

## Chapter 4. Folk and Popular Culture

People living in other locations often have extremely different social customs. Geographers ask why such differences exist and how social customs are related to the cultural landscape.

### Key Issues

1. Where do folk and popular cultures originate and diffuse?
2. Why is folk culture clustered?
3. Why is popular culture widely distributed?
4. Why does globalization of popular culture cause problems?

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

A **habit** is a repetitive act that a particular *individual* performs. A custom is a repetitive act of a group. A collection of social customs produces a group's material culture. Material culture falls into two basic categories that differ according to scale: folk and popular. **Folk culture** is traditionally practiced primarily by small, homogeneous groups living in isolated rural areas. **Popular culture** is found in large, heterogeneous societies. Landscapes dominated by a collection of folk customs change relatively little over time. In contrast, popular culture is based on rapid simultaneous global **connections**. Thus, folk culture is more likely to vary from place to place at a given time, whereas popular culture is more likely to vary from time to time at a given place.

In Earth's *globalization*, popular culture is becoming more dominant, threatening the survival of unique folk cultures. The disappearance of local folk customs reduces local diversity in the world and the intellectual stimulation that arises from differences in background. The dominance of popular culture can also threaten the quality of the environment.

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

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

Two basic factors help explain the spatial differences between popular and folk cultures: the process of origin and the pattern of diffusion.

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### Origin of Folk and Popular Cultures

A social custom originates at a hearth, a center of innovation. Folk customs often have anonymous hearths. They may also have multiple hearths. Popular culture is most often a product of the economically more developed countries. Industrial technology permits the uniform reproduction of objects in large quantities.

### Origin of Folk Music

Music exemplifies the differences in the origins of folk and popular culture. Folk songs tell a story or convey information about daily activities such as farming, life-cycle events (birth, death, and marriage), or mysterious events such as storms and earthquakes. Folk customs may have multiple origins owing to non-communication among groups in different places. Within the Upper South, geographer George Carney identified four major hearths of country music during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### Origin of Popular Music

In contrast to folk music, popular music is written by specific individuals for the purpose of being sold to a large number of people. Popular music as we know it today originated around 1900. To provide songs for music halls and vaudeville, a music industry was developed in New York, along 28th Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway, a district that became known as Tin Pan Alley.

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

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

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

The broadcasting of American popular music on Armed Forces radio illustrates the difference in diffusion of folk and popular cultures. The spread of popular culture typically follows the process of hierarchical diffusion from hearths or nodes of innovation. In contrast, folk culture is transmitted . . . primarily through migration, . . . relocation diffusion.

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

Amish customs illustrate how relocation diffusion distributes folk culture. Amish folk culture remains visible on the landscape in at least 17 states. In Europe the Amish did not develop distinctive language, clothing, or farming practices and gradually merged with various Mennonite church groups. Several hundred Amish families migrated to North America in two waves.

Living in rural and frontier settlements relatively isolated from other groups, Amish communities retained their traditional customs, even as other European immigrants to the United States adopted new ones.

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

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

**Folk Culture Origin of Soccer.** Soccer is the world's most popular sport (it is called football outside North America). Its origin is obscure.

Early football games resembled mob scenes. In the twelfth century the rules became standardized. Because football disrupted village life, King Henry II banned the game from England in the late twelfth century. It was not legalized again until 1603 by King James I. At this point, football was an English folk custom rather than a global popular custom.

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

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Football was first played in continental Europe in the late 1870s by Dutch students who had been in Britain. British citizens further diffused the game throughout the worldwide British Empire. In the twentieth century, soccer, like other sports, was further diffused by new communication systems, especially radio and television. Although soccer was also exported to the United States, it never gained the popularity it won in Europe and Latin America.

**Sports in Popular Culture.** Each country has its own preferred sports. Cricket is popular primarily in Britain and former British colonies. Ice hockey prevails, logically, in colder climates. The most popular sports in China are martial arts, known as wushu, including archery, fencing, wrestling, and boxing. Baseball . . . became popular in Japan after it was introduced by American soldiers.

Lacrosse is a sport played primarily in Ontario, Canada, and a few eastern U.S. cities, especially Baltimore and New York. It has also fostered cultural identity among the Iroquois Confederation of Six Nations. In recent years, the International Lacrosse Federation has invited the Iroquois nation to participate in the Lacrosse World Championships.

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **Himalayan Art**

In a study of artistic customs in the Himalaya Mountains, geographers P. Karan and Cotton Mather demonstrate that distinctive views of the physical environment emerge among neighboring cultural groups that are isolated.

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These groups display similar uniqueness in their dance, music, architecture, and crafts.

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

People respond to their environment, but the environment is only one of several controls over social customs. Folk societies are particularly responsive to the environment because of their low level of technology and the prevailing agricultural economy. Yet folk culture may ignore the environment. Broad differences in folk culture arise in part from physical conditions and . . . these conditions produce varied customs. Two necessities of daily life—food and shelter—demonstrate the influence of cultural values and the environment on development of unique folk culture.

#### **Distinctive Food Preferences**

Folk food habits derive from the environment.

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For example, rice demands a milder, moist climate, while wheat thrives in colder, drier regions. People adapt their food preferences to conditions in the environment. A good example is soybeans. In the raw state they are toxic and indigestible. Lengthy cooking renders . . . (soybeans) edible, but fuel is scarce in Asia. Asians derive . . . foods from soybeans that do not require extensive cooking. In Europe, traditional preferences for quick-frying foods in Italy resulted in part from fuel shortages. In

Northern Europe, an abundant wood supply encouraged the slow stewing and roasting of foods over fires, which also provided home heat in the colder climate.

**Food Diversity in Transylvania.** Food customs are inevitably affected by the availability of products, but people do not simply eat what is available in their particular environment. In Transylvania, currently part of Romania, food preferences distinguish among groups who have long lived in close proximity. Soup, the food consumed by poorer people, shows the distinctive traditions of the neighboring cultural groups in Transylvania.

Long after dress, manners, and speech have become indistinguishable from those of the majority, old food habits often continue as the last vestige of traditional folk customs.

**Food Attractions and Taboos.** According to many folk customs, everything in nature carries a signature, or distinctive characteristic, based on its appearance and natural properties. Certain foods are eaten because their natural properties are perceived to enhance qualities considered desirable by the society, such as strength, fierceness, or lovemaking ability. People refuse to eat particular plants or animals that are thought to embody negative forces in the environment. Such a restriction on behavior imposed by social custom is a **taboo**. Other social customs, such as sexual practices, carry prohibitions, but taboos are especially strong in the area of food.

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Hindu taboos against consuming cows can also be explained partly for environmental reasons. A large supply of oxen must be maintained in India, because every field has to be plowed at approximately the same time: when the monsoon rains arrive.

But the taboo against consumption of meat among many people, including Muslims, Hindus, and Jews, cannot be explained primarily by environment factors. Social values must influence the choice of diet, because people in similar climates and with similar levels of income consume different foods.

**Folk Housing.** The house . . . is a product of both cultural tradition and natural conditions.

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**Distinctive Building Materials.** The two most common building materials in the world are wood and brick. The choice of building materials is influenced both by social factors and by what is available from the environment.

**Distinctive House Form and Orientation.** Social groups may share building materials, but the distinctive form of their houses may result from customary beliefs or environmental factors. The form of houses in some societies might reflect religious values.

Beliefs govern the arrangement of household activities in a variety of Southeast Asian societies.

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**Housing and Environment.** The form of housing is related in part to environmental as well as social conditions. Even in areas that share similar climates and available building materials, folk housing can vary, owing to minor differences in environmental features.

### **U.S. Folk House Forms**

Older houses in the United States display local folk-culture traditions. The style of pioneer homes reflected whatever upscale style was prevailing at the place on the East Coast from which they migrated. In contrast, houses built in the United States during the past half century display popular culture influences.

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

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

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

- **Diffusion of popular housing, clothing, and food**
- **Role of television in diffusing popular culture**

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

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

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

**Popular Housing Styles**

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

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

**Modern House Styles (1945–1960).** In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the dominant type was known as *minimal traditional*. The *ranch* house replaced minimal traditional as the dominant style of housing in the 1950s.

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The *split-level* house was a popular variant of the ranch house between the 1950s and 1970s. The *contemporary* style was an especially popular choice between the 1950s and 1970s for architect-designed houses. The *shed* style, popular in the late 1960s, was characterized by high-pitched shed roofs.

**Neo-eclectic House Styles (Since 1960).** In the late 1960s, *neo-eclectic* styles became popular and by the 1970s had surpassed modern styles in vogue. The first popular neo-eclectic style was the *mansard* in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The *neo-Tudor* style, popular in the 1970s, was characterized by dominant, steep-pitched front-facing gables and half-timbered detailing. The *neo-French* style also appeared in the early 1970s.

The *neo-colonial* style, an adaptation of English colonial houses, has been continuously popular since the 1950s but never dominant.

**Rapid Diffusion of Clothing Styles**

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

A second influence on clothing in MDCs is higher income. Improved communications have permitted the rapid diffusion of clothing styles from one region of Earth to another. Until recently, a year could elapse from the time an original dress was displayed to the time that inexpensive reproductions were available in the stores. Now the time lag is less than six weeks. The globalization of clothing styles has involved increasing awareness by North Americans and Europeans of the variety of folk costumes

around the world. The continued use of folk costumes in some parts of the globe may persist not because of distinctive environmental conditions or traditional cultural values but to preserve past memories or to attract tourists.

**Jeans.** An important symbol of the diffusion of western popular culture is jeans, which became a prized possession for young people throughout the world. Locally made denim trousers are available throughout Europe and Asia for under \$10, but “genuine” jeans made by Levi Strauss, priced at \$50 to \$100, are preferred as a status symbol.

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Jeans became an obsession and a status symbol among youth in the former Soviet Union, when the Communist government prevented their import. The scarcity of high-quality jeans was just one of many consumer problems that were important motives in the dismantling of Communist governments in Eastern Europe around 1990.

### **Popular Food Customs**

People in a country with a more developed economy are likely to have the income, time, and inclination to facilitate greater adoption of popular culture.

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

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Geographers cannot explain all the regional variations in food preferences.

**Wine Production.** The spatial distribution of wine production demonstrates that the environment plays a role in the distribution of popular as well as folk food customs. Because of the unique product created by the distinctive soil and climate characteristics, the world’s finest wines are most frequently identified by their place of origin. Although grapes can be grown in a wide variety of locations, wine distribution is based principally on cultural values, both historical and contemporary. Wine production is discouraged in regions of the world dominated by religions other than Christianity. The distribution of wine production shows that the diffusion of popular customs depends less on the distinctive environment of a location than on the presence of beliefs, institutions, and material traits conducive to accepting those customs.

### **Role of Television in Diffusing Popular Culture**

Watching television is an especially significant popular custom for two reasons. First, it is the most popular leisure activity in more developed countries throughout the world. Second, television is the most important mechanism by which knowledge of popular culture, such as professional sports, is rapidly diffused across Earth.

### **Diffusion of Television**

Inventors in a number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union, simultaneously contributed to the development of television. The U.S. public first saw television in the 1930s. However, its diffusion was blocked for a number of years when broadcasting was curtailed or suspended entirely during World War II.

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During the early 1950s, television sets were being sold in only 20 countries, and more than 85 percent of the world’s 37 million sets were in the United States. By the early 1990s more than 180 countries had 900 million television sets, with less than one-fourth in the United States.

Currently, the level of television service falls into four categories. The first category consists of countries where nearly every household owns a TV set. A second category consists of countries in

which ownership of a television is common but by no means universal, primarily Latin America . . . and the poorer European states. The third category consists of countries in which television exists but has not yet been widely diffused. Finally, about 30 countries, most of which are in Africa and Asia, have very few television sets.

### **Diffusion of the Internet**

The diffusion of internet service is following the pattern established by television a generation earlier, and is likely to diffuse rapidly to other countries in the years ahead. Among less developed regions, Latin America and Asia are likely to expand internet hosts more rapidly than Africa.

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### **Government Control of Television**

In the United States most television stations are owned by private corporations. Some stations, however, are owned by local governments or other nonprofit organizations and are devoted to educational or noncommercial programs.

In most countries the government(s) . . . control TV stations to minimize the likelihood that programs hostile to current policies will be broadcast—in other words, they are censored. Operating costs are typically paid by the national government from tax revenues, although some government-controlled stations do sell air time to private advertisers. A number of Western European countries have transferred some government-controlled television stations to private companies.

**Reduced Government Control.** In the past, many governments viewed television as an important tool for fostering cultural integration. In recent years, changing technology—especially the diffusion of small satellite dishes—has made television a force for political change rather than stability.

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Governments have had little success in shutting down satellite technology. The diffusion of small satellite dishes hastened the collapse of Communist governments in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s. Facsimile machines, portable video recorders, and cellular telephones have also put chinks in government censorship.

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

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

The international diffusion of popular culture has led to two problems. First, the diffusion of popular culture may threaten the survival of traditional folk culture in many countries. Second, popular culture may be less responsive to the diversity of local environments and consequently may generate adverse environmental impacts.

#### **Threat to Folk Culture**

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

#### **Loss of Traditional Values**

One example of the symbolic importance of folk culture is clothing. In African and Asian countries today, there is a contrast between the clothes of rural farmworkers and of urban business and government leaders. The Western business suit has been accepted as the uniform for business executives and bureaucrats around the world. Wearing clothes typical of MDCs is controversial in some Middle Eastern countries.

**Change in Traditional Role of Women.** The global diffusion of popular culture threatens the subservience of women to men that is embedded in many folk customs. The concepts of legal equality and availability of economic and social opportunities outside the home have become widely accepted

in more developed countries, even where women in reality continue to suffer from discriminatory practices.

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However, contact with popular culture also has brought negative impacts for women in less developed countries, such as an increase in prostitution. International prostitution is encouraged in (some) countries as a major source of foreign currency.

#### **Threat of Foreign Media Imperialism**

Leaders of some LDCs consider the dominance of popular customs by MDCs as a threat to their independence.

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Leaders of many LDCs view the spread of television as a new method of economic and cultural imperialism on the part of the more developed countries, especially the United States.

**Western Control of News Media.** Less developed countries fear the effects of the newsgathering capability of the media even more than their entertainment function. Many African and Asian government officials criticize the Western concept of freedom of the press. They argue that the American news organizations reflect American values and do not provide a balanced, accurate view of other countries. In many regions of the world the only reliable and unbiased news accounts come from the BBC World Service shortwave radio newscasts.

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

Popular culture is less likely than folk culture to be distributed with consideration for physical features.

#### **Modifying Nature**

Popular culture can significantly modify or control the environment.

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It may be imposed on the environment rather than springing forth from it, as with many folk customs.

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

#### **Uniform Landscapes**

The distribution of popular culture around the world tends to produce more uniform landscapes. In fact, promoters of popular culture want a uniform appearance to generate "product recognition" and greater consumption.

**Fast-food Restaurants.** The diffusion of fast-food restaurants is a good example of such uniformity.

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The success of fast-food restaurants depends on large-scale mobility. Uniformity in the appearance of the landscape is promoted by a wide variety of other popular structures in North America, such as gas stations, supermarkets, and motels. These structures are designed so that both local residents and visitors immediately recognize the purpose of the building, even if not the name of the company.

**Global Diffusion of Uniform Landscapes.** Diffusion of popular culture across Earth is not confined to products that originate in North America. Japanese automobiles and electronics, for example, have diffused in recent years to the rest of the world, including North America.



### **Negative Environmental Impact**

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

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

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

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

The more developed societies that produce endless supplies for popular culture have created the technological capacity both to create large-scale environmental damage and to control it. However, a commitment of time and money must be made to control the damage. Adverse environmental impact of popular culture is further examined in Chapter 14.

### **Key Terms**

Custom (p.117)

Folk culture (p.117)

Habit (p.117)

Popular culture (p.117)

Taboo (p.125)

