

## What is Culture?

Culture reflects the knowledge and identity of a particular group. Cultural identity is a reflection of a people's language, religion, food, literature, ethics, music and art. There are thousands of different cultures in the world today. Some share similarities like the United States and Britain does when it comes to an appreciation for democracy. Some cultures could not be more different like France where women dress in all the latest trends compared to Saudi Arabia where women are generally required to wear head coverings and much more modest dress.

Cultural differences reflect the different attitudes and thinking of people: for example, in Canada people meeting for the first time typically shake hands. In Egypt shaking hands is also customary *provided* the two people belong to the same gender; however, if a man greets a woman typically the female must extend her hand first. If she does not, the man typically bows his head in greeting. So, while greetings look different in Canadian and Egyptian cultures respectively, they serve the same fundamental purpose: to introduce people to one another in order to show respect.

Cultural values are transmitted by parents to their children; they are also transmitted to the young through religious communities, peer groups, schools, and through such things as social media and movies. One value Canadians learn at an early age is to value the tolerance of individual differences. This does not mean intolerance does not exist in Canada. Yet, compared to many other societies Canadians are comparatively much more tolerant of diversity. The process whereby Canadians learn tolerance is called socialization. Socialization is the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to a particular society, e.g. Egyptian men show respect to women by not forcing them to shake hands. As it stands, socialization is used both for good and for ill: in 2017 a Buddhist majority in Myanmar persecuted, killed and exiled the Rohingya (a Muslim minority). Buddhists were encouraged to reject the Rohingya for cultural, religious and ethnic reasons. Something like this taking place in 21st century Canada is inconceivable.<sup>1</sup>

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### Why Cultures Are Different Reading Assignment

Read the handout entitled *Why Cultures Are Different* and answer the following questions.

- 1). Create and provide your own definition for the concept of *culture*.
- 2). Provide a definition for the concept *in-group*.
- 3). Provide a definition for the concept an *out-group*.
- 4). Explain by way of example why tension might exist between two people who belong to two different in-groups.
- 5). Why is it accurate to describe culture by using a metaphor of an onion with outer and inner layers? Explain.
- 6). What role, if any, does history play in the formation of a culture?
- 7). What exactly is an *idiom*?

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<sup>1</sup> Genocide might be inconceivable in the 21st century BCE Canadian context; however, Canada's history as recently as the 20th century with respect to the treatment of minorities is far from perfect. The residential school system, for instance, materially contributed to a death toll numbering in the thousands.

- 8). Why do members of different cultures struggle to understand one another's idioms?
- 9). Provide a definition for the concept of *worldview*.
- 10). In what fundamental sense are Westerners culturally different from Africans?
- 11). Describe the process by which culture is transmitted?
- 12). Provide a working definition for the concept of a *parent culture*.
- 13). What is *ethnocentrism*?