

What is Culture?

Think about these things:

What is a culture? How are cultures different?

How are they the same? How should we define culture?

These are a few questions that we will explore throughout this unit. By the time we have finished, you will have a better understanding of the uniqueness of your own culture, and hopefully, a greater appreciation of the similarities and differences that exist among various cultures of the world.

There are many things that make up a culture. In fact, there are so many things about our lives that make us part of the culture we belong to that there is no way to cover them all here. Therefore, in this article, I will concentrate on only three aspects of culture: language, folklore, and holidays.

Language

According to Webster's Dictionary language is defined as:

1. a body of words and systems for their use common to people of the same community or nation.
2. any system of formalized symbols, signs, etc., used or conceived as a means of communication.
3. the means of communication used by animals

Simply put, language is what people and animals use to communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Of course, animals communicate with each other differently than humans, and each type of animal communicates differently. For example, a bee uses a sophisticated dance to tell the rest of the bees in the hive where there is food, while humpback whales communicate through the use of melodic sounds. One could say then, that animals use different languages.

Like animals, people also use different languages. Each culture has its own words and symbols that are used by people within that culture to communicate with others in the same culture. For example, a person living in Japan will use the Japanese language to communicate with other Japanese. Unlike animals though, some cultures use more than one language. People within these cultures are said to be either bilingual or multilingual. One such place is Canada. It is very likely that a person living in Canada may speak both French and English. Likewise, a person living in Switzerland may speak Italian, German and French.

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Not only do people use different languages to communicate, but languages also have different dialects. A dialect is a variation of a language which uses words and grammar somewhat differently from the standard form of the same language. For example, people who live in Manchester, England speak in a dialect that is slightly different from people who live in London, England; however, people in both cities speak English.

There are also some people who don't use a spoken language at all. These people use their hands to communicate. This type of language is called sign language and is most commonly used by people who are deaf.

Now that we know how people communicate, we are faced with a question. Are we part of a specific culture because of the language we speak, or do we speak a particular language because we are part of that culture? To put it more simply, is a Korean person Korean because he speaks Korean, or does he speak Korean because he was born in Korea? What part does language play in the definition of culture?

Folklore

Folklore is a body of stories that reflect a culture's beliefs, traditions, and values. Often the characters in folktales are real people. When a folktale tells of the actions of a real person, its purpose is to reveal some admired quality of that person's character. Other folktales use characters that are larger than life to pass on truths that are valued by the culture. Characters like Annie Oakley and Pecos Bill are two examples from the American culture.

Folktales have been told for centuries, and all cultures have them. At one time, all folklore was part of an oral tradition and was passed on by word of mouth. Today, folklore finds its way into poetry, song lyrics, and fables.

The folktale below is an American tale about George Washington. What quality of George Washington's character is the tale trying to highlight? Why?

George Washington's father had a beautiful garden. In his garden there were many flowers and trees. His favorite tree was the cherry tree. He liked the pink flowers in the spring and the sweet, red fruit in the summer.

George was just a little boy. He was six years old. He had a new ax, and he liked to cut things in the garden. One day, he cut down the cherry tree by mistake. When he saw the cherry tree on the ground, he felt very badly.

Later that day, George's father saw the tree on the ground. He was angry. He called his son. "George," he asked, "Do you know who cut down my cherry tree?" George was afraid because his father was angry, but he wanted to tell the truth.

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"Father," George said, "I cannot tell a lie. I cut down the cherry tree." George's father took the boy in his arms and hugged him. He was happy because his son had told the truth.

Holidays

A holiday is a day made special by a culture's customs or laws. Holidays help a culture remember and honor its history. Each culture has its own traditions for recognizing and celebrating these special days. People may attend parades, sing songs, go on picnics or give gifts to each other on certain holidays. Some holidays are peculiar to a culture. Other holidays, like Christmas and Thanksgiving, are celebrated by many cultures around the world.

The English word holiday actually came from two words, holy and day. This is because, years ago, the only holidays that were observed were religious days. The best known religious holiday is Christmas. In most parts of the world, Christmas is a time of happy festivities. People decorate Christmas trees with ornaments and lights and give each other gifts. Families gather for large dinners that consist of turkey, ham, dressing, yams, and other holiday fare. They also attend church and give thanks for the birth of Jesus Christ, who was born as the savior of the world.

Below is a short version of the story of Christmas. As you read the story, think about how Christmas is celebrated in your culture. Do people in your culture celebrate Christmas like people in North America? If not, in what way do you celebrate Christmas? What holiday is the most important in your culture? Why?

The Christmas Story

While Mary and Joseph were resting in a stable in Bethlehem, Mary's baby was born. Mary was happy, because an angel had told her that her baby was the son of God, and that He would grow up to help people love one another, and love God. Mary called the baby Jesus.

The shepherds came to see the Christ Child and to worship Him. When they left, they spread the joyous news. All the angels came, too. They filled the air with singing as they praised God and said, "Glory be to God in the highest, and peace on earth and good will to man."

I hope this article has make you think more deeply about your culture and what it means to be part of your cultural community. Your culture is unique. But it is also has many similarities with other cultures. It is these similarities that allows so many cultures to exist together in the world.

-The End-