

What Is Culture?

BEFORE YOU READ

Reach Into Your Background

You and the people you know have certain ways of doing

things. You have a way of celebrating birthdays. You have a way of greeting your friends. You have a way of eating a meal. You have a way of speaking. You have ways of gesturing. Many of the ways you do things are unique to you alone. Others you share with people around you.

Questions to Explore

1. What is culture?
2. How do cultures develop?

Key Terms

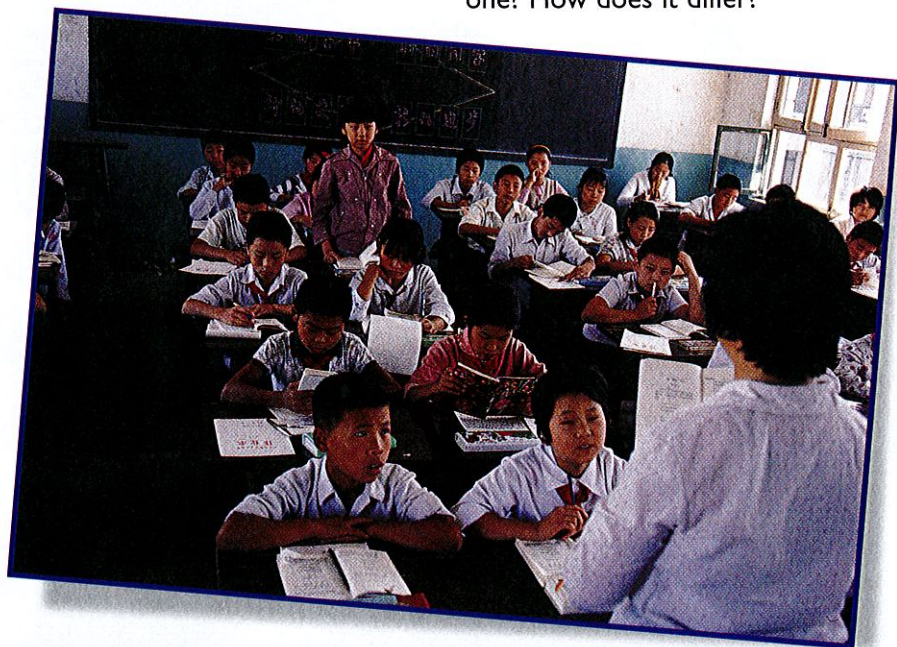
culture
cultural trait
technology
cultural landscape
agriculture

“All right, students,” your teacher says, “time to clean the room. Kaitlyn—I’d like you to sweep today. Guy and Keisha, please use these feather dusters to clean our shelves and windowsills. Eric and Bobby, you can do the lunch dishes today. Serena and Zack, please empty the wastebaskets and take out the trash.”

Would you be surprised if this happened in your classroom? Would you pitch in—or complain? In Japan, students would pitch in to help keep their classrooms clean. Hard work and neatness are important lessons. Although Japanese schools are similar to American ones, there are differences. Japanese students generally spend more time studying than many American students. In Japan, most children go to school five days a week and often on Saturdays for half a day. Many students do many hours of homework every afternoon and evening and over vacations.

Japanese students, like many American students, also enjoy sports, music, drama, and science. They join teams and clubs. They paint and take photographs. They play baseball, soccer, and tennis. They do karate and judo. They play musical instruments.

▼ These students in Japan are listening closely as their classmate speaks. How is your own classroom like this one? How does it differ?



Culture: A Total Way of Life

READ ACTIVELY



Predict What do you think the word *culture* means?

▼ How people live is part of their culture. Different cultures sometimes interact with their environment in similar ways. In mountainous Japan, farmers build terraces on the hillsides to increase the amount of land available for farming. Terrace farming is also used in other cultures, including those in South America and South Asia.

What if you met students from Japan? You would probably ask many questions. “How do you feel about cleaning your classroom?” you might ask. When you heard about how much homework they do, you might also ask “How do you find time to have fun?” Later, you might wonder about other things. What do Japanese students eat for lunch? What kinds of music do they like? What makes them laugh?

Answers to these questions will tell you something about the culture of Japan. **Culture** is the way of life of a group of people who share similar beliefs and customs. The language Japanese students speak and the way they dress are both a part of their culture. So are the subjects Japanese students study and what they do after school.

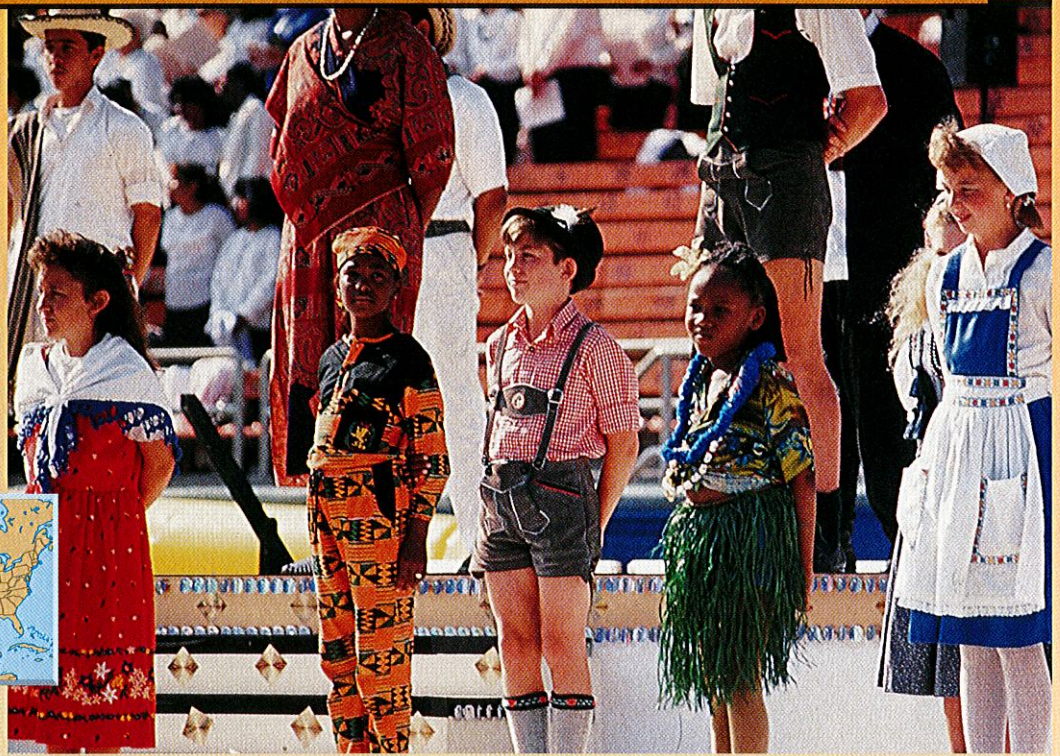
Elements of Culture Culture includes the work people do, their behaviors, their beliefs, and their ways of doing things. Parents pass these things on to their children, generation after generation. A particular group’s individual skills, customs, and ways of doing things are called **cultural traits**. Over time, cultural traits may change, but cultures change very slowly.

Some elements of a culture are easy to see. They include material things, such as houses and other structures, television sets, food, or clothing. Sports, entertainment, and literature are also visible elements of culture. The things you cannot see or touch are also part of culture. They include spiritual beliefs, ideals, government, and ideas about right and wrong. Language is also a very important part of culture.



Culture and Costume

Some aspects of culture, like the clothes people wear, may not seem important. When you visit another country, however, these differences can make you feel like an outsider. This photograph shows children who are watching an international track meet held in Los Angeles. The children are from the Los Angeles area. To make athletes from other countries feel welcome, they dressed in many different national costumes.



People and Their Land Geographers study culture, especially activities that relate to the environment. These things are part of the theme of human-environment interaction. Geographers want to know how landforms, climate, vegetation, and resources affect culture. For example, fish and seaweed are popular foods in Japan, a nation of islands. These islands are mountainous, with little farmland. Therefore, the Japanese get food from the sea.

Geographers are also interested in the effect people have on their environment. Often the effect is tied to a culture's **technology**, or tools and the skills people need to use them. People use technology to take advantage of natural resources and change the environment. Technology can mean tools like computers and the Internet. But technology also means stone tools and the ability to make them. Geographers use levels of technology to see how advanced a culture is.

A group's **cultural landscape** includes any changes to its environment. It also includes the technology used to make the changes. They vary from culture to culture. For example, Bali, in Indonesia, has many mountains. Therefore, people carved terraces in them to create flat farmland. Other regions, such as central India, have much level land. Farmers there would not develop a technology to create terraces.

Think about your culture. What do people eat? What are the houses like? What kind of work do people do? Can you identify some beliefs and values of your culture? In your mind, describe your culture. You may find it is harder to look at your own culture than at someone else's.

CITIZEN HEROES

Working Together

Sometimes the old ways are best. Two Bolivians, Bonifacia Quispe and Oswaldo Rivera, discovered the ancient Aymara Indians cut terraces into the sides of mountains to create flat farmland. Terraces are easier to irrigate and fertilize than slopes. In 1986, Quispe and Rivera taught the method to today's Aymara farmers. These farmers then grew 28 times more food.

The Development of Culture

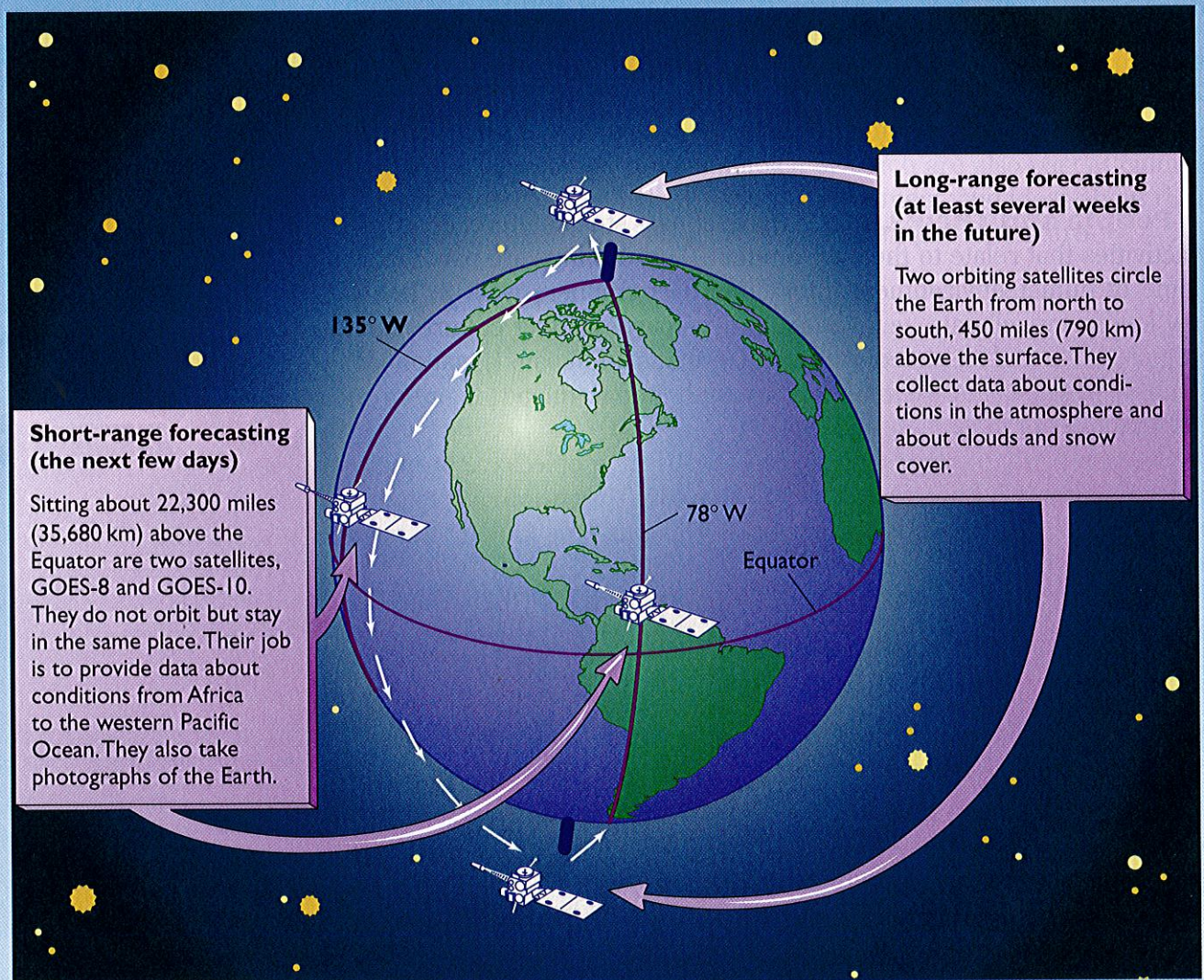
Cultures develop over a long time. Geographers say early cultures went through four stages: the invention of tools, the discovery of fire, the growth of **agriculture**, or farming, and the use of writing.



Technology and Weather Forecasting

Technology is a very important part of culture because it changes the way we do things. For thousands of years, people have looked up at the sky to try to forecast the weather. Today, meteorologists—scientists who study the weather—still look up at the sky. However, they use very advanced technology, including various kinds of

satellites, to do their job. Our ancestors could do little more than guess about the weather. Modern meteorologists, however, can make highly accurate forecasts about the weather several days into the future. Below is a diagram of a weather tracking satellite system.



Short-range forecasting (the next few days)

Sitting about 22,300 miles (35,680 km) above the Equator are two satellites, GOES-8 and GOES-10. They do not orbit but stay in the same place. Their job is to provide data about conditions from Africa to the western Pacific Ocean. They also take photographs of the Earth.

Long-range forecasting (at least several weeks in the future)

Two orbiting satellites circle the Earth from north to south, 450 miles (790 km) above the surface. They collect data about conditions in the atmosphere and about clouds and snow cover.

Early Technology For most of human history, people were hunters and gatherers. Traveling from place to place, they collected wild plants, hunted game, and fished. Wood and stone tools and weapons helped them hunt, prepare food, and do other work. Later they learned to make and use fire, so some people began living in colder climates.

The Start of Agriculture Then, people discovered how to grow crops and tame wild animals to use as food or to help them with work. Now people no longer had to spend all their time following herds or moving from campsite to campsite in search of wild plants. Over time, societies relied on farming for most of their food. Historians call this great change the Agricultural Revolution.

By 3,000 years ago, the Agricultural Revolution had changed much of the world. Agriculture provided a steady food supply. Birthrates rose; death rates fell; population increased. Agriculture also led to the creation of cities and complex societies. Some people produced food, and others developed special skills. For example, people became potters, tailors, or metal workers. People began to develop laws and government. To record information, they developed writing. Now, people could store knowledge and pass it on to others. When a culture creates a writing system, it is called a civilization.

Early civilizations also created unique forms of art and music. They organized their beliefs into religions, with priests, temples, and ceremonies. Their roads and canals became features of the landscape. People learned to control and change their environment. Because of technological inventions such as irrigation and terracing, people could grow more and better crops in more areas. People spread over more and more regions. As they moved, they made changes to the Earth's landscape.



The Domestication of Grain

Early people gathered the seeds of the wild grains for food. However, about 10,000 years ago, people in Southwest Asia decided to try to plant wild wheat to tide them over. The first crop was poor. But farmers saved seeds from the best plants and tried again the next year. Over time, this led to today's domesticated wheat.

**SECTION 1
REVIEW**

- 1. Define** (a) culture, (b) cultural trait, (c) technology, (d) cultural landscape, (e) agriculture.
- 2.** If someone asked you to describe your culture, what would you tell them?
- 3.** Describe four important developments in human culture. Tell why they are important.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Recognizing Cause and Effect** Agriculture encouraged people to settle in one area and provided a steady food supply. How did agriculture lead to civilization?

Activity

- 5. Writing to Learn** Find a photograph of a familiar scene in your town or city. List at least ten features of your culture shown in the photograph.