (2008) have suggested, the world has changed in dramatic ways since Hofstede's research began. The world map has changed,

cultures themselves may have changed, and the original data is likely to be out of date. In fact, it is somewhat of a puzzle why Hofstede's theory continues to enjoy the popularity that it does. Indeed, over the years, attempts by many researchers to replicate Hofstede's findings have not been very successful (Orr & Hauser, 2008).

Final reflection

In this chapter, we have surveyed two approaches to the study of cultural values: that of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, that of Hofstede. The study of values will no doubt remain a vibrant subject for cross-cultural researchers.

However, implicit in Hofstede's work, in particular, is the idea that there exists such a thing as a national culture. In discussing cultural values, we have temporarily gone along with this suggestion. However, in closing, let us raise the question of whether the idea of national culture actually makes any sense. McSweeney (2002: 110), echoing the sentiments of many other scholars insists that, "the prefixing of the name of a country to something to imply national uniformity is grossly over-used." In his view, Hofstede's dimensions are little more than statistical myths.

In the chapters to come, we will suggest that culture is a term better applied to small collectivities and explain why the idea that there is any such thing as national culture may be a mere illusion.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

1. Choose a community that you know well and decide where you think most members of the community would place themselves within Table 6.1—the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Value Orientations framework. Explain your reasoning. Are your views the same or different from those of your primary community?
2. Is your primary cultural community a “high-indulgence” or a “high-restraint” community? How does this cultural orientation align with your own personal orientation? Are you a “high-indulgence” or a “high-restraint” person?

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7

Group Membership and Identity

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This chapter deals with a complex topic that has generated much scholarly debate. The following questions and tasks will get you started on the road to understanding the issues.

1. Give a one-sentence definition of ethnicity. List some features often associated with ethnicity. Identify some other terms that also might suggest ethnicity?
2. Why do many scholars now think it is incorrect to define ethnicity in terms of shared culture? How do they now prefer to define it?
3. If race is not a biological category, and it is not a cultural category, what is it? How does Appiah prove that racial

identification is not necessarily a cultural affair?

4. In what way do social classes seem to exhibit cultural differences?
5. What is the difference between a country, a nation, and a nation-state? How is a nation like an ethnic group, and how is it different?
6. Identify two forms of nationalism. How are they similar and how are they different? What does the work of Theiss-Morse teach us about American national identity?

Preliminary remarks

In this chapter, we will examine the theme of culture as group membership. One of the most common ways that we use the term culture in everyday English is to refer to people who share the same nationality. We think of people from Korea, for instance, as exemplifying “Korean culture,” or people from Saudi Arabia as exemplifying “Saudi culture.”

However, if we are interested in arriving at a coherent understanding of the concept of culture, I believe this usage leads us astray. The idea that culture is a product of human activity and that it includes everything that people make and everything they think and do (together) ... that idea of culture seems fairly clear and useful. However, to turn around and call a whole nationality a culture, as we are often tempted to do, is an invitation to confusion.

Perhaps it made sense for anthropologists in the 19th and early 20th centuries who focused on traditional societies to think of the small geographically isolated

groups they studied as cultures. Such groups were small enough that for the most part they did share all aspects of culture: language, beliefs, kinship patterns, technologies, etc.

But the large collectives of the modern world that we call nation-states are not culturally homogenous. In other words, we will expect to find different cultures in different places, or even different cultures intermingling with one another in the same places. We say that the society in question is multicultural. What this means for the idea of culture as group membership is that we will need a strategy for identifying the various groups that are presumably the repositories of the many cultures of a multicultural society. One way that sociologists have tried to conceptualize the parts that together make up the whole of a society is by means of the distinction between culture and subculture. On the other hand, historians and political scientists have been more interested in a macroscopic view, inquiring into the origins of nationality and the relationships between such things as nationality and ethnicity.

Cultures and subcultures

According to many sociologists, the dominant culture of a society is the one exemplified by the most powerful group in the society. Taking the United States as an example, Andersen, Taylor and Logio (2015: 36-37) suggest that while it is hard to isolate a dominant culture, there seems to be a “widely acknowledged ‘American’ culture,” epitomized by “middle class values, habits, and economic resources, strongly influenced by . . . television, the fashion industry, and Anglo-European traditions,” and readily thought of as

“including diverse elements such as fast food, Christmas shopping, and professional sports.” Philosopher and cultural theorist Kwame Appiah (1994: 116) is more pointed, emphasizing America’s historically Christian beginnings, its Englishness in terms both of language and traditions, and the mark left on it by the dominant classes, including government, business, and cultural elites.

In contrast to the dominant culture of a society, say sociologists, are the various subcultures, conceived as groups that are part of the dominant culture but that differ from it in important ways. Many sociology textbooks are quick to propose race and ethnicity as important bases for the formation of subcultures. Other commonly mentioned bases include geographic region, occupation, social or economic class, and religion (Dowd & Dowd, 2003: 25). Although this way of thinking about the connections between culture and groups has now fallen somewhat out of favor among cultural theorists, it is still common in basic sociology texts. Therefore, we will outline it here along with the caveat that there is an alternative way of looking at group membership, one grounded in the concept of identity rather than of culture.

Ethnicity

The term ethnicity has to do with the study of ethnic groups and ethnic relations. But what is an ethnic group? Let’s start by making clear what it is not. It is not a biological category. Therefore, it is not possible to establish a person’s ethnicity by genetic testing. Instead, an ethnic group is one whose members share a common ancestry, or at least believe that they do, and that also share one or more other features, possibly including

language, collective memory, culture, ritual, dress, and religion (Meer, 2014; Zenner, 1996). According to Meer (p. 37), the shared features may be real or imagined. Although sociologists once treated ethnic groups as if they were categories that could be objectively established, at least in principle, many scholars today see ethnicity primarily as a form of self-identification (Banton, 2015; Meer, 2014). In other words, an individual's ethnicity is not something that can be tested for by checking off a list of defining features that serve to establish that individual's ethnicity.

If you ask Americans about their ethnic identities, you might get a variety of different answers. Some people will emphasize their American-ness, by which they mean they do not think of themselves as belonging to any particular ethnic group. Others may point to national origins, emphasizing the fact that they are children of immigrants (or even perhaps themselves immigrants). If they identify strongly with their immigrant heritage, they might use a term, such as Italian American, Cuban American, or Mexican American. Americans of African ancestry are likely to identify (or be automatically identified by others) as African American. Americans of various Asian backgrounds, may specify that they are Chinese American, Japanese American, Korean American, etc. (although if they think they are speaking to someone that wouldn't know the difference, they might just say, Asian American.



Many U.S. cities abound in ethnic neighborhoods. (Dragon Gate to Chinatown in San Francisco)

A common phenomenon in the United States is the presence of neighborhoods, popularly characterized as ethnic, especially in large cosmopolitan cities. Such neighborhoods result from the fact that the U.S. has historically been a country

open to immigration, and immigrants are often likely to settle where their fellow countrymen have previously settled. Many American cities, for instance, have their Little Italy(s), China Towns, Korea Towns, and so on. The residents of these ethnic enclaves might be more or less integrated into the larger society depending upon such factors as how long they have lived in the U.S., or how well they speak English.

A Native American (i.e., an American Indian) might interpret an inquiry about ethnicity as a question about tribal identity. He or she might say—Ute, Shoshoni, Navaho, Lakota, etc. On the other hand, since not all of these tribal names are names that the tribes claim as their own, they may refer to themselves in their native language. For instance, the Navajo call themselves Diné. Tribal affiliations would also be salient in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. For instance, two major tribes in Afghanistan are the Tajiks and Pashtuns.

In China, the term *minzu* (民族) is used to refer to what, in English, we would call ethnic groups. Officially, the Chinese government recognizes 56 *minzu*. Just how the government decided on 56 as the definitive number of

minzu in China, however, is an interesting story. More about that at another time though.

It may be tempting to think that people who share an ethnic identity also share a common culture. Indeed, that is what is implied in calling an ethnic group a subculture. Sometimes it is the case that people who share an ethnic identity are also culturally similar.



Hui people, third largest ethnic group in China

But it is shared identity and not shared culture that makes a group ethnic. In fact, scholars specializing in ethnic studies have discovered many examples of different groups claiming a common ethnic identity but not sharing a common language, nor even common beliefs, values, customs or traditions. This shows that the connections between culture, group membership, and identity are loose at best.

It is also important to note that ethnic identification is not an irreversible decision. Sometimes people change ethnicity as easily as they might change clothes by simply deciding to no longer identify as, for example, Han 汉族 (the largest *minzu* in China) but to identify instead as Hui 回族 (one of the largest “national minorities” in China).

Racial identity

Since the demise of the idea that race is grounded in biology—race, like ethnicity, has come to be regarded primarily as a matter of social identity. Also like ethnicity,

it is often presumed, incorrectly, that individuals who share a racial identity must share a common culture. As Appiah (1994: 117) has noted, “it is perfectly possible for a black and a white American to grow up together in a shared adoptive family—with the same knowledge and values—and still grow into separate racial identities, in part because their experience outside the family, in public space, is bound to be racially differentiated.” In other words, it is a mistake, not only to assume that race and ethnicity represent biological categories; it is also a mistake to assume them to be cultural categories.

As we mentioned in the previous section, ethnic identification is typically (although not always) self-determined. On the other hand, racial identities are more likely to be imposed on an individual by others. For example, “white” Americans are likely to presume certain individuals to be “black” or African American based on perceived physical characteristics, including skin color, hair texture and various facial features alleged to be characteristically African. Long before “African American” children have ever had time to reflect on matters of identity, that identity has been decided for them. As with any identity, individuals have it within their power to resist ethnic or racial identification. Ironically, the best, and perhaps only way to effectively resist an ascribed identity is to proudly embrace it.



Barack Obama and family in the Whitehouse Green Room

No doubt, one the most well-known Americans to reflect publicly on the perplexities of racial identification in America is Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States and the first black president. In his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*,

Obama (1995), writes eloquently of the confusion he experienced growing up the son of a white woman born in Kansas and a black man from Kenya. How did Barack Obama come to embrace a black, or African-American identity?

Born in Hawaii, a cauldron of ethnic diversity, peopled by groups from all across Asia and the Pacific Islands, Obama tells a story of race and identity that is nuanced and reflective. Barack's father was somewhat of a mystery to him since his mother and father divorced and his father returned to Kenya shortly before Barack turned 3 years old. Throughout his childhood, Obama recounts, his white family nurtured in him a sense of respect and pride in his African heritage, anticipating that his appearance would eventually require him to face questions of racial identity. These questions surfaced gradually during adolescence, when he began to experience a tug of war between his white and his black identities.

Inspired by a nationally ranked University of Hawaii basketball team with an all-black starting lineup, Barack joined his high school basketball team. There, he says, he made his closest white friends, and he met Ray (not his real name), a biracial young man who introduced Barack

to a number of African Americans from the Mainland. Barack's experiences in multiracial Hawaii caused him to reflect deeply on the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, indignities frequently faced by blacks. Increasingly confronted by the perspectives of his black friends and his own experiences with discrimination, Obama writes:

I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a little translation on my part the two worlds would cohere. Still, the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with me (p. 82).

Amid growing confusion, Obama writes that he turned for counsel to black writers: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, and Malcolm X. After high school, Barack's quest continued throughout two years of study at Occidental University in LA before he transferred to Columbia University in New York. Gradually, he constructed a provisional black identity, while never really disavowing his white one.

But it seems to have been in Chicago that Barack Obama finally put the finishing touches on the African American identity that he would eventually embrace when he ran for president in 2008. After years of working as a community organizer in the black neighborhoods of Chicago, he had become well known in the black community. He joined an African American church. And he married Michelle Robinson, herself African American and a lifelong Chicagoan.

President Obama's story illustrates some of the

dynamics involved in racial identification. Obama faced questions of racial identity initially because his appearance prompted people to label him as black. In the end, after years of reflection and self-exploration, including a pilgrimage to Kenya after the death of his father to acquaint himself with his Kenyan heritage, Obama eventually publicly embraced an African American identity.

Social class and culture

Social class refers to the hierarchical ranking of people in society based on presumably identifiable factors. American sociologists, in trying to define these relevant factors more precisely have tended to use the term socioeconomic status (SES) which is measured by combining indices of family wealth and/or income, educational attainment, and occupational prestige (Oakes and Rossi, 2003). While Americans are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge the existence of social class as a determinant of social life in the U.S., scholars have long argued that social class is a culturally marked category. Clearly social class is reflected in the material lives of people. For instance, lower class and upper class people typically live in different neighborhoods, belong to different social clubs, and attend different educational institutions (Domhoff, 1998).

Sociologists argue that different social classes seem to embrace different systems of values and that this is reflected in childrearing. For instance, Kohn (1977) showed that middle-class parents tended to value self-direction while working class parents valued conformity to external authority. Middle class parents aimed to instill in children

qualities of intellectual curiosity, dependability, consideration for others, and self-control, whereas working class parents tended to emphasize obedience, neatness, and good manners.

More recent research (e.g., Lareau, 2011) has confirmed Kohn's findings, further emphasizing the advantages that middle-class parenting tends to confer on middle-class children. For example, in observational studies of families, Lareau found "more talking in middle-class homes than in working class and poor homes, leading to the development," among middle class children, of "greater verbal agility, larger vocabularies, more comfort with authority figures, and more familiarity with abstract concepts" (p. 5).

According to Kraus, Piff and Keltner (2011), social class is also signaled behaviorally. For instance, in videotaped interactions between people (in the U.S.) from different social classes, lower-class individuals tended to show greater social engagement as evidenced by non-verbal signs such as eye contact, head nods, and laughs compared to higher-class individuals who were less engaged (as evidenced by less responsive head nodding and less eye contact) and who were more likely to disengage by means of actions such as checking their cell phones or doodling (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

Lower-class and upper class individuals may also embrace different belief systems. For instance, lower-class people are more likely to attribute social circumstances, such as income inequality, to contextual forces (e.g., educational opportunity). On the other hand, upper-class people are more likely to explain inequality in dispositional terms—as a result of differences in talent, for instance (Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

In short, different social classes seem to be distinguished from one another by many of the characteristics that we have previously identified as elements of culture, e.g., patterns of beliefs, values, collective habits, social behavior, material possessions, etc.

Nationality

In this section, we will discuss group membership and identity as historians and political scientists are more likely to view them. Although their interests overlap somewhat with those of sociologists, the main focus of historians and political scientists is somewhat different. Rather than taking the “microscopic” view that seeks to divide a larger culture into constituent subcultures, political scientists tend to take a more “macroscopic” view. Political scientists, in other words, are more interested in exploring how the various subgroups of society relate to the larger political units of the world. Rather than dwelling on subcultural identities, they are more likely to inquire into national identities and the implications this may have for international relations. Let’s shift our focus then from ethnicity to nationality.

Our everyday understanding of nationality is that it refers to the particular country whose passport we carry. But this is a loose way of speaking. According to International Law, nationality refers to membership in a nation or sovereign state (“Nationality,” 2013). Before elaborating further, it will be useful to clarify some terms that are often wrongly taken to be synonymous: *country*, *nation*, and *state*. These are terms that have more precise meanings in the disciplines of history, political science, and international relations than they do in everyday

discourse. The non-expert uses terms like *country* and *nation* with little reflection, but feels perhaps a bit uncertain about the term *state*. Let's define these terms as the political scientist uses them.

First, what is a country? A *country* is simply a geographic area with relatively well-defined borders. Sometimes these borders are natural, e.g., a river or mountain range. But often they are best thought of more abstractly as lines on a map.

A *nation* is something entirely different. A nation is not a geographical entity. Instead, it is a group of people with a shared identity. Drawing on the opinions of various scholars, Barrington (1997: 713) has suggested that many definitions seem to converge on the idea that nations are united by shared cultural features, which often include myths, religious beliefs, language, political ideologies, etc.). Unfortunately, this definition of *nation* has much in common with the definition of an ethnic group. What is the difference? Some scholars believe the difference is only a matter of scale, e.g., that an ethnic group is simply a smaller unit than a nation but not otherwise different in kind. Others insist that because nations imply a relationship to a state, in a way that that of an ethnic group usually does not, it is important to make a clear distinction between ethnic groups and nations (Eriksen, 2002: 97). In other words, as Barrington further emphasizes, in addition to shared cultural features, nations are united in a belief in the right to territorial control over a national homeland.

What then is a state?

First, let's note that by the term *state*, as we are using it here, we do not mean the subdivisions of a country, as in "Utah is one of the 50 states of the United States." Instead, we mean the main political unit that provides the means by which authority is exercised over a territory and its people. In other words, the state, as we are defining it here, refers to the instruments of government, including things like a military to counter external threats, a police force to maintain internal order, and various administrative and legal institutions.



The stateless Kurds occupy the border regions of five countries

Finally, one sometimes encounters the term *nation-state*. This refers to an ideal wherein a country, nation, and state align perfectly. However, as Walby (2003: 531) has pointed out, perfect examples of the nation-state are rarely found in the real world where "there are far more nations than states." In fact, nations sometimes spill over the territorial boundaries of multiple states. For example, the Kurds, who can be found in parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Armenia, can be seen as a nation without a state. Because they involve territorial claims, efforts on the part of some Kurds to establish an autonomous state are resisted by the governments of Turkey and others, sometimes leading to violent conflict.



Also stateless are the Palestinians in Israel

Another example of a stateless nation involves the case of the Palestinian people currently living in the state of Israel. Prior to 1948, the land in question had been occupied by Palestinian Arabs. But in 1948, the state of Israel was established, the result of a complicated set of post-World War II arrangements negotiated principally by old European colonial administrators; in the case of Palestine, Great Britain was such an administrator.

These arrangements made it possible for many Jews returning from war torn Europe to have a Jewish homeland for the first time in 2000 years. At the same time, many Palestinian people found themselves pushed by the newcomers from homes where their families had lived for generations.

Indeed, the conditions under which Israel was established in 1948 sowed the seeds of perpetual conflict, the details of which are too complicated to summarize here. However, the result has been that Israel has become an economically prosperous modern nation-state, and Israelis on the average have thrived. Palestinians, on the other hand, have found themselves dispossessed, oppressed, and robbed of the possibility of national self-determination. For decades, many Palestinians, and

indeed most international observers have called for an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, a “two state solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Such a solution, however, would require anti-Israel partisans to acknowledge Israel’s right to exist and guarantee her security, and it would require Israel to hand over coveted territories, acknowledge Palestinian grievances, and treat the Palestinian people’s demands for self-determination with respect.

As the above discussion suggests, one reason that issues of national identity are complicated is because the relationships between nationhood, ethnicity, country, territory and state are extraordinarily complex.

The origin of nations

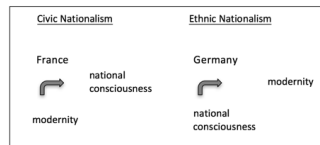
Recall that a nation is a group of people who see themselves as united by various shared cultural features, including myths, religious beliefs, language, political ideologies, etc. Some scholars see nations as having deep roots extending back to ancient times. Smith (1986), for instance, claims that most nations are rooted in ethnic communities and that there is a sense in which nations have existed in various forms throughout recorded history.

On the other hand, Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1991) argue that nations merely imagine themselves as old, when in fact they are really recent historical developments, having only emerged in 19th century Europe with the rise of sophisticated high cultures and literate populations. Gellner and Anderson are counted among a group of scholars often referred to as modernists who argue that while there may have been elites in pre-modern societies with visions of nationhood, national consciousness is a

mass phenomenon. According to this view, nations, as we understand them today, only came into being when elites acquired tools for conveying a feeling of national unity to the masses. At first this occurred by means such as print and the spread of universal schooling and later by means of radio, film and television. What Gellner suggests, in fact, is that nations are a product of *nationalism*, which is not merely “the awakening of nations to self-consciousness,” as nationalists often proclaim, but instead “invents nations where they do not exist” (cited in Erikson, 2002: 96).

It is perhaps also useful to point out that not all nations came to be nations in the same way, nor are all nations constituted in exactly the same way.

Looking at nations in historical perspective, for instance, a distinction is often made between *ethnic nations* and *civic nations*. The difference turns on the question of whether the members of a population developed a *feeling* of national identity before or after the emergence of a modern state. As an illustration, historians often point to Britain and France as the first European nation-states to emerge through a process often described as *civic nationalism*. In other words, in Britain and France, the rational, civic, and political units of modernity came first, and the development of a national consciousness came later. On the other hand, Germany and Russia followed a path of *ethnic nationalism* in which the emergence of a national consciousness came first, followed by the development of a fully modern state (Nikolas, 1999).



Two different historical processes of nationalism

Where does the United States fit into this scheme? Opinions vary. As Erikson (2002: 138) has pointed out, the U.S. differs in important ways from Europe. For one thing, it has no myths pointing to some supposed ancient origins. In fact, it was founded barely before the beginning of the modern era. This is not to say, however, that the U.S. lacks a national myth; only that it is not a myth lost in the mists of memory.

The American myth is instead a historical narrative stretching back only about 400 years when English settlers began arriving on the continent. The most important chapter perhaps (from the perspective of American national identity) revolves around the difficult and contentious negotiation of a set of founding ideals and principles, articulated in two rather brief documents: *The Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*. Thereafter, the myth continues with an account of the rapid population of the continent by successive waves of immigration from four other continents, Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. However, in our telling of the national myth, we often omit the shameful history of injustice dealt to the indigenous First Nations (as they are called in Canada), or we treat these details as mere footnotes in a largely Eurocentric, white-supremacist narrative. On the other hand, we usually do confront the history of slavery that nearly tore the nation apart in a civil war. We usually also recount the story of the more than 100-year struggle of African Americans to secure the full rights of citizenship, with its major 20th century victories, as these reinforce a narrative of America striving to live up to its ideals.

Today the United States is often described as multiethnic in the sense that many of its people can trace

their ancestry to one or more geographic regions around the world. Indeed, while most Americans speak English, at least 350 different languages are spoken in U.S. homes, including languages from every (inhabited) continent, as well as 150 Native American languages (U. S. Census Bureau, 2015).

But is the U.S. an ethnic nation or a civic nation? Or to put it in historical terms, is the U.S. a product of ethnic nationalism or civic nationalism? Social scientists have often regarded the U.S. as a civic nation but not in the same way as Britain or France. American national identity is presumably based on shared cultural features rather than on shared ethnic heritage. However, American identity is complicated, and current public discourse suggests a sharp divide among American people.

One sees among many American conservatives on the far-right, for instance, a tendency to stress the nation's Colonial Era origins (1629-1763) with its Protestant (Christian) roots and its Revolutionary Era (1764-1800), featuring the Founding Fathers—who were mostly, white, (male) and English. Theiss-Morse (2009: 15-16) sees this as at the root of an ethnocultural view of American identity. While many Americans may see this as only part of the story, there are some who see it as the most important part. This particular narrative has been the dominant one at various points throughout American history, during which nativist political agendas and restrictive immigration policies held sway. White supremacists often seize upon it in their efforts to marginalize, not only immigrants, but anyone not perceived to be ethnically “white,” Christian, and of European ancestry.

American liberals, on the other hand, are more inclined to emphasize a view, which Theiss-Morse has called

“American identity as a set of principles” (p. 18-20). Liberals tend to acknowledge the revolutionary achievements of the Founding Fathers in establishing the noble ideals and liberal political principles of liberty, equality, democracy, and constitutionalism. However, they do not hesitate to recognize that the Founding Fathers were flawed men, some of whom even defended the institution of slavery, while others continued to own slaves even after they saw that it contradicted the founding ideals. Moreover, liberals are more inclined to give equal weight to the story of American immigration, recognizing that the nation’s founding principles made room for newcomers who could come from anywhere and become American simply by embracing those principles. Identity as a set of principles seems more closely aligned to a multicultural, rather than an ethnocultural view of the nation.

While the above contrast somewhat over simplifies American political opinion, it does illustrate the fact that the question of American identity is a highly contested one. Kaufmann (2000) has claimed that the view of the U.S. as a civic nation is supported only if we restrict our attention to developments that have occurred since the 1960’s. According to Kaufmann, for almost its entire history, the political and cultural elite defined the U.S. in ethnic terms as white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. During periods of high immigration, this elite expended great effort to assimilate immigrants to their own ethnic ideal, and when the growth of immigrant populations posed a challenge, defensive responses arose, including restrictions to immigration. In fact, from 1920-1960, this defensive response was institutionalized. After this long period in which national quotas kept a tight lid on

immigration, the U.S. only became more open to immigration again in 1965 with the passage of the *Immigration and Nationality Act*.

The tendency, then, to see the U.S. as a civic nation of immigrants is a recent historical development. Nor is the U.S. exceptional in this respect. Rather, the U.S. is merely part of a broader trend among “Western” nations to redefine themselves in civic terms. In fact, Kaufmann (2000: 31) cites research showing that contrary to popular perceptions of the U.S. as a land of immigration, “Western Europe ... has had a higher immigrant population than the United States since the 1970’s and by 1990 had proportionately two to three times the number of foreign-born” as the United States.

Whether the post-1960’s immigration trends across much of Western Europe and the United States will continue is currently an open question. A number of events that took place in the second decade of the 21st century seem clearly regressive, including Great Britain’s decision in 2016 to withdraw from the European Union, the rise of far-right challenges to liberal European democracies, not to mention the 2016 U.S. election, which turned the presidency over to an administration apparently committed to recreating immigration policies reminiscent of the exclusionary pre-1965 era.

National identity

Earlier we suggested that anthropologists and sociologists have moved from trying to establish the cultural features that define groups to studying how the members of groups self-identify. Political scientists have made similar moves in their studies of nationalism. Rather than focusing

wholly on ethnocultural roots or civic transformations, the recent trend among many scholars is to focus on the social and psychological dynamics of national identity.

Let's consider the issue of national identity in the United States. Now the criteria of American citizenship are quite clear. Anyone born in the United States or a U.S. territory (e.g., Puerto Rico) is a citizen, regardless of whether one's parents are citizens or not. Anyone born outside of the United States is a citizen as long as at least one parent is a citizen. And anyone who goes through the naturalization process becomes a U.S. citizen by virtue of established law. Nevertheless, many Americans, despite clearly being citizens (by either birth or naturalization) are sometimes regarded by other Americans as somehow less American. Some Americans, for instance, view themselves as more American if they are white and of English descent, or at least if their non-English ancestors immigrated many generations ago instead of more recently. We refer to this phenomenon as nativism, which is the tendency to believe that the longer one's ancestors have been here, the greater one's claim on American identity. And we can call a person who espouses such a belief, a nativist.

To what extent then do individual Americans differ in the degree to which they embrace an American national identity? Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2009) has studied this question and suggests that Americans can be distinguished from one another according to whether they are strong, medium, or weak identifiers. Furthermore, the strength of national identity appears to be tied to other social characteristics. For example, compared with weak identifiers, strong identifiers are more likely to be: older, Christian, less educated, more trusting of others, and more likely to identify with other social groups in general.

On the other hand, black Americans and Americans with extremely liberal political views are less likely to claim a strong American identity.

Strong identifiers are also more likely to describe themselves as “typical Americans” and to set exclusionary group boundaries on the national group—to claim, for instance, that a “true American” is white, or Christian, or native-born. In contrast, weak identifiers are less likely to believe that their fellow Americans must possess any particular qualities to be counted as American.

Final reflection

The relationship between culture and group membership is complicated. Whereas scholars once defined certain types of groups, e.g. ethnic and racial groups, or national groups, on the basis of shared culture, group membership is now more likely to be seen as a matter of social identification. Moreover, social identities are fluid rather than fixed and are established by means of processes whereby group members negotiate the boundaries of the group as well as the degree to which they identify with valued groups.

Application

For Further Thought and Discussion

1. Do you belong to a dominant culture in your country, or are you a member of a minority community?
2. Do you identify with any particular ethnic group or

groups? For each group with which you identify, explain how members of the group define themselves.

3. Do you think of yourself in terms of any racial identity? Explain.
4. To what extent do you think you exhibit any signs of social class affiliation?
5. How would you describe your national identity? How typical are you of other people from your country? ... a) very typical, b) somewhat typical, or c) not very typical. ... What makes you typical or atypical?
6. Some people have more than one identity, or feel they have different identities in different social contexts. We refer to this as hybridity. Do you have a hybrid identity? If so, what is that like?

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8

Religion and Culture

ELIZA ROSENBERG

BY SPECIAL GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

ELIZA ROSENBERG

Lecturer in Religious Studies at USU

Suggested Focus

Keep the following questions in mind as you read the chapter.

1. What is the origin of the word religion? How do the words “religion” and “culture” seem to overlap in meaning?
2. What are some words in other languages that seem to correspond to the word religion?
3. What is religion NOT?
4. What are some important questions that religions

often seek to answer?

5. What are some different aspects of daily living that are often regulated by religious rules?

What is religion?

What do we mean when we say “religion”? In some ways, the answer seems obvious. Most people can tell you that they are atheist, Buddhist, Christian, Daoist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, etc. In other ways, the answer is more complicated. The



Boys praying at the Western Wall, a holy site in Judaism

English word “religion” comes from the Latin word *religio*. Ancient Roman philosophers actually disagreed about where the word came from, and modern scholars are not sure either. Still, most ancient Romans knew what *religio* meant. They used the word for their rituals, holidays, beliefs, myths, and rules. They also applied it to those of non-Romans around them, such as Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians. But for hundreds of years, Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians did not adopt the Latin word *religio* or come up with their own words to express the concept. To everyone except the Romans, the things that made up *religio*—rituals, myths, holidays, rules, etc.—were just part of “the way things were.” They did not need a separate category or term.

Eventually, Christianity became widespread in Rome's empire, which included Greece, Egypt, and many other places. When the Roman emperor became Christian, Christians – including non-Roman Christians – started to think of Christianity as their *religio*. The idea of “religion” remained important even after the Roman empire fell. It influenced Judaism and Islam, as well as other religions. Today, many languages have words that were invented or re-interpreted to translate *religio*. In western Europe, many languages borrowed the Latin *religio*. In southern Asia today, the ancient Sanskrit word *dharma* can be used to mean about the same thing as “religion.” (It also has many other meanings.) In Eastern Asia, the Chinese word *dao* and loan words in neighboring languages works in a similar way.

The term “religion” is useful, but like many words, it is complicated. The concept of “religion” makes sense because there are many elements that you can find in many different religions. But no religion has every single one of these elements, and there is probably no one element that every religion has. In addition, the same element may “mean” different things or “work” in different ways in different religions. For example, Buddhism and Islam both have beliefs about what happens to us when we die. But they have very different ideas about what that is, about what *should* happen, and even about who “we” are.

For at least the last hundred years, scholars have tried to find a definition of religion that would always be useful and accurate. Although their hard work did not succeed, it has taught scholars today a valuable lesson: There is no perfect definition of religion. Most people more or less understand what they mean when they use the term “religion,” even if they cannot define it perfectly. In this

chapter, we will not try to explain what religion “really is.” Instead, we will explore some of the things that different religions are. By doing so, we will understand all of them better. There are many shared features and many differences – not only between different religions, but within the same religion.

Religion and culture are parts of each other. Culture affects religion, and religion affects culture. The same religion can have different forms in different cultures. Within one culture, different religions can take similar forms. And, of course, religion is practiced by people, who are all different.

What religion is not

While religion is many different things, it is also important to know what it (usually) is not. First, religion is *not* (usually) a way to explain things that people did not understand before modern science. In ancient China, most people did not think that the flesh of the giant Pangu had literally turned into the earth at some exact time. In ancient Israel, most people knew perfectly well that the whole universe was not formed in six days. How could it have been, when there was no sun or moon until the fourth “day”? Every religion has at least one example of this. In ancient times, people did not know the scientific history of the world, *and they did not think their religions told them*. Stories of the cosmic tortoise, the first human, etc. were (and are) important because people connected with them emotionally and poetically. They allow people to connect personally to the scope of the universe. But they have rarely been pre-scientific answers to complicated questions. In fact, religion has often been the cause of

science. We owe modern mathematics to Jain contemplation of the nature of existence; modern chemistry to Muslim ideas about the spiritual virtue of observing nature; some branches of physics to the Christian scholastic movement of the middle ages; and many scientific ideas to various Daoist practices.

Second, religion is not “really about” any one simple aspect of life. People who like religion sometimes say that it expresses the highest human ideals; that it makes communities strong; that it inspires goodness; that it inspires people; and so on. People who dislike religion sometimes say that it is used to control people; that it is connected with ignorance; that it supports corrupt power; that it provides false reassurances; etc. All of these things can be true. Religion can and does promote good order *and* oppress people; promote knowledge *and* ignorance; inspire peace *and* violence; etc. It is not possible to reduce religion to a single, simple factor. Religion is dynamic and complex, just like the cultures that influence it (and that it influences) – and just like the people who practice it (or *don't* practice it).

The world's religions

There are probably more religious identities in the world than there are religions!

That is because it can be possible to be part of more than one religion at a time. For example, many European Christians feel that you cannot be a Christian and any other religion, but many Native American Christians feel that it is possible to practice Christianity without abandoning their ancestral religions. In



Yin and Yang, a Daoist symbol for the harmonious flow of the universe

Japan, most people practice both Buddhism and Shinto and identify themselves accordingly. In traditional China, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism were known as the “three great teachings,” and it was assumed that people should learn from all of them. To be a Christian is to commit to a religion that relies on Judaism for its very existence. To be a Buddhist is to be an heir to the defining concepts of Hinduism. To be an atheist is sometimes to choose a specific system of thought as a reaction to a particular religion. And so on.

Some common religious questions

Where do human beings fit into the universe?

Religion, like culture, is something that humans do. This may seem obvious, but it is not a statement that all religions would find meaningful. In traditional Native American religions, for example, there is no part of

existence that is separated from the sacred. Of course, humans play a unique, human role in this – just as bears play a unique, ursine role in it; rivers a unique river role; etc. And Daoism teaches that “alone among the ten thousand things, humans must be taught to follow the *dao*.” That is, everything else that exists is naturally part of the harmonious flow of the *dao*. The fact that human beings need philosophy, religion, etc., shows that there is something wrong with us!



An ancient painting of the “medicine wheel,” a Native American symbol of unity and holiness

Most Native American religions see human beings as one kind of being among many. Just as human beings have their own communities, social rules, life histories, and individual personalities, so do all other animals. If human beings are different from all other animals, according to these religions, it is usually because we are worse! Until recently, most Native Americans were hunter-gathers, and many today hunt and gather as well as buying farmed food at grocery stores. In Native American thought, hunted

animals voluntarily give up their lives to let humans eat. But human beings are not as generous, – no animal native to North or South America normally preys on human beings. (Only a handful – polar bears; grizzly bears; mountain lions; and alligators – prey on humans at all, and even then, it is rare.) Human beings are seen as more selfish than animals, whereas animals are altruistic.

Judaism and Christianity both teach that God allows human beings to rule over the rest of nature. Today, many Jews and Christians interpret this as meaning that human beings have a responsibility to care for nature. But some today, like many in earlier times, interpret this as permission to use nature however they want. Islam's concept has a subtle but critical difference. Muslims believe that God entrusted human beings with the responsibility to administer the natural world, but that, rather than being worthy of God's trust, humanity all too often "has proved [to be] a sinner and a fool."



A painting of the Buddhist realms of rebirth. Buddhists hope to escape the endless cycle of death.

Many religions that believe in reincarnation also place human beings in a special category. In Buddhism, the human realm is one of six realms in which it is possible to be born (the other five are divine; heavenly; animal; hungry-ghost; and hell). In Jainism, it is one of four (the other three are heavenly; animal; and hell). Both Jainism and Buddhism teach that you

can only gain enlightenment during a human birth. If you are born into another realm, you can proceed toward enlightenment, but you can only actually reach it as a human. Hinduism tends to think that being human is helpful for reaching spiritual liberation, but not actually necessary. Although it is less likely, a soul certainly *can* attain liberation while existing as a flower, a butterfly, or whatever else. In addition, all these religions teach that the human realm is a high-risk birth. Human beings can think abstractly and make moral choices, which is beneficial for true understanding. But by the same token, we can choose ignorance, embrace delusion, and practice cruelty in a way that no other creature can, and all too often, we in fact do these things. This earns us (bad) karma and moves us away from liberation instead of toward it.

What happens when we die?

It is easy to become curious about death. When someone we love dies, are they gone forever? Will we ever see them again? Different religions have different ideas answers to these questions, and different members of the same religion may also give different answers. In general, though, most Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that each human being comes into existence either when they are born or in the mother's uterus, lives out one lifetime, and then dies. They did not live before this and they will



The Christian Eucharist (the body and blood of Christ)

not be born again after this. Instead, these religions teach, God will judge them for how they lived. They believe that God is kind and forgives people for making mistakes, and that because of God's kindness, "good enough" people exist at peace with God after they die. This existence may be called Heaven or Paradise. Most Jews, Christians, and Muslims say that it is impossible to understand it fully in this life. Instead, they use metaphors and comparisons. For example, Muslims may say that Paradise is like a beautiful garden of fruit trees, or Christians that Heaven is like a beautiful city filled with fruit trees. In Judaism, it is more common to say that we will know "in God's own time" but not before. As long as we live in this world, we should focus on doing what it is right. All of these religions teach that people who insist on choosing evil will be punished. For example, a murderer who refuses even to admit their actions were wrong might be punished in Hell, kept out of Paradise, or just be completely "gone" when they die.

In contrast, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs believe in reincarnation (literally, "being put back in flesh"). This is the idea that after death, the soul – the essence of the person – is born again in another form. How you are born depends on how well you lived in your previous life. If you live wrongly, your soul earns karma (or bad karma, according to Buddhists) that you must burn away through suffering (punishment) and then living rightly. Right now, you are a human being, but you might previously have been a tree or a deer, and that you could be a tree or a deer or a different human in a future life. The goal is to stop being reincarnated, which is possible when you no longer have any karma (or only have good karma, according to Buddhism) and have reached spiritual enlightenment. Hindus call this *moksha* and believe that it means being

fully aware that the individual soul is not truly separate from the universal soul. After that, it is no longer necessary to exist any one individual (who, after all, exists only by being separate from every other individual). Buddhists call it *nirvana* and believe that it means understanding that the soul is only an illusion. Jains believe that the enlightened individual remains an individual but no longer needs a body, instead existing forever as a being of pure light. Sikhism envisions something more similar to the Muslim idea of *jinnah*, Paradise.

Other religions do not have single, obvious ideas about what happens after we die. Traditional Native American religions, for example, did not see the soul or personality as being completely different from the body, and they did not believe that humans were somehow apart from the rest of the world. Human beings were part of the world before they lived, a part of the world while they lived, and a part of the world after they died – just not the same part at each time. Similarly, Daoism has never had a specific teaching about death that all members of the religion would agree on. Instead, it has ideas about timeless flow of the *dao* and the harmonious cycle of *yin* and *yang*. This allows Daoists to have different ideas about reincarnation, heavenly existence, long life on earth, etc. And Confucius taught that we should worry about the afterlife when we get to it! If we spend too much time thinking about what happens after death, it will distract us from how we should behave during life. Many Jews would agree with Confucius.

Where do we look for answers?

Many religions in the world today have a holy book. For most of human history, though, most people learned sacred teachings, stories, and songs by hearing them and repeating them. This is an example of *oral*



The Qur'ān is the holy book of Islam.

tradition, and people could remember many stories, rules, etc., very accurately. (Many societies had a few professional singers and story-tellers, which helped.) Actually, this is a “cost” of universal literacy – when everyone in a society reads regularly from childhood, people’s memories are not as good! In some religions today, such as Native American religions, it is important to many people to keep this oral tradition alive in the religion. Hymns, rituals, and prayers are often the only things that are *not* written down by people who practice these religions. (All other kinds of literature are very important.) And today, even in religions that have ancient books and members who can all read them, non-written aspects are very important! Here is one example: If you have ever seen a painting or a display showing the birth of Jesus, you will have seen an ox and a donkey with the baby Jesus. *The ox and the donkey are nowhere in the Bible!* But Christians, even those who read the Bible often, cannot imagine the scene without the animals there. For highly educated Buddhists and Muslims, it is still important to learn mantras and parts of the Qur'ān by heart, and to recite them from memory.

But books are very important in many religions. Most religions with written books have more than one! All schools of Buddhism share the Pālī canon, but different Mahayana traditions also have different texts in addition. Hinduism has a vast number of texts in many languages, including ancient hymns and rituals like the *Vedas*; philosophical texts like the *Upanishads*; mythological texts called the *Puranas*; heroic epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*; devotional hymns; etc. No one Hindu community uses all or even most of these texts. Instead, most Hindus see this variety of texts as offering limitless avenues to truth and goodness. Daoism's central text is the *Daodejing*, but the *Zhuangzi* is also extremely important, and so are many of the more than 1,500 books that are included in the *Daozhong* ("Daoist canon" or "Daoist list"). Today, many Christians and Jews think of the Bible as a book, but this is a mistake. The word "Bible" comes from the Greek *biblia*, "books" – plural! The Bible is actually a collection of different books, all of which can be printed in a single volume. But until 1500 or so, it was not possible to print all the books in one volume. Earlier Jews and Christians understood that they had "scriptures" (writings) rather than one single book. The Qur'ān in Islam may be an exception to this rule. It is a single book (a book with "chapters"). The *Daodejing* is also a single book, but the Qur'ān has a unique status in Islam. While Islam has other important religious writings, there is nothing comparable to the *Zhuangzi*, for example.

There are subtle but important differences in how religions view their books. Many Hindus view the *Vedas* as divinely revealed in a specific way, but believe that humans have been divinely guided to produce many other texts in different ways. Speaking very generally, Daoists and

Buddhists usually emphasize that their texts contain the wisdom of enlightened teachers but consider the “how” of these texts much less important than the “what.” Jews and Christians generally believe that God inspired various human authors to write the books of the Bible. Muslims believe that the Qur’ān always existed and was simply revealed to Muhammad (pbuh). The physical text obviously had scribes (the prophet’s (pbuh) companions, may God be well pleased with them), but they do not believe that the contents have an author.

Religion and right behavior

Religions often have rules that their members are supposed to follow. Within most religions, members may disagree about some of what the rules are and about which rules are most important. In addition, few people (if any!) follow all the rules of their religion perfectly all the time. Nevertheless, rules can be an important part of many people’s religious experience.

There are some basic rules that most religions share. Most of these are very basic rules that non-religious systems also have. For example, no religion allows its members to murder or steal, just as no government allows its citizens to murder or steal. (Of course, murder and stealing unfortunately still occur.) Many religions also have some version of the “Golden Rule”: Treat others the way you want others to treat you; do not do to others what you would not want done to you. This, too, is a rule that every child must be told at some point!

Religious rules apply to many kinds of behavior: Worship; occupation; finance; social structure; marriage; clothing; and countless others. Instead of including all of

these, let's discuss one type of rule – rules about food – as an example.

Example: Rules about food

Native American religions rarely forbid any specific kind of food. However, they usually limit how much people are allowed to hunt and gather. Hunting too much is disrespectful to animals that give up their lives to feed humans. If animal communities feel disrespected, they will go away and not allow hunters to get them. Wasting any part of the animal's body is also unacceptable, and there are often strict rules about using every part respectfully. For example, among some of the Cree nations (formerly called “tribes”), it is forbidden to speak while eating fresh hunted meat.

One of the most famous religious rules about food is that Jews and Muslims do not eat pork. The Bible states that pigs are unclean and that Jews may not eat them. Most Christians (although not all!) interpret the New Testament to mean that Christians do not need to obey Jewish laws about food. But the Qur'ān also states that pigs are unclean, so Muslims do not eat pork either. The Qur'ān lists several other animals whose meat is forbidden to Muslims, and the Bible has entire categories of land animals, birds, and sea animals whose meat is forbidden to Jews. The reason is always stated to be that these animals are unclean – but in scientific terms, most of them are no dirtier than the animals whose meat is permitted. Judaism also has other food rules – for example, meat products and dairy products must be eaten separately – that are unrelated to cleanliness or health. Jews and Muslims often say that these rules are really about obeying

God. Having to think about whether a given food is okay is a reminder to pay attention to God's will at all times. (It is easy to say that people should not need this reminder, but much harder to apply the principle!) In a similar way, the rule is a daily reminder to Jews and Muslims that they cannot just do whatever they want. There is no obvious practical reason not to eat pork if you want to – but sometimes there *seems* to be no obvious practical reason to fulfill other desires that, if you think more carefully, might be harmful to others or to you. Obeying food laws (called *kosher* for Judaism and *halal* for Islam) is good practice. (*Kosher* and *halal* also regulate slaughter to try to limit the suffering of animals as much as possible, but the reason for this is obvious.)



A vegetarian thali, sampler plate. Vegetarianism is important for many Hindus.

Another widely known religious food rule is that Hindus are strongly encouraged to be vegetarian and strictly forbidden to eat the meat of cows. The reason for encouraging vegetarianism is straightforward: the duty of

ahimsa, “not harming.” Eating meat obviously harms animals, so people should not do it. Some schools of Mahayana Buddhism have similar teaching. Of course it is natural for tigers to eat deer and for hawks to eat mice, but for most Hindus (like all Jains and some Mahayana Buddhists), this is not important. Tigers and hawks do not have a choice, but humans do. Or – perhaps it is “natural” for humans to eat meat. But, many Hindus (and others) might counter, it is also “natural” for the human life expectancy to be thirty-five years and for the child mortality rate to be 50% or even higher. We do not accept these things because they are “natural.”

The special prohibition of cows’ meat can seem more complicated to non-Hindus. After all, dairy products (such as milk, yogurt, *ghee* butter, *paneer* cheese) are an important part of the diet in many regions of southern Asia, the homeland of Hinduism. If Hindus are willing to drink cows’ milk, why not eat their meat too?

Actually, Hindus do not eat cows’ meat *because* they drink their milk. Humans take milk as sustenance from dairy cows just as they take milk as sustenance from their mothers. Therefore, a cow is a mother to people as well as calves, and people have a duty to take care of cows just as grown-up children have a duty to take care of their parents. One of the duties of a Hindu son is to provide an appropriate funeral for his parents when they die. For Hindus, eating beef is equivalent to cutting up and eating the dead body of your own mother. As such, it is one of the most serious sins a Hindu could commit, far worse than eating pork would be for a Jew or a Muslim. In fact, Muslims are permitted to eat pork if it is the only way to avoid starvation, and Jews are actually required to do so.

But for many Hindus, the (bad) *karma* that would result from cow-killing is far, far worse than death.

Not every religion has such specific rules about food. Daoist practice, for example, is less likely to forbid specific foods than to have a system of which foods are good to eat (or to avoid) under which circumstances, and why. Christianity also tends not to forbid specific foods, but many Christians would feel that it was sinful to eat the meat of an animal that is considered “special” in their culture. An amusing example: My American Christian auntie, visiting Sweden, was offered a common Swedish food – reindeer meat – by a fellow Christian. She did not want to eat one of Santa Claus’ helpers! Santa’s reindeer are not “officially” Christian, and my auntie had not believed in Santa since she was a small child. But in this case, emotion was more important than “official” religion!

Conclusion

Religion is a complex part of culture, and the two influence each other in many ways. It is impossible to identify one thing that religion is “really” or “always” about. However, there are some questions that are often useful to ask. Indeed, asking questions can be the most important part of understanding religions! It is best to think about different possibilities, rather than try to find the one “right answer” to any of these questions. Thinking about the possibilities can enrich our understanding of religions, the people who practice them, and the communities in which they live.

Application

1. Do you identify with any particular religion? Why or why not?
2. What do you believe happens to a person when they die?
3. Do people in your home community observe any religiously prescribed rules?
4. Do you think it is possible to adhere to more than one religion? Why or why not?

For Further Reading

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9

Roots of American National Culture

NOLAN WEIL

Suggested Focus

This chapter is a crash course in American history from the perspective of social history and cultural geography. If you can grasp the argument of this chapter, you might begin to see American culture in a completely new light.

1. Name from memory as many as you can of the American beliefs and values discussed at the beginning of the chapter.
2. What does Woodard mean when he says there are 11 nations in North America? (What is a nation?)
3. Besides the English, which three other European powers established a major presence in North America?

4. What makes New York the unique city that it is?
5. To which colonies does *Albion's Seed* refer? From where did these colonists come exactly? How was the understanding of “freedom” different in each of those colonies?
6. From where did the founders of the Deep South come?
7. What happened during the Westward Expansion?

Preliminary remarks

The title of this chapter, *The Roots of American Culture*, may require a bit of explaining; otherwise perhaps it may not be apparent how the two parts of the chapter fit together. Where does one look for the roots of a national culture? This chapter suggests looking in two places. On one hand, we might suppose those roots might be exposed if we simply examine the beliefs and values that seem to animate the culture as it lies before us in the present. This then is how we begin this chapter on American national culture, with a snapshot of American beliefs and values that have been repeatedly identified by observers of the American scene.

On the other hand, we suggest, perhaps this view is too superficial, painting American culture in an overly generalized, stereotypical way. We point out that there is too much strife and political division in the United States to suppose that the national culture can be so easily captured. In fact, we question whether there is a “national culture” at all and suggest that if we look at the founding and settlement of the United States in historical

perspective, as we do throughout the remainder of the chapter, we see not one national culture but many regional cultures. And while an overwhelming majority of Americans may say they hold dearly the value of “freedom,” if we look closely, we begin to see that not all Americans understand freedom in the same way. Once we realize this, we may be better able to understand the obvious divisions in contemporary American society.

American beliefs and values

As pointed out in the last chapter, it is a mistake to automatically assume that everyone in a large multicultural country like the U.S. shares a common culture. But this hasn’t stopped many writers from suggesting that they do. Among the most recent popular essays to address the question of American beliefs and values is Gary Althen’s “American Values and Assumptions.” Here is a list of the beliefs and values that Althen (2003) identifies as typically American:

- individualism, freedom, competitiveness and privacy
- equality
- informality
- the future, change and progress
- the goodness of humanity
- time
- achievement, action, work and materialism
- directness and assertiveness

In what follows, I summarize Althen’s description of

typical American values and assumptions, sometimes extending his examples with my own.

Individualism

According to Althen (2003), “the most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to individualism. They are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations . . . and . . . destinies. They’re not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collectivity.”

Althen illustrates the above point by describing an interaction he observed between a three-year-old boy and his mother. They are at the mall, and the boy wants to know if he can have an Orange Julius, (a kind of cold drink made from orange juice and ice). The mother explains to him that he doesn’t have enough money for an Orange Julius because he bought a cookie earlier. He has enough for a hot dog. Either he can have a hot dog now, she says, or he can save his money and come back another day to buy an Orange Julius.

Althen says that people from other countries often have a hard time believing the story. They wonder, not just why such a young child would have his own money, but how anyone could reasonably expect a three-year-old to make the kind of decision his mother has suggested. But Americans, he says, understand perfectly. They know that such decisions are beyond the abilities of three-year-olds, but they see the mother as simply introducing the boy to an American cultural ideal—that of making one’s own decisions and being responsible for the consequences.

Freedom

Americans feel strongly about their freedom as individuals. They don't want the government or other authorities meddling in their personal affairs or telling them what they can and cannot do. One consequence of this respect for the individuality of persons, Althen claims is that Americans tend not to show the kind of deference to parents that people in more family-oriented societies do. For example, Americans think that parents should not interfere in their children's choices regarding such things as marriage partners or careers. This doesn't mean that children do not consider the advice of parents; quite the contrary, psychologists find that American children generally embrace the same general values as their parents and respect their opinions. It is just that Americans strongly believe everyone should be free to choose the life he/she wishes to live.

Competitiveness

The strong emphasis on individualism pushes Americans to be highly competitive. Althen sees this reflected not only in the American enthusiasm for athletic events and sports heroes, who are praised for being "real competitors," but also in the competitiveness that pervades schools and extracurricular activities. According to Althen, Americans are continually making social comparison aimed at determining:

. . . who is faster, smarter, richer, better looking; whose children are the most successful; whose husband is the best

provider or the best cook or the best lover; which salesperson sold the most during the past quarter; who earned his first million dollars at the earliest age; and so on.

Privacy

Americans assign great value to personal privacy, says Althen, assuming that everyone needs time alone to reflect or replenish his or her psychic energy. Althen claims that Americans don't understand people who think they always have to be in the company of others. He thinks foreigners are often puzzled by the invisible boundaries that seem to surround American homes, yards, and offices, which seem open and inviting but in fact are not. Privacy in the home is facilitated by the tendency of American houses to be quite large. Even young children may have bedrooms of their own over which they are given exclusive control.

Equality

The American Declaration of Independence asserted (among other things) that "all men are created equal." Perhaps most Americans are aware that equality is an ideal rather than a fully realized state of affairs; nevertheless, says Althen, most Americans "have a deep faith that in some fundamental way all people . . . are of equal value, that no one is born superior to anyone else."

Informality

American social behavior is marked by extraordinary informality. Althen sees this reflected in the tendency of

Americans to move quickly, after introductions, to the use of first names rather than titles (like Mr. or Mrs.) with family names. Americans, says Althen, typically interact in casual and friendly ways. Informality is also reflected in speech; formal speech is generally reserved for public events and only the most ceremonious of occasions. Similarly, Americans are fond of casual dress. Even in the business world, where formal attire is the rule, certain meetings or days of the week may be designated as “business casual,” when it is acceptable to shed ties, suit coats, skirts and blazers. Foreigners encountering American informality for the first time may decide that Americans are crude, rude, and disrespectful.

The Future, Change, and Progress

The United States is a relatively young country. Although the first European colonies appeared in North America nearly 400 years ago, the United States is only 240 years old as I write these words. Perhaps this is why the U.S. tends to seem less tied to the past and more oriented towards the future. Moreover, the country has changed dramatically since the time of its founding, becoming a major world power only in the last 75 years.

To most Americans, science, technology and innovation are more salient than history and tradition, says Althen. Americans tend to regard change as good, and the new as an improvement over the old. In other words, change is an indication of progress. Americans also tend to believe that every problem has a solution, and they are, according to Althen, “impatient with people they see as passively accepting conditions that are less than desirable.”

The Goodness of Humanity

Although some Americans belong to religious groups that emphasize the inherent sinfulness of man, Althen claims that the basic American attitude is more optimistic. For one thing, the American belief in progress and a better future, Althen argues, would not be possible if Americans did not believe human nature was basically good, or at least that people have it within their power to improve themselves. The robust commercial literature of self-help or self-improvement is another source of evidence for this conviction.

Time

Americans regard time as a precious resource, says Althen. They believe time should always be used wisely and never wasted. Americans are obsessed with efficiency, or getting the best possible results with the least expenditure of resources, including time.

Achievement, Action, Work, and Materialism

American society is action oriented. Contemplation and reflection are not valued much unless they contribute to improved performance. Americans admire hard work, but especially hard work that results in substantial achievement. “Americans tend to define and evaluate people,” says Althen, “by the jobs they have.” On the other hand, “family backgrounds, educational attainments, and other characteristics are considered less important.”

Americans have also been thought of as particularly materialistic people, and there is no denying that

American society is driven by a kind of consumer mania. Material consumption is widely seen as the legitimate reward for hard work.

Directness and Assertiveness

Americans have a reputation for being direct in their communication. They feel people should express their opinions explicitly and frankly. As Althen expresses it, “Americans usually assume that conflicts or disagreements are best settled by means of forthright discussions among the people involved. If I dislike something you are doing, I should tell you about it directly so you will know, clearly and from me personally, how I feel about it.”

Assertiveness extends the idea of directness in the expression of opinion to the realm of action. Many Americans are raised to insist upon their rights, especially if they feel they have been treated unfairly, or cheated, e.g., in a business transaction. There is a strong tradition, for example, of returning merchandise to retail stores, not only if it is defective but even if it just does not live up to an individual’s expectation as a customer. The retailer who refuses to satisfy a customer’s demand to refund the cost of an unacceptable product is likely to face a stiff argument from an assertive or even angry customer. The customer service personnel of major retailers tend, therefore, to be quite deferential to customer demands.

Conclusion

In his discussions of American values and assumptions, Althen is careful to point out that generalizations can be risky—that it would be a mistake to think that all

Americans hold exactly the same beliefs, or even that when Americans do agree, that they do so with the same degree of conviction. He is also careful to note that the generalizations represent the predominant views of white, middle class people who have for a long time held a majority of the country's positions in business, education, science and industry, politics, journalism, and literature. He acknowledges that the attitudes of many of the nation's various ethnic minorities might differ from the values of the "dominant" culture but insists that as long as we recognize these limitations, it is reasonable to regard the observations he offers as true on the average.

There may be a good deal of truth to Althen's claim; however, a closer look into American history reveals considerable regional variation in Americans' understanding of even the most fundamental ideals, e.g., ideas about the freedom of the individual. In Part 2, we will see that a closer look at the American political scene, may force us to conclude that even when Americans endorse the same values, they may actually have different things in mind.

A closer look at American cultural diversity

In this section, I want to show why the idea of a dominant American culture is more complicated than it is often taken to be. Listen to any serious political commentary on American TV and sooner or later you will hear about the radical polarization of American culture and politics. Commentators may differ on whether we have always been this way, or whether it is worse than ever, but journalists and scholars alike are nearly unanimous in insisting that the country is anything but unified. Every

U.S. President at the annual State of the Union Address says we are unified, but that is something the President must say. “The state of our Union is strong,” are the words traditionally uttered. But does anyone believe it?

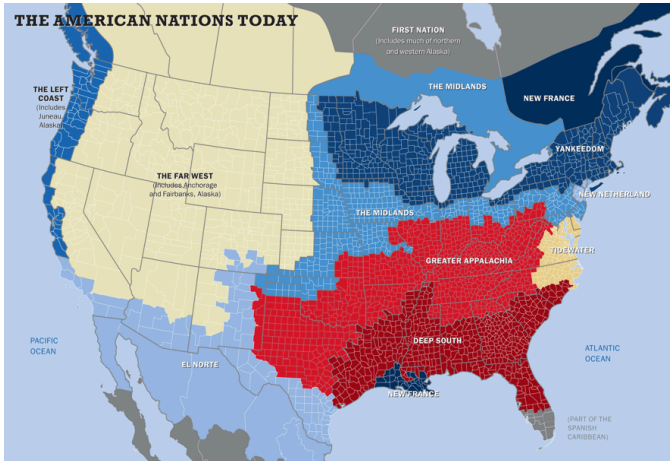


Figure 8.1. Woodard (2011) argues that there are 11 American nations occupying the continental U.S.

And just when many of us think we have finally put the American Civil War and the shameful legacy of slavery behind us once and for all by electing the first black president, the nation turns around and elects a successor that surely has Abraham Lincoln turning over in his grave. How is it possible? Essays like Althen’s certainly do not give us any clue.

What could possibly explain it?

Perhaps we can find a clue in the work of cultural geographers, historians, and journalists. Back to the original question: Is there really a dominant American culture? Depending upon whom you read, there is not one unified American culture. Rather, at least four cultures

sprang from British roots, and altogether there may be as many as eleven national cultures in the U.S. today. (See Figure 8.1)

Understanding U.S. Cultural Landscapes

In 1831, 26-year old French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States. Four years later, he published the first of two volumes of *Democracy in America*. At that time, Tocqueville saw the United States as composed of almost separate nations (Jandt, 2016). Since then, cultural geographers have produced evidence to support many of Tocqueville’s observations, noting that as various cultural groups arrived in North America, they tended to settle where their own people had already settled. As a result, different regions of the U.S. came to exhibit distinctive regional cultures. Zelinsky (1973) identified five distinctive cultural regions while Bigelow (1980) identified no fewer than nine. (See Table 8.1)

Zelinsky (1973)		Bigelow (1980)	
Examined 31 effective settlements in terms of	Identified 5 regions	Examined	Identified 9 regions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language • religion • food habits • architecture • place names • culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New England The Midwest Middle West South West 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ethnicity • region • political party affiliation • dialect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Northeast Border South Deep South Midwest Mexicans Southwest Colorado Mormondom Pacific Northwest

Table 8.1 Studies identifying U.S. regional cultures

the observations of hundreds of observers of the American scene, Garreau begins *The Nine Nations of North America* by urging his readers to forget everything they learned in sixth-grade geography about the borders separating the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, as well as all the state and provincial boundaries within. Says Garreau:

Joel Garreau (1981), while an editor for the Washington Post, also wrote a book proclaiming that the North American continent is actually home to nine nations. Based on

Consider, instead, the way North America really works. It is Nine Nations. Each has its capital and its distinctive web of power and influence. A few are allies, but many are adversaries. Some are close to being raw frontiers; others have four centuries of history. Each has a peculiar economy; each commands a certain emotional allegiance from its citizens. These nations look different, feel different, and sound different from each other, and few of their boundaries match the political lines drawn on current maps. Some are clearly divided topographically by mountains, deserts, and rivers. Others are separated by architecture, music, language, and ways of making a living. Each nation has its own list of desires. Each nation knows how it plans to get what it needs from whoever's got it. ...Most important, each nation has a distinct prism through which it views the world. (Carreau, 1981: 1-2)

Historian David Hackett Fischer (1989) has argued that U.S. culture is best understood as an uneasy coexistence of just four original core cultures derived from four British folkways, each hailing from a different region of 17th century England. Most recently, journalist Colin Woodard (2011) drawing on the work of Fischer and others has identified eleven North American nations. In the sections that follow, I hope to show why essays like Althen's may not be helpful for understanding American culture. In the process, I will briefly recount the story of the settling of North America for those who may not be entirely aware of that history.

Officially, of course, only three countries, Canada, the United States, and Mexico, occupy the entirety of North America, and each country began as a European project.

The principal powers driving the settlement of the continent were England, France, and Spain. All three powers had a major presence in parts of what is now the United States before the U.S. assumed its present shape.

Spanish influence

Spain was the first European power to insert itself into the Americas, starting in the Caribbean islands after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. Spain would eventually dominate most of South America and Mexico and even gain a temporary foothold in present day Florida as well as much of the American Southwest and California.

By the time the first Englishmen stepped off the boat at Jamestown . . . Spanish explorers had already trekked through the plains of Kansas, beheld the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, and stood at the rim of the Grand Canyon. They had mapped the coast of Oregon . . . [and] established short-lived colonies on the shores of Georgia and Virginia. In 1565, they founded St. Augustine, Florida, now the oldest European city in the United States. By the end of the sixteenth century, Spaniards had been living in the deserts of Sonora and Chihuahua for decades, and their colony of New Mexico was marking its fifth birthday. (Woodard, 2011: 23)

The descendants of the first Spanish settlers in the Southwest (many of whom intermarried with the indigenous peoples) thought of this region as *el Norte* (the north), and while Spanish influence on the West would eventually be eclipsed by English folkways, Spanish influences persist to this day.

French influence

While the Spanish spread out across the South and laid claim to the West, the French dropped in from the North. Frenchmen explored the coasts of Newfoundland and sailed up the Saint Lawrence River in 1534. They sailed the coasts of New Brunswick and Maine and established the first successful French settlement in Nova Scotia in 1605, followed by Quebec City in 1608 and Montreal in 1642. From Montreal, the St. Lawrence River carried them to the Great Lakes and from there by way of an extensive network of rivers into the vast interior of the continent, the so-called Louisiana territory. Following the great Mississippi River down to the Gulf of Mexico, the French founded New Orleans in 1718.

Moreover, the French established a more sympathetic and human relationship with the native peoples than either the Spanish or the English had. As Woodard (2011) has observed, the Spanish enslaved the Indians; the English drove them out; but the French settled near them, learned their customs and established trading alliances “based on honesty, fair dealing, and mutual respect” (p. 35)

The legacy of New France, as it was called, can still be felt in isolated pockets of the U.S., like southern Louisiana and the city of New Orleans, and also near the northern boundaries of eastern states like Vermont and Maine. Otherwise, it has a stronger pull on Canada where it continues to resist domination by the English-speaking regions of Canada. On the other hand, Spanish influences are more widely felt in the United States, particularly in South Florida and throughout the southwestern U.S. and California. However, the dominant culture of the United

States—or as Fischer (1989) has argued—the four dominant cultures are British.

Dutch influence

Another European power to establish a presence in North America was the Netherlands. In 1624, the Dutch established a fur trading post on what is today the Island of Manhattan in New York City. In fact, Woodard (2011: 65) reminds us, the character of New York City is due very much to the cultural imprint of the first Dutch settlers of New York. Of course, it was not called New York back then but New Amsterdam.

Unlike the Puritans who would come five years later, the Dutch had no interest in creating a model society. Nor were they interested in establishing democratic government. During the first few decades of its existence, New Amsterdam was formally governed by the Dutch West India Company, one of the first global corporations. The Dutch were interested in North America primarily for commercial purposes.

To understand how the Dutch influenced New York, it is important to understand the culture and social history of the Netherlands. By the end of the 1500's, the Dutch had waged a successful war of independence against a huge monarchical empire (the kingdom of Spain). They had asserted the inborn human right to rebel against an oppressive government, and they had established a kingless republic nearly two centuries before the American Revolution, which established American independence from the British Empire.

“In the early 1600s, the Netherlands was the most modern and sophisticated country on Earth,” says

Woodard (2011: 66-67). They were committed to free inquiry. Their universities were among the best in the world. Scientists and intellectuals from countries where free inquiry was suppressed flocked to the Netherlands and produced revolutionary scientific and philosophical texts. Dutch acceptance of freedom of the press resulted in the wide distribution of texts that were banned elsewhere in Europe. The Dutch asserted the right of freedom from persecution for the free exercise of religion. They produced magnificent works of art and established laws and business practices that set the standard for the Western world. They invented modern banking, establishing the first clearinghouse at the Bank of Amsterdam for the exchange of the world's currencies.

The Dutch had also virtually invented the global corporation with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602. With 10,000 ships of advanced design, shareholders from all social classes, thousands of workers, and global operations, the Netherlands dominated shipping in northern Europe in the early 1600s.

By the time the Dutch West India Company founded New Amsterdam, the Netherlands had assumed a role in the world economy equivalent to that of the United States in the late 20th century, setting the standards for international business, finance, and law. (Woodard, 2011: 67)

The Dutch effectively transplanted all of these cultural achievements to New Amsterdam. Dutch openness and tolerance consequently attracted a remarkable diversity of people. The ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, says Woodard, shocked early visitors. The streets of New

Amsterdam teamed with people from everywhere, just as New York does today.

By the mid 1600's, there were “French-speaking Walloons; Lutherans from Poland, Finland; and Sweden; Catholics from Ireland and Portugal; and Anglicans, Puritans, and Quakers from New England. . . . [D]ozens of Ashkenazim [eastern European Jews] and Spanish-speaking Sephardim [Jews from Spain] settled in New Amsterdam in the 1650s, forming the nucleus of what would eventually become the largest Jewish community in the world. Indians roamed the streets, and Africans—slave, free and half-free—already formed a fifth of the population. A Muslim from Morocco had been farming outside the city walls for three decades. (Woodard, 2011: 66)

When the Duke of York, future King James II of England, arrived with a naval fleet in 1664, the Dutch were forced to cede political control of New Amsterdam to England. New Amsterdam became New York. However, the Dutch managed to negotiate terms, which enabled them to maintain a presence and preserve Dutch norms and values. Thus, diversity, tolerance, upward mobility, and the emphasis on private enterprise, characteristics historically associated with the United States in general and New York in particular, began in New Amsterdam and represent the Dutch legacy in America.

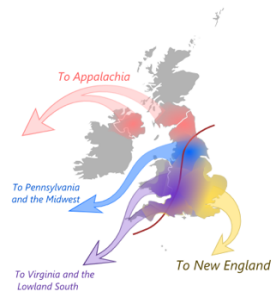


New Amsterdam, centered in the eventual Lower Manhattan, in 1664, the year England took control and renamed it “New York”.

Albion's Seed

Of the three major European powers, the English were latecomers. But when they finally came, they washed over the continent like a tsunami. Today English cultural influences prevail over vast areas of both Canada and the United States.

In his book, *Albion's Seed*, David Fischer argues that the foundations of U.S. culture were laid between 1629-1775 by four great waves of English-speaking immigrants. Each wave brought a group



Geographic origins of four English groups

of people from a different region of England, and each group settled in a different region of British America.

- The first wave (1629-1640) brought Puritans from the East of England to Massachusetts.
- The second wave (1642-1675) brought a small Royalist elite and large numbers of indentured servants from the South of England to Virginia.
- The third wave (1675-1725) consisted of people from the North Midlands of England and Wales. This group settled primarily in the Delaware Valley.
- Finally, multiple waves of people arrived between 1718-1775 from the borders of North Britain and Ireland. Most of these people settled in the mountains of the Appalachian backcountry.

According to Fischer, despite all being English-speaking Protestants living under British laws and enjoying certain British “liberties,” each group came from a different geographical region, and each region had its own particular social, political, and economic circumstances. As a result, the basic attitudes, behaviors, and values of each group were profoundly different.

Massachusetts (Yankeedom)

The Puritans who founded Massachusetts Bay Colony were not the first English settlers in New England; the so-called Pilgrims beat them by about 10 years. But the Massachusetts Bay Puritans left a more lasting legacy. The Puritans came in greater numbers over an eleven-year period (1629-1640), primarily from East Anglia. In the 17th

century, East Anglia was the most economically developed area of Britain. East Anglians were artisans, farmers, and skilled craftsmen; they were well educated and literate. They had little respect for royal or aristocratic privilege. In East Anglia, they had practiced local self-government by means of elected representatives (selectmen) whom they trusted to carry out the affairs of the community. They were middle class and roughly all equal in material wealth.

When they migrated to Massachusetts, they brought with them their own particular folkways. These included many of the customs and values they had been accustomed to in East Anglia. They were also deeply religious and brought a utopian vision of a society that would bring about God's kingdom on earth, governed by a particular Puritan interpretation of the Bible. They only accepted people into their communities that were willing to conform to their Puritan brand of Calvinism; dissenters were punished or exiled.

On the other hand, according to Boorstin (1958), the Puritans were completely non-utopian and practical in the way they lived their daily lives. Because they considered their theological questions answered, says Boorstin, they could focus less on the ends of society and more on the practical means for making society work effectively. Eventually, historical circumstances would even sweep the religious authoritarianism away, leaving behind a legacy self-government, local control, and direct democracy.

As Woodard (2011) has observed, "Yankees would come to have faith in government to a degree incomprehensible to people of the other American nations." New Englanders trusted government to defend the public good against the selfish schemes of moneyed interests. They were in favor of promoting morality by prohibiting and regulating

undesirable activities. They believed in the value of public spending on infrastructure and schools as a means for creating a better society. Today, notes Woodard, “More than any other group in America, Yankees conceive of government as being run by and for themselves.” They believe everyone should participate, and nothing makes them angrier than the manipulation of the political process for private gain (p. 60).

Virginia (Tidewater)

According to Fischer (1989) as the Puritan migrations were coming to an end in 1641, a new migration was just about to begin. This migration was from the south of England, and these newcomers settled in what is today southeast Virginia, in the area known as the Tidewater. The founders of Virginia were about as different from the New England Puritans as any group could be.

While the Puritans were artisans, farmers, and craftsmen from the east of England, the Tidewater Virginians had been English “gentlemen” in south England. The economy of south England in 17th century was organized mainly around the production of grain and wool. While the Puritans enjoyed a fairly egalitarian life in East Anglia, the south of England was marked by severe economic inequality. Those who didn’t own land were tenants. The region had also suffered greatly during the English Civil War, a conflict that pitted the King of England against the Parliament over the manner in which England was to be governed. The landed gentry of south England were Royalists; they supported the King. However, they found themselves on the losing side of the conflict. Unlike the Puritans who migrated to New

England for religious reasons, the Royalists hoped to escape their deteriorating situation by seeking their fortunes in the New World. To the extent that religion was important to them, they embraced the Anglican Church of England, the same church as the King of England.

Like the Puritans, the Royalists were not the first English settlers in their respective region. The earliest Virginians had founded the Jamestown Colony in 1607. Also, like the Puritans, the Royalists turned out to be more successful administrators than the settlers who had come before. But while the Jamestown settlers had been incompetent in many ways, they had set the stage for a successful agricultural export industry based on tobacco (Woodard, 2011).

Tobacco was a very lucrative crop and Virginia was perfect for growing it, but it was very labor-intensive. The Virginians solved their labor problem by recruiting a large workforce of desperate people from London, Bristol, and Liverpool. In fact, poor newcomers greatly outnumbered the Royalist elites; more than 75 percent of immigrants to Virginia came as indentured servants. Two thirds were unskilled laborers and most could not read or write. The Royalists, in fact, succeeded in reproducing the conditions that had existed in the south of England where they had been the lords and masters of large estates, exploiting a vast and permanent underclass of poor, uneducated Englishmen. Even worse, when the Virginians began losing their workforce because the servants completed their indentures, they turned to slave labor, which would eventually spread across the entire southern United States. Before the abolition of slavery in 1865, millions of Africans would be kidnapped and shipped to the New World (and

later bred In America) as permanent property (Woodard, 2011).

As Fischer (1989) has pointed out, people everywhere in British America embraced the ideal of liberty (freedom) in one form or another; however, it would be a mistake to think that liberty had the same meaning to New Englanders as it did to Virginians. New Englanders believed in ordered liberty, which meant that liberty belonged not just to an individual but to an entire community. In other words, an individual's liberties or rights were not absolute but had to be balanced against the public good. New Englanders voluntarily agreed to accept constraints upon their liberties as long as they were consistent with written laws and as long as it was they themselves that collectively determined the laws. It is also true though that because the original Puritan founders saw themselves as God's chosen people, they did not at first feel compelled to extend freedom to anyone outside of their Puritan communities.

The Virginians, in contrast, embraced a form of liberty that Fischer has described as hegemonic or hierarchical liberty. According to Fischer (1989) freedom for the Virginian was conceived as "the power to rule, and not to be overruled by others. . . . It never occurred to most Virginia gentlemen that liberty belonged to everyone" (pp. 411-412). Moreover, the higher one's status, the greater one's liberties. While New Englanders governed themselves by mutual agreement arrived at in town hall meetings, Virginian society was ruled from the top by a small group of wealthy plantation owners who completely dominated the economic and political affairs of the colony.

Delaware Valley (The Midlands)

The third major wave of English immigration took place between 1675-1725 and originated from many different parts of England, but one region in particular stood out—the North Midlands, a rocky and sparsely settled region inhabited by farmers and shepherds. The people had descended from Viking invaders who had colonized the region in the Middle Ages. They favored the Norse customs of individual ownership of houses and fields and resented the imposition of the Norman system of feudal manors, which the southern Royalists had embraced (p.446). The most peculiar thing about the people was their religion. They were neither Puritans like the people of eastern England, nor Anglican like the Royalists of the south, but Quaker, or as they called themselves Friends.

The Quakers began arriving in great numbers in 1675, settling in the Delaware Valley, spreading out into what is today western New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania. Sandwiched between Puritan Massachusetts and Royalist Virginia, Woodward (2011) refers to this region as the Midlands.

By 1750, the Quakers had become the third largest religious group in the British colonies (Fischer, p. 422). Like the Puritans and unlike the Royalists, the Quakers sought to establish a model society based on deeply held religious beliefs. But whereas the Puritans tended restrict the liberties of outsiders, even persecuting them, the Quakers (under the leadership of William Penn) “envisioned a country where people of different creeds and ethnic backgrounds could live together in harmony” (Woodard, p. 94). The Quakers would not impose their religion on anyone but would invite everyone into the

community who accepted their worldview. They extended the right to vote to almost anyone and provided land on cheap terms. They maintained peace with the local Indians, paid them for their land, and respected their interests.

Quakers held government to be an absolute necessity and were intensely committed to public debate. At the same time, they developed a tradition of minimal government interference in the lives of people. The Quaker view of liberty was different from that of both the Puritans and the Royalists. While the Puritans embraced ordered or bounded liberty for God's chosen few, and the Royalists embraced a hierarchical view of liberty for the privileged elite (and who saw no contradiction in the keeping of slaves), the Quakers believed in reciprocal liberty, a liberty that they believed should embrace all of humanity. The Quakers were the most egalitarian of the three colonies discussed so far, and they would be among the most outspoken opponents of slavery.

Appalachia

The last great waves of folk migration came between 1718-1775 from the so-called borderlands of the British Empire, Ireland, Scotland, and the northern counties of England. They were a clan-based warrior people whose ancestors had endured 800 years of almost constant warfare with England (Woodard, p. 101). Unlike the Puritans or the Quakers who dreamed of establishing model societies based upon their religious beliefs, or the Royalists who wished to regain their aristocratic wealth and privilege, the Borderlanders sought to escape from

economic privation: high rents, low wages, heavy taxation, famine and starvation.

These new immigrants landed on American shores primarily by means of Philadelphia and New Castle in the Quaker Midlands, mainly because of the Quaker policy of welcoming immigrants. Unfortunately, the Borderlanders, proved too belligerent and violent for the peace-loving Quakers, who tried to get them out of their towns and into the Appalachian backcountry as quickly as possible. The Appalachian Mountains extend for 800 miles from Pennsylvania to Georgia and several hundred miles east to west from the Piedmont Plateau to the Mississippi. The Borderlanders would end up spreading their folkways throughout this vast region.

While the other three colonial regions established commercial enterprises revolving around cash groups and manufactured goods, the Borderlanders lived primarily by hunting, fishing, and farming. In Britain, they had never been accustomed to investing in fixed property because it was too easily lost in war. In the American backcountry, they carried on in the same way; whatever wealth they had was largely mobile, consisting of herds of pigs, cattle, and sheep. They practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, moving to new lands every few years when they had depleted the soil in one place. In time, some individuals managed to acquire large tracts of land, while others remained landless. The result was to reproduce the pervasive inequality that had existed in the northern English borderlands.

Early on, Appalachia acquired a reputation as a violent and lawless place. In the earliest years of settlement, there was little in the way of government. To the extent that there was any order or justice, it was according to the

principle *lex talionis*, which held that “a good man must seek to do right in the world, but when wrong was done to him, he must punish the wrongdoer himself by an act of retribution. . .” (Fischer, p. 765).

The people that settled Appalachia held to an ideal of liberty that Fischer has called “natural liberty,” characterized by a fierce resistance to any form of external restraint and “strenuously hostile to ordering institutions” (Fischer, p. 777). This included hostility to organized churches and established clergy. The Appalachian backcountry was a place of mixed religious denominations, just as the borders of North Britain had been. However, if there was a dominant denomination, it may have been Scottish Presbyterianism.

In essence, the Borderlanders reproduced many aspects of the society they had left behind in the British borderlands, a society marked by economic inequality, a culture of violence and retributive justice, jealous protection of individual liberty, and distrust of government. A more different culture from that of New England or the Midlands is hard to imagine. Except perhaps for the Deep South.

Englanders from Barbados

The Deep South

Fischer does not deal with the founders of the Deep South in *Albion's Seed* for the simple reason that none of them came directly from England as the Puritans, Virginians, Quakers, and Borderlanders had. Instead, they were in Woodard's words “the sons and grandsons of the founders

of an older English colony: Barbados, the richest and most horrifying society in the English-speaking world” (p. 82). The colonizers of Barbados had established a wealthy and powerful plantation economy based on sugar cane, grown entirely by means of a brutal system of slave labor. Having run out of land on Barbados, it became necessary for Barbadians to find new lands, which they did by migrating to other islands in the Caribbean and to the east coast of North America.

The Barbadians arrived near present day Charleston, South Carolina in 1670 and set to work replicating a slave state almost identical to the one they had left behind in Barbados. They bought enslaved Africans by the boatloads and put them to work growing rice and indigo for export to England. They often worked them to death just as they had in Barbados. They built a tremendous amount of wealth from this slave labor, and most of it was concentrated in the hands of a few ruling families who comprised only about one quarter of the white population. They governed the territory solely to serve their own interests, ignoring the bottom three-quarters of the white population, and of course the black majority who actually made up 80 percent of the population. The brutality of the system is certainly shocking to modern sensibilities, and it was even shocking to the Barbadian’s contemporaries.

While slavery was initially tolerated in all of the colonies, it was an organizing economic principle only in the Tidewater region and the Deep South. However, there were important differences. Initially, the Tidewater leaders had imported labor in the form of indentured servants both white and black. Indentured servants could earn their freedom, and many blacks did. In the Tidewater,

slaves outnumbered whites by only 1.7 to 1, and the slave population grew naturally after 1740, eliminating the need to import slaves. And because there were few newcomers, the black population of the Tidewater was “relatively homogenous and strongly influenced by the English culture it was embedded within” (Woodard, p. 87). Having African heritage did not necessarily make someone a slave in the Tidewater. People in the Tidewater found it harder to deny the humanity of black people.

In the Deep South, however, the black population outnumbered the white population by about 5 to 1, and blacks lived largely apart from whites. Moreover, the separation of whites and blacks was strictly

enforced, and the white minority thought of blacks as inherently inferior. Because they were so greatly outnumbered, Southern plantation owners also feared the possibility of a violent rebellion, and they organized militias and conducted training exercises in case they might need to respond to an uprising. “Deep Southern society,” says Woodard, “was not only militarized, caste-structured, and deferential to authority, it was also aggressively expansionist” (p. 90). Unfortunately, the slaveholding practices of the Deep South eventually caught hold in the Tidewater too. By the middle of the 18th century, permanent slavery came to be the norm everywhere south of the Mason-Dixon line.



Mason Dixon Line: Popularly regarded as the cultural boundary between North and South

The Westward Expansion

After the American Revolution, four of the nations that we have just surveyed headed west: New England, the Midlands, Appalachia, and the Deep South all raced towards the interior of the continent apparently with little mixing. Figure 8.1 shows the territories that each nation settled. Woodard's argument and the work of cultural geographers suggests that these four nations carried their particular folkways and cultural attitudes with them and that the states they settled still bear those same cultural markings.

The Far West

The cultural migrations were halted for a time by the sheer extremity of the West, which was not well suited to farming. Only two groups braved the arid West. The Mormons hailed from Yankee roots. Like the New England Puritans, two centuries earlier, they set out on a utopian religious mission, and began arriving in the 1840s on the shores the Great Salt Lake in present day Utah. "With a communal mind-set and intense group cohesion," notes Woodard, "the Mormons were able to build and maintain irrigation projects that enabled small farmers in the region to survive in far Western conditions." Interestingly, the Mormon values of communitarianism, morality, and good works are all Yankee values. One wonders sometimes why Utah politicians seem to align themselves so often with politicians espousing values more typical of Appalachia and the Deep South rather than with New England.

The other hardy souls to venture into the Far West were the Forty-niners, so named after the year 1849 which

brought a flood of frontiersmen to California seeking gold. Otherwise, the West was successfully settled only after the arrival of corporations and the federal government, the only two forces capable of providing an infrastructure that would eventually permit widespread settlement. Westerners would come to resent both the corporations and the federal government as unwelcome intrusions in their lives.

The Left Coast

“Why is it,” asks Woodard, “that the coastal zone of northern California, Oregon and Washington seems to have so much more in common with New England than with the other parts of those states?” The explanation, according to Woodard, is that the first Americans to colonize it were New England Yankees who arrived by ship. New Englanders were well positioned to colonize the area having become familiar with the region as New France’s main competitor in the fur trade.

The first Yankee settlers were merchants, missionaries, and woodsmen. They arrived determined to create a “New England on the Pacific.” The other group to settle the region consisted of farmers, prospectors and fur traders from Greater Appalachia. They arrived overland by wagon, and took control of the countryside, leaving the coastal towns and government to the Yankees. The Yankee desire to reproduce New England was ultimately unsuccessful because as ever more migrants arrived from the Appalachian Midwest and elsewhere, the Yankees were outnumbered fifteen to one. They did manage, however, to maintain control over most civic institutions.

Today the region shares with coastal New England the

same Yankee idealism and faith in good government and social reform blended with Appalachian self-sufficient individualism.

Final reflection

While these various European founders of the United States were working out their destinies, the U.S. was also a destination for immigrants from all over the world. Throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century, the majority of immigrants were from Europe, first from northern and western Europe, then from southern and eastern Europe, and then once again from western Europe. From the 1960s on, the majority of immigrants have come from Asia and Latin America.

Given the passage of time and the huge influx of immigrants, it might not seem believable that these founding nations would have maintained their distinct cultural identities. Haven't they surely been diluted and transformed, asks Woodard, by the tens of millions of immigrants moving into the various regions? It might seem, says Woodard, that by now these original cultures must have "melted into one another, creating a rich, pluralistic stew."

However, cultural geographers such as Zelinsky (1973) have found reasons to believe that once the settlers of a region leave their cultural mark, newcomers are more likely to assimilate the dominant culture of the region. The newcomers surely bring with them their own cultural legacies, foods, religions, fashions, and ideas, suggests Woodard, but they do not replace the established ethos.

In *American Nations*, Woodard argues that the divisions in American politics can be understood in large part by

understanding the cultural divisions that have been part of the United States since its founding. These divisions can help us understand regional differences in basic sentiments such as trust vs. distrust of government. They can also help us understand why certain regions of the country are for or against gun control, environmental regulation, or the regulation of financial institutions, and so on, or for or against particular Congressional legislation.

Application

1. Whether you are an American citizen, U.S. resident, or international student ... which, if any, of the American national values discussed in the chapter are important where you come from? Which, if any, are unimportant?
2. Based on this history of the United States, what adjustments are necessary to the idea of a dominant American culture?
3. If you are not an American citizen or U.S. resident, how might the lessons of this chapter apply to your own country?

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