**Chapter 4: Folk & Popular Culture**

**Key Issue 1: Where Are Folk and Popular Leisure Activities Distributed?**

**Culture** is defined as a collection of social **customs**; customs are repetitive acts of groups. Repetitive acts of individuals are called **habits**. Chapter 4 focuses on two facets of material culture: (1) culture deriving from the necessities of daily life such as food, clothing and shelter, and (2) leisure activities such as the arts and recreation.

Culture is defined as the body of material characteristics, customary beliefs, and social forms that together embody the distinct tradition of a group of people. These three components of culture capture the interest of geographers; in Chapter 4, the visible elements that a group possesses and leaves behind for the future are discussed. Following the examination of migration in Chapter 3, links can be made to the discussion of culture in this Chapter; two locations have similar cultural beliefs, objects, and institutions because people bring along their culture when they migrate. Differences become apparent when two groups have limited interaction.

To analyze the relationship between culture and the behavior of people, geographers differentiate between habit and custom. Habit is a performative act that a particular individual repeats, such as wearing jeans to class every day. A custom is a repetitive act of a group, performed to the extent that it becomes characteristic of the group, such as many students typically wearing jeans to class.

**Introducing Folk and Popular Culture** Geographers have identified two major categories of culture: **folk** and **popular** **culture**.Folk culture and popular culture differ in their patterns of origins, diffusion, and distribution. Folk culture is practiced by small homogenous groups living in isolated rural areas. Popular culture is found in large heterogeneous societies that share certain customs despite differences in other personal characteristics. Landscapes heavily influenced by folk culture change relatively little over time, while popular culture’s foundation rests on rapid simultaneous global connections through communications systems, transportation networks, and other modern technology. Rapid diffusion promotes persistent changes in popular culture. Scalar differences are observed in folk and popular culture, as well – globally, popular culture is becoming more dominant (at least for those with the income to have access to it), while many folk cultures are locally based. This global phenomenon threatens the existence of unique folk cultures, potentially reducing local diversity the world over. Popular culture may also pose negative environmental effects, with “built environments” being unsustainable.

**Origin, Diffusion, and Distribution of Folk and Popular Culture** The distribution of folk and popular culture can be explained by two basic factors: the process of origin and the pattern of distribution.

**Origin** Customs originate from hearths. Folk customs are often anonymous while popular customs originate in more developed countries as part of the market for recreational (leisure) and disposable income to purchase these material goods.

**Diffusion** Popular culture diffuses (usually hierarchically) through rapid electronic communications and transportation networks. Folk culture diffuses through relocation diffusion (migration).

**Distribution** Popular culture is distributed widely across many countries, with little regard for physical factors. The primary barrier to access is lack of income to purchase the materials of popular culture. Folk cultures often (though not always) incorporate elements of the local environment. Groups with relatively little contact with others develop unique folk cultures. Himalayan religious art is used as an example of how isolated religious groups depict the same environment much differently in their art.

**Geographic Differences Between Folk and Popular Culture** Geographers recognize that cultural features display distinctive regional distributions. Culture regions are often vernacular – people perceive these regions to exist as a component of their cultural identity. Culture regions may also manifest as formal or functional. The region encompassing a folk culture is generally much smaller than one encompassing a popular culture, due to connections (or lack thereof). Limited connections, possibly due to physical barriers, may engender different folk cultures in a relatively small geographic area.

**Origin and Diffusion of Folk and Popular Music** Music researcher Daniel Levitan argues that every culture in human history has had some tradition of music. Music can be looked to as an example of the differences in the origin, diffusion, and distribution of folk and popular culture.

**Folk Music** The purpose of folk music is to tell stories or to disseminate information. Folk music typically originates from an anonymous hearth and is transmitted among populations orally. As people migrate, folk music travels with them as part of the diffusion of folk culture.

**Popular Music** Popular music is deliberately written to be sold and performed. While some forms of popular music contain references to local places or events, the purpose of the music is still to appeal to a variety of people across Earth. As with other elements of popular culture, popular musicians have more connections with performers of similar styles, regardless of where in the world they happen to live, than they do with performers of different styles who happen to live in the same community.

In the past musicians clustered in particular communities according to their shared interest in specific styles. Because of the globalization of popular music, musicians are less tied to the culture of a particular place. Now musicians cluster in communities where other musicians reside regardless of the style of music they play. Musicians are also clustered in large metropolitan areas so they can be near sources of employment.

**Origin and Diffusion of Folk and Popular Sports** Many sports originated as isolated folk customs and were spread like other folk culture, through the relocation diffusion (migration). The contemporary diffusion of organized sports, however, displays the traits of popular culture.

**Folk Culture: Origin of Soccer** Soccer is an example of a popular folk custom that was popularized and then globalized. The hearth of soccer is believed to be in England in the eleventh century. Following the Danish invasion of England between 1018 and 1042, workers excavating a building site discovered a Danish soldier’s head, which they began to kick. “Kick the Dane’s head” evolved into boys using an inflated cow bladder in the place of the head, and games were played between two villages. The victorious side was the one to kick the ball into the center of the rival village.

**Popular Culture: Diffusion of Soccer** In the 1800s, soccer transformed from a folk custom to a popular culture. Several English soccer clubs formed an association to standardize the rules and to organize professional leagues. Spectators started to pay to see first-class events. Soccer then diffused to other parts of Europe. Soccer later diffused to other parts of the world by new communication systems such as the radio and TV. Today, the global popularity of soccer is exemplified in the World Cup, held every four years.

**Olympic Sports** Other sports are similar to soccer as elements of popular culture, though the distribution of each sport is different. If a sport becomes popular enough worldwide, it becomes part of the Olympics. For a sport to be to be included in the Olympics it must be widely played in at least 75 countries (50 countries for women sports) and on four continents.

**Surviving Folk Sports** Most other sports have diffused much less than soccer. Cricket, Wushu, baseball, and lacrosse are examples of sports that never became very popular globally.

**Key Issue 2: Where Are Folk and Popular Material Culture Distributed?**

**Elements of Material Culture** Folk culture is more apt to be influenced by environmental conditions, but popular culture is not insulated from these environmental influences. Geographers have noted that folk and popular culture can come into conflict with one another.

**Wine Geography** The spatial distribution of wine production is indicative of the importance of both environmental and cultural elements. Grapes needed for making decent wine grow better in some places compared to others.

**Wine Production: Environmental Factors** The distinctive character of a wine stems from a vineyard’s terrior – the unique combination of soil, climate, and other traits at the place where the grapes are grown.

**Wine Production: Cultural Factors** Cultural values underpin the historical and contemporary production of wine. 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 characteristics conducive to accepting those customs.

**Conflicting Folk and Popular Cultural Values** Conflicts may emerge between folk and popular culture. For example, wearing folk clothing in countries dominated by popular culture can be controversial, and vice versa. Particularly difficult has been the coexistence of the loose-fitting combination body covering, head covering, and veil traditionally worn by women in Southwest Asia and North Africa in contrast to the open-necked blouses, tight-fitting slack, and revealing skirts commonly seen in casual Western-style popular women’s clothing.

**Folk and Popular Clothing** People living in folk cultures have traditionally worn clothing in part in response to characteristic agricultural practices and climatic conditions. In popular culture, clothing choices generally reflect occupations rather than particular environments.

**Folk Clothing Preferences** People wear distinctive folk clothing for a variety of environmental and cultural reasons. Women who live in countries in Southwest Asia and Northern Europe are discouraged from wearing popular casual Western-style clothing because of religious reasons. On the other hand, some European countries prohibit women from wearing traditional clothing from Southwest Asia and North Africa because the leaders in government believe that those clothes make women seem like second class citizens.

**Rapid Diffusion of Popular Clothing Styles** Popular clothing habits have little regard for the climate or topography of an area. Because of the sufficient incomes, the social desirability of dressing for a particular job or social class, and rapid communications, popular clothing styles can change several times per year across the more developed world. Jeans are an example of how Western popular culture has diffused to other countries. Jeans retain local diversity because different regions of the world prefer a particular style of jeans.

**Folk Food Customs** According to the nineteenth-century cultural geographer Vidal de la Blache, food supply is one of the most enduring connections that tie people to a particular environment. Food preferences are strongly influenced by cultural traditions, and shared food preferences may help to establish social, religious, and ethnic customs.

**Food and the Environment** The local climate presents a major influence on what can and cannot be grown. The contribution of a location’s distinctive physical features to the way food tastes is known as **terroir.** Folk cultures have had to adapt their food preferences to conditions in their local environment and this has created distinctive local cuisines around the world. Folk cultures will also eat certain foods that are believed to enhance qualities that are considered desirable by their society.

**Food Taboos** The development of food **taboos** are thought to be partly environmental and partly cultural. Taboos are restrictions on behavior imposed by religious law or social custom. These taboos may help to protect endangered animals or to conserve scarce natural resources. Many religions have food taboos because they protected the environment of the religion’s hearth. Social values can also influence what people eat because people in similar climates and with similar levels of income consume different foods.

**Popular Food Preferences** Popular food preferences are impacted more by cultural values than by environmental features. Despite this, some regional differences are apparent between and within countries, and environmental factors remain significant in specific items.

**Regional Differences: Global Scale** The example of soft drink sales can be instructive in examining differences in global preferences. While Coca-Cola accounts for more than half of the world’s soft drink sales, Pepsi is another prominent brand, making up one-fourth of the soft drink market. Pepsi is preferred in Québec, where marketing practices tied the soft drink to French Canadian identity. Political influences may play a role in preference, as seen in the Soviet Union and the Arab countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

**Regional Differences: U.S. Snack and Fast Food** Regional differences in food preferences of developed countries may be associated with cultural or environmental factors, while others are more abstract in their origin. Americans may choose particular beverages or snacks in part on the basis of preferences of what is produced, grown, or imported locally. Many regional variations cannot be easily explained by cultural or environmental factors, as can be seen by the differences in the distribution and concentration of McDonalds across the United States.

**Folk and Popular Housing** The house, as theorized by French geographer Jean Brunhes, is a product of both cultural and natural conditions. American cultural geographer Fred Kniffen considered the house to be a good reflection of cultural heritage, current fashion, functional needs, and the impact of environment.

**Folk Housing** Singular environmental and cultural factors play a role in the provision of housing in folk cultures.

**Environmental Influences** Folk housing styles are another example of the influence of the physical environment, with housing design reflecting both cultural norms and environmental influences from the type of building material used to the shape of the house to more efficiently heat, cool, or shed water. Even in areas that share similar climates and available building materials, folk housing can vary because of minor differences in environmental features.

**Cultural Influences** Some folk housing distinctive design may also derive primarily from religious values and other customary beliefs. Houses in some folk cultures may have sacred walls or corners. Compass direction may play a big role in how the house was built and how the interior of the house is arranged.

**U.S. Folk Housing** Older houses in the United States from the east coast toward the Mississippi River display a local folk-culture tradition. The distribution of U.S. folk housing styles reflected whatever style was prevailing at the place on the East Coast from which the people migrated from. Housing built in the 1940s and beyond is indicative of how popular customs differ more in time than in place.

**Key Issue 3: Why Is Access to Folk and Popular Culture Unequal?**

**Diffusion of TV and Internet** The world’s most popular and important electronic media format is television (TV). While the Internet has grown in popularity and importance in recent years, TV remains the foremost electronic media format.

**Distribution and Diffusion of TV** Popular culture is diffused faster and further than ever with the invention and diffusion of forms of electronic communication like television. Television allows images and messages about popular culture, such as professional sports, to spread instantaneously across the globe. Watching TV is now the most popular leisure activity in the world, with the average human watching 3 hours daily and the average American watching 5 hours daily The technology by which television is delivered is changing throughout the world, with ownership rates in developing countries climbing rapidly since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

**Diffusion of the Internet** Internet service has diffused at a rapid pace throughout the world. The diffusion of the Internet has occurred much more quickly than TV. It is likely to diffuse even further in the years ahead at a rapid rate.

**Diffusion of Social Media** People in the United States have dominated the use of social media during the early years. Social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube still enjoy their greatest popularity in the United States, but are quickly diffusing to other countries. The possibility of other social media platforms gaining popularity outside the United States also exists.

**Diffusion of Facebook** Since the founding of Facebook by Harvard University students in 2004, it has diffused rapidly. Mirroring the early dominance of Internet in the United States, Facebook users in the United States outnumbered those in other countries during its early years. As of 2014, the United States and India claim more than 100 million Facebook users each, with developing countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Indonesia behind. Facebook is not as popular in China and Russia, due to competing social media platforms and restrictions on Internet usage.

**Diffusion of Twitter** The United States was the source of one-third of all Tweets in 2014, with another one-third originating in India, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and Canada. The rising presence of social media in developing countries such as India and Brazil may be a preview of future trends, in which electronic communications advances diffuse rapidly not only in developed countries, but the world over.

**External Threat: Developed Countries Control the Media** Since media outlets are largely Western (especially television programming), their content may present values or beliefs in conflict with those of a particular place receiving those broadcasts. Government may perceive this Western control as a threat to their national systems and attempt to restrict the programming available to the populace.

**Internet Threat: Social Media** In some places around the globe residents have sought out Western programming otherwise not available through the use of satellite dishes. Governments around the world are also trying to limit the Internet content in their countries. Social media has started to play an even more significant role in breaking the monopoly of government control over the diffusion of information.

**Challenges in Accessing Electronic Media** Not every country enjoys the same open access to information and modern electronic communications (e.g. the Internet and cell phones) as the citizens of the United States do. Based on a Freedom on the Net survey of the level of Internet and digital media freedom in 65 countries, 19 countries were categorized as “free,” 31 were classified as “partly free,” and 15 were “not free.” Three categories of restrictions on the free use of the Internet are recognized by Freedom on the Net: banned technology, blocked content, and violated user rights.

**Banned Technology** Governments can prevent electronic technology deemed unwanted by regulating the underlying technology platforms that are supported by the infrastructure in the country. Some governments do not permit the sale of certain models of phones, tablets, and computers. Devices that are permitted must be configured to exclude certain functionality. Some travelers between free countries, such as from the United States to Western Europe, discover that their devices fail to operate due to incompatible cellular infrastructure. China is an example of a country that aggressively monitors and restricts foreign applications, as evidenced by the relatively small fraction of Facebook and Twitter users living there.

**Blocked Content** Some websites and web content is censored or prevented altogether from being displayed on devices in a particular country. The leaders of some developing countries view American dominance of TV programming as a new method of cultural and economic imperialism. Social norms present in this programming may not match those of developing countries; many satellite and cable providers in these developing countries block programming containing such content. Three types of Internet content are routinely censored in select countries:

* Political content that expresses views in opposition to those of the current administration or that is related to human rights, freedom of expression, minority rights, and religious movements.
* Social content related to sexuality, gambling, and illegal drugs and alcohol, as well as other topics that may be socially sensitive or perceived as offensive.
* Security content related to armed conflicts, border disputes, separatist movements, and militant groups.

**Violated User Rights** Some citizens of countries that are not “free” digitally have devised ways of circumventing government restrictions on ownership of hardware, use of software, and viewing of online content. These governments have codified physical attacks and imprisonment to intimidate their citizens into ceasing these departures. Freedom on the Net has noted that women and the LGBTQQIAAP community have been targeted in a number of countries for their online activities. Iran, Syria, and China have been identified by Freedom on the Net as the worst-offending countries in using the oppressive actions.

**Key Issue 4: Why Do Folk and Popular Culture Face Sustainability Challenges?**

**Sustainability Challenges for Folk Culture** Growing connections with popular culture can make it difficult for folk culture to maintain centuries-old practices and customs. A folk culture group often undergoes a process of **assimilation**, which is a process of giving up cultural traditions, such as food and clothing preferences, and adopting social customs of the dominant culture of a place. Instead of assimilation, a folk group often undergoes **acculturation**, which is a process of adjustment to the dominant culture of a place, while retaining features of a folk culture, or syncretism (the creation of a new cultural feature through combining elements of two groups).

**Preserving Cultural Identity: The Amish** The Amish are an example of a group in the United States that shuns any mechanical or electrical power. The globalization of popular culture represents to many people in folk cultural societies a loss of traditional values. Many fear the loss of folk culture, especially because of the rising demand for possessions of a popular culture. For folk culture, increased connection with popular culture can make it difficult to maintain centuries-old practices. Folk societies are trying hard to maintain their unique culture in an age of globalization.

**Challenging Cultural Values: Dowries in India** The global diffusion of popular culture has challenged the subservience of women that is embedded in some folk cultures. This has been both a good thing and a bad thing for women in developing countries. The family of the bride in India is sometimes expected to provide the groom with a dowry. Some women in India have actually been killed because their family did not pay a large enough dowry to the groom. Although anti-dowry laws were enacted by the government of India in 1961, they are largely ignored and women still face the consequences of the harsh reality of this custom.

**Sustainability Challenges for Popular Culture** Popular culture can greatly modify or control the environment, with little regard for local environmental conditions, such as climate and soil. The diffusion of some popular customs can negatively impact environmental quality in two ways: landscape pollution and depletion of natural resources.

**Landscape Pollution**  For many popular customs, the environment is altered to enhance participation in a leisure activity or to promote the sale of a product. Although some built environments are designed to look “natural,” they are actually deliberately created by people in the pursuit of popular social customs.

**Uniform Landscapes** The spatial expression of a popular custom in one location will be similar to another. To build a uniform landscape, hills may be flattened and valleys filled in. Promoters of popular culture actually want a uniform appearance to generate “product [or brand] recognition” and greater consumption. Gas stations, supermarkets, and fast food restaurants all exhibit characteristics of a uniform landscape. Physical expression of uniformity in popular culture has diffused from North America to other countries, further establishing uniformity in the global landscape.

**Resource Depletion** Popular customs may also involve the overuse and depletion of scarce natural resources. The increased demand for meat is leading to a decrease in the total amount of grain available. Pollution often times results from popular cultural practices. Recycling consumer products is helping to alleviate all the unwanted by-products that usually end up in landfills or burned in incinerators.

Golf courses require large expanses of open, carefully managed grass. Some golf courses are designed partially in response to local physical conditions. Many courses have little regard for local conditions and usually dramatically alter the natural landscape of an area. Golf course remake the environment by creating of flattening hills, cutting grass, carting in or digging up sand for traps, and draining or expanding bodies of water to create hazards.