

CULTURAL EXCHANGE

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Summary

The twentieth century has seen rapid changes on all fronts and this is no more evident than in the sphere of culture. Since the Second World War, rapid transport of large groups of people has led to a greater exposure to the cultures of other peoples. The ethnic composition of populations has become increasingly multicultural and this has had both positive and negative effects on the populations generally. Globalization has promoted the ideas and other cultural contents all over the world with great speed. This has led to the adoption of foreign goods and concepts with great rapidity. However, many of these goods and ideas become objects of fashion, which can be discarded with the speed at which they were embraced. Americanization has been an all-pervasive influence world-wide. It is natural that societies which have remained generally static in their culture for long periods of time would find such influences threatening.

1. Introduction

The various components comprising the concept of culture are based in essence on a body of conventional understandings that persist through tradition and refined the identity of a particular group of people. This may also transcend national boundaries, where members of a particular cultural group are to be found within different nation states, as a result of map-drawing during the colonial era or as a result of historical conquests or cessions. This can be observed in Africa, for example, where members of one cultural group are to be found in the border areas or two or more nation states. This is not only the case in Africa, where cultural differences have given rise to extreme conflict, but also in Europe in countries such as France, Belgium and Spain with significant numbers of inhabitants belonging to a different cultural group to that of the bulk of the population. This can most clearly be seen in the different languages spoken within one state. Examples of the borders of a state not necessarily coinciding with cultural borders are the Basque regions of both Spain and France, Francophone Belgium and Switzerland which is home to four main cultural groups, namely the

French, German, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic. A shared cultural heritage and language is also to be found in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, which through cultural evolution have, in addition to shared language and cultural heritage component, have developed different their cultural contents in different ways. Language islands also exist in various parts of the world, such as German in Namibia Sorbian in eastern Germany, the Romanian Banat and Siebenbuergen areas. The United States, with its strong identity of what is “American” is also home to many different cultural groups such as Native Americans and Hispanic groups, all with significantly different cultural traditions.

The contents of culture are manifold and encompass all that man has acquired in the way of habits and capabilities in his role as a member of society. This means that the complex entity of received social heritage, broken down into its different parts impacts not only on how the individual perceives him- or herself, but in their interaction with other members of the same society and foreign ones and which may become acute in times of rapid social change. Some of these cultural complexes relate to the way in which knowledge is perceived and who is responsible for conveying and conserving it. (see *Diversity and unity in the cultural heritage of peoples, states and humanity*)

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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.