

## CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CIVILIZATION

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**Keywords:** Culture, social change, acculturation, rejection, adoption, tradition, belief, fundamentalism, food, festivals, difference, knowledge, birth, marriage, death, technology tolerance, Creolization

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### Summary

Culture in contemporary civilization can be seen to contain at least two major opposing forces: Globalization and cultural diversity. However, cultural difference can be creatively used to enhance tolerance of differences in a global situation, where different cultures meet with greater frequency and rapidity than in the past. Societies throughout the world adopt different strategies for dealing with change, the major ones being rejection, acculturation and adoption.

### 1. Introduction

Culture, defined by William F. Ogburn as the “environment which men have, but which wild animals do not have”, is in essence “our social heritage, ... a composite of many different parts, such as cities, families, forms, philosophies, art, science,” and, as Tyler amplifies: “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Redfield narrows the field somewhat when defining a particular culture as “an organized body of conventional understandings, manifest in art and artifact, which persisting through tradition, characterizes a human group”. Furthermore, although tradition is part of the concept of culture, culture itself is by no means static and the social evolution of a particular society includes, to a large degree, the evolution of culture as well. There is, however, the phenomenon of what can be defined as “cultural lag” to be taken into consideration, too. Giving rise to unrest and social conflict in many contemporary societies on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the lack of synchronization between social evolution, which is proceeding apace, for example, as a result of the speed of modern technology, particularly Information Technology that disseminates information almost instantaneously

on a global scale, and the traditional ways prevailing in a particular society. All of these developments together strain the ability to adapt of societies with particularly strong religious convictions, such as some staunchly conservative Islamic societies, for example, to the breaking point. The result is often a period of repression and retreat from the outside world, with a possible reemergence after a time of isolation, to engage once again with global influences, once a modicum of consensus within the society as regards such matters as the national identity have been reached. This can be observed, for example, in more recent developments in Iran. At the other end of the spectrum of possible scenarios, are the reactionary actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan, resulting in harsh repression and dire social and economic consequences, particularly for women and children, representing a restrictive reduction of the definition of Afghan culture as an expression of religious fundamentalism, which manifests itself in radical regression as regards social, economic and political evolution.

Cultural lag can also be seen in the practice of medicine, which may be connected with religious or philosophical ideas with regard not only toward the causes of illness, the value of suffering and concepts of healing, and these can work in both directions. This can be observed, for example, in the increasing popularity of so-called “alternative medicine”, in Western societies and in the adoption perhaps of foreign healing procedures and medicines, as a reaction possibly to what is perceived to be the increasing anonymity of contemporary technologically geared medical practice. Indeed, social psychology is being increasingly studied and the modern concept of personality is viewed less in Darwinian terms as a result of genetic determinism than as a result of the cultural patterning of the environment in which a child is raised and nurtured. Exposure to group related institutions such as the family, religious institutions and activities, school and playground shape group cultural patterns. Sociologists also attest to the changes in feminine personality over the past century, where a fixed biological nature has been subjected to rapidly changing cultural phenomena. One of the first European signs of this change was a literary text, namely, the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen’s play: *The Doll’s House*, which demonstrates the clash between the traditional male view of women and the newer view of female self-understanding. Fashion and custom also represent two factors at opposite ends of the spectrum as regards cultural evolution. Whereas fashion by its very nature is subject to constant change, custom remains relatively static and is slow to change

Concepts such as “high”, “mass” and “folk” culture represent the reality of the stratification of many western European societies. However, the institutionalization of culture fosters the idea of a collective consciousness, which is then propagated by such institutions as the educational system and the media. This structured pressure for consistency is at variance in contemporary society with the “overproduction of symbolic goods with a bewildering flow of signs, images, information, fashions and styles” (cf. Münch and Smelser).

One of the most striking changes in contemporary societies, placing considerable strain on traditional values is the so-called “Youth” culture. Max Weber (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft - Economy and Society*) was one of the first to point out what Karl Mannheim later summed up as follows: “Industrial society places an increasing premium on youth and lowers the currency of accumulated wisdom”. Max Weber had observed that apart from situations of chronic warfare, the prestige of the old wanes in relation to the rapidity of change affecting a particular society: “This is also the case in periods of economic and

political changes of a revolutionary character, whether peaceful or violent, and also in periods of weakened religious controls, in which sacred traditions are at an ebb. Age, on the other hand, is held in high esteem wherever experience is an actual asset and wherever tradition remains a vital force”. This phenomenon has deeply affected societies such as Japan and many countries in Africa, where veneration of the aged has been put under pressure by the emphasis on youth. This occurs particularly in the field of Information Technology, with the emergence of such groups of young successful people, dubbed “Yuppies” (Young upwardly mobile professionals), who have been able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by quick access to information, which the older generation had to laboriously accumulate. As Karl Mannheim put it: ”Success on the free competitive market demands a continuous awareness of social change. An individual who must live by his wits and seize his opportunities as they arise no longer feels committed to a prescribed way of life”.

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#### **Biographical Sketch**

**Thorpe, Kathleen:** Associate Professor, German Studies in der School of Literature and Language Studies, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Teaches German Literature. Has published widely on contemporary Austrian prose, women’s literature, gender studies, multiculturalism, and literary translation. Has translated books by Peter Rosei.