



# *Cultures: Similarities And Differences*

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## Cultures: Similarities and Differences

Time: 27:15

### **PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

The program opens with a short preview of the five locations and cultures compared and contrasted in the program -- Akropong, Ghana; Chicago, Illinois; St. Petersburg, Russia; Gitwinksihlkw, British Columbia (Canada); and San Luis Potosi, Mexico. The communities are thousands of miles from each other, yet they share many similarities. Their citizens are members of various groups, including the *nuclear family*. Other groups mentioned include the *extended family*, *clan*, and *tribe*. Size and function of these groups are briefly covered. The program then discusses other groups and subgroups (educational attainment, occupation,

social and recreational preferences, political affiliations, age and religion). The expression of ideas, information and emotions through language, art and the performing arts is something else shared by all cultures. Differences in art, language and music are based on history, technology, natural resources and other factors. All cultures have ways to obtain food, also. Depending on resources, technologies and geography, cultures obtain food by gathering, farming, fishing, herding, ranching -- or a combination of these strategies. In urbanized cultures, food is obtained in



stores. All cultures have governments, too. History plays a key role in how governments function in a society. One of the most important functions of government is educating young people. It is one of the ways cultures pass from one generation to the next important information

and *values*. Parents and other adults in the family also pass on important information and values. All cultures have religions and/or philosophies that guide behavior and explain human existence. Many cultures combine religious traditions. Religious differences may be explained by history and a society's relationship to nature. In addition to the six factors that make up cultural behavior, the "things" of a culture, such as its tools and modes of transportation, differ through technologies, climate, natural resources and ability to muster economic resources.

## **STUDENT OBJECTIVES**

After viewing this video and participating in the suggested activities, students should be able to do the following:

- (1) Name at least five major group classifications found in all cultures, and tell why they differ.

- (2) Tell three methods cultures employ to express information, ideas and emotions, and explain why these methods may differ among cultures.
- (3) Name five strategies cultures use to obtain food, and explain why those methods may differ among cultures.
- (4) Explain methods cultures use to pass to the next generation important values, information and ideas.
- (5) Tell the role religion and philosophies play in a culture, and explain why religions may differ.
- (6) Tell the role governments play in culture, and explain why governments may differ.
- (7) Explain why the “things” of a culture may differ.

## **SUGGESTED LESSON PLAN**

### **Introduction**

Write the word “culture” on the chalkboard. Discuss what the word means. At the end of the discussion, write the following definition: “The way a people live their lives, the way they see the world and their place in it, and the things they make and use.” Analyze the different parts of the definition, then have your students give examples of each section of the definition. Ask if any class members have traveled overseas. If so, were the cultures there different than here? In what ways? The descriptions probably will be somewhat general. Tell the class that social scientists, people who study cultures, develop classifications to help them accurately compare cultures and how people behave. They then use those classifications as they study different cultures (or other groups of people).

## Previewing Activities

Tell the class that they will see a video called ***Cultures: Similarities & Differences***. Explain that the program looks at the people in five different communities around the world to show how all cultures are the same, how they differ, and the reasons why the differences occur. Then hand out “Site Locations,” which show where the five communities are found. Using an atlas, classroom map or globe, find the locations, and have your students write their names in the appropriate spaces. Then hand out “Site Profiles,” which gives background information on the communities shown in the video. Have your students read the descriptions silently, or aloud. If appropriate, discuss the descriptions if you feel it is appropriate. Next, hand out “Vocabulary List,” which lists terms in the program that your students may not know. You may decide to have your students look up the terms, or have volunteers give their definitions. Whenever necessary, refine the definitions. (If your classroom time is limited, you may find it advisable to assign the first three handouts as a homework exercise.) Next, pass out “Viewer’s Concept Guide.” Have your students read the questions before viewing the program. You may decide to have the class answer the questions as they see the program, or afterwards. Because this program runs approximately 25 minutes, you may find it necessary to show it in two sessions. Please consult the transcript below to determine the best stop point for your students.



## Post-viewing Activities

Ask the class if there are any questions about the program. If your students did not fill out the “Viewer’s Concept Guide” while watching the program, have them do so now, either individually or

as a class activity. Go over the answers with the class if the students have done this exercise as an individual activity. Hand out “Non-verbal Communication.” Help your students understand that non-verbal communication is an extremely important factor in the communication process, and that it is very easy for misunderstandings to take place when people of different cultures meet because their non-verbal languages may differ significantly. Next, pass out “Cultural Analysis & Comparisons.” Because of its difficulty, you may elect to do this exercise with your class. It will be important for the class to understand that filling out this chart gives only an extremely brief overview of each culture. Point out that cultures are extremely complex, and that there are often overlapping categories and various shades of gray. For example, under the “religion” category, the Nisga’a of Gitwinksihlkw practice both Christianity and totemism. Some Nisga’a may believe more strongly in their traditional creed than in the beliefs brought by missionaries. Others may believe more in Christianity. Finally, a brief “Evaluation Exercise” has been provided to determine each student’s level of comprehension.

### **ANSWER KEY**

**Site Locations:** A. Gitwinksihlkw, Canada; B. St. Petersburg, Russia; C. Akropong, Ghana; D. Chicago, IL; E. St. Luis Potosi, Mexico.

**Viewer’s Concept Guide:** 1. nuclear family; 2. wash dishes, watch over family’s animals, gather and prepare food, tend the family plot; 3. wolves, ravens, killer whales, eagles; 4. There are more occupational groups and various subdivisions of those groups in high-tech cultures; 5. Those based on similar interests, recreational preferences, political affiliations, age; 6. express information, ideas and emotions; 7. high-tech cultures; 8. found nearby, readily available; 9. fishing, hunting, gathering, raising animals and crops, herding, shopping; 10. salmon; 11. The government of the United States is extremely powerful and is

based on a system “by, for and of the people.” The regional and local governments of Ghana are based on an elaborate system of chiefs and sub chiefs and leadership is hereditary; 12. because the Spanish colonists in Mexico lived under an authoritarian system of government; 13. from parent and grandparent to child thorough words, literature, example; 14. helps guide behavior, addresses spiritual side of human nature; 15. feel a deep kinship with nature; 16. religion; 17. nature, a culture’s relationship to nature, history, technology; 18. have groups; have methods to express ideas, information and emotions; ways to obtain food; ways to pass on to the next generation what it believes to be important information and values; religions and/or philosophies; governments; 19. geography, levels of technology, access to money; 20. inexpensive and nonporous

**Non-verbal Communication:** 1. nodding and smiling; 2. shaking head; 3. index finger held to closed mouth; 4. palm toward body, crook index finger, move it back and forth toward body; 5. waving or flicking hand away from body; 6. hand raised, or whistle loudly; 7. curved hand extended palm outward; 8. wrinkle nose while puckering lips.

**Cultural Analysis & Comparisons:** Answers will vary.

**Evaluation Exercise:** 1. F; 2. T; 3. F; 4. T; 5. T; 6. F; 7. F; 8.T; 9.T; 10. T; 11. F; 12. T; 13. F; 14. F; 15. I; 16. T; 17. T.

### **TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO**

Akropong, Ghana, in western Africa.

Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.

St. Petersburg, Russia, in eastern Europe.

Gitwinksihlkw, British Columbia, in Canada.

San Luis Potosi, Mexico.

They are communities thousands of miles from each other, populated by people of different races, different languages, and different customs. Yet, these diverse peoples share many similarities.

In fundamental ways, their cultures (the way a people live their lives, the way they see the world and their place in it, and the things they make and use) are alike.

For one thing, these cultures, and all others, are made up of groups.

The core group of all societies is the “nuclear family” – a parent (or parents) and their children.

The nuclear family may vary in size, of course. In some countries, religious and cultural traditions, economic conditions and other factors may foster large families, while in other countries, just the opposite may be the case.

Beyond the nuclear family lies the “extended family” – grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, as well as parents and their children.

In cultures such as those found in southern Ghana, members of the extended family often live together in compounds, a number of houses built closely to each other, generally around a central court yard.

Members of the extended family often work as an economic unit, doing various household chores, such as washing dishes and watching over the family’s animals.

They also may gather and prepare food, as well as tend the family plot.

A group of extended families makes up a clan, and many clans may make up a tribe.

Young Nisga’a Indians in British Columbia learn very early, for instance, that their tribe is divided into four clans – wolves, ravens, killer whales and eagles.

Besides family groups, cultures also have groups based on levels of education.

In many third-world countries, those with less advanced economies and technologies, people with an elementary education may form an elite group.

On the other hand, in high-tech cultures, those with complex economies, individuals with a grade school education form a group far down on the educational attainment ladder.

In those societies, a college degree is necessary for many, but certainly not all, occupations.

Which leads us to a third kind of group found in almost all cultures, those based on the kind of work individuals pursue.

As one would expect, there are many occupational groups in technologically-based, economically complex cultures, as well as many sub-divisions of those groups.

For example, a physician could be a pediatrician who takes care of children; or a cardiologist, who specializes in caring for people with heart problems; or a gerontologist, whose specialty is caring for the elderly; and so on.

In third-world countries, the range of occupational groups is relatively limited. There are laborers, gatherers and farmers, vendors, and those who run small businesses.

There also may be educators and others in professional groups, but their numbers are smaller than those of their counterparts in economically and technologically complex societies.

And there are fewer subgroups.

Social groups (in addition to family, educational attainment and occupational groups) are also found in virtually all cultures.

Social group members may have similar interests, such as charitable activities, recreational preferences, political affiliations, age, or many other things, including religious beliefs.

Church socials, where people of similar religious convictions gather, are a time-honored tradition in many North American communities.

Whether family, occupational, social, or any other kind, groups are not the only thing all societies have in common.

Another important similarity is the seemingly universal need to express emotions, ideas and information.

Language, particularly oral language, is the most common way ideas, information and emotions (including delight) are expressed.

Language is found virtually everywhere.

Written language is found in almost all cultures.

The use of digital languages has become one of the most prevalent in technologically-based cultures and has spread to yet another way to express ideas, information and emotions – the arts.

Traditional art forms are still found in high-technology societies, of course.

But they are more likely to be the major forms of artistic expression in cultures in which computers have not made such deep inroads.

Traditional art forms vary from one location to another. A Nisga'a master carver in British Columbia makes a totem pole, an art form based on religious beliefs.

A weaver in Ghana makes an intricately-woven kente cloth whose abstract patterns may symbolize mythical and historical events, while elaborate statues and gold-leaf carvings in a Mexican cathedral call to mind the European religious experience.

The differences can be explained, at least in large part, by different levels of technologies and by historical events.

The artwork in many Mexican churches reflect that culture's Spanish – and native – roots.

The performing arts, such as dance, are still another form of artistic expression found in virtually all cultures.

Native Canadian dancers (as well as their counterparts to the south, in the United States) often use dance to portray events found in nature and to explain the supernatural.

The accompanying music combines the vocal (that is, singers) and the percussive, or drums.

Music is still another performing art found in all societies.

As with other facets of culture, differences in musical instruments can be attributed to the availability of materials.

The Nisga'a use tree trunks and sticks for musical instruments because those materials are readily found in the heavily-forested areas in which they live.

Akan musical instruments are also primarily wooden because tropical rain forests cover a large part of Akan lands.

In some societies, such as Russia, the performing arts take on such an important role that special schools have been built to train children as performing artists.

At the tender age of eight or nine, children recite poems they've written and then perform musical interpretations of that poetry, interpretations they've composed.

So far, we've seen that all cultures are composed of groups, and all of them have different ways to express ideas, information and emotions – through language, art and the performing arts.

All cultures also have ways to obtain food for their members.

As you can well imagine, geography plays a key role in what kinds of food are obtained. For untold centuries, for instance, the Nisga'a have depended on the Nass River that flows through their lands to provide salmon, a major part of their diet.

Methods of preparing and preserving food also may take traditional forms in some cultures. Nisga'a women cut and clean salmon outside a smokehouse, and then the fish are placed on wooden racks inside.

After the fish are hung, a fire is lit and smoke begins to fill the room.

The fish are smoked for about 24 hours, then cut into strips, and then smoked again to be completely preserved.

Some foods do not need to be preserved, of course. Nor are they hunted or fished.

In some areas, such as Ghana, where food is readily found in the rain forest, gathering may be an important means of obtaining nourishment.

Raising animals and crops are two other ways cultures obtain food, other than gathering, fishing and hunting.

The Akan combine raising animals and tending crops. They are also herders and shoppers.

In fact, most cultures do combine several methods to obtain food.

That includes the Nisga'a. From time to time, they travel to nearby towns to fill in nutritional gaps.

It is much the same for many Mexicans who live outside large cities.

They herd, farm and ranch.

But most also find it necessary to shop.

In urban cultures, such as the United States, only a tiny minority of people farm, ranch or fish.

Almost none hunt commercially. Fewer still use gathering as a way to obtain food.

Agriculture is highly mechanized in these societies and complex distribution systems rush food products to local markets, markets that are almost always regulated and inspected by governmental authorities.

All cultures have governments, too. Governments often play a major role in the daily lives, and security, of their citizens. Even so, governments may differ significantly.

In Ghana, for example, governmental affairs at the local and regional levels are undertaken by an elaborate system of chiefs and sub chiefs.

The system, developed over many centuries, helps maintain an intricate set of rules for tribal, clan and individual behavior.

Leadership posts are handed down from one generation to the next.

Ghanaians also have a national government, but it has little to do with their everyday lives.

On the other hand, the national government in the United States wields enormous power.

Laws passed in the legislative branch, executive orders from the White House, and Supreme Court rulings may have wide-ranging impact on the imposition of justice, the health of the economy, civil rights, international relations, and much more.

Leaders are elected by ballot in the United States, which has long history of government “by, for and of the people,” a tradition transported across the Atlantic, from England – carried by colonists who established communities in North America.

Mexicans live under a more authoritarian system because, for one reason, the Spanish, who colonized Mexico, lived under a monarchy, not in a democratic system of government.

Russians, too, traditionally have lived under autocratic rulers – communists, and before them, monarchs.

Russia’s halting attempts to create a democratic system of government show how difficult it is to change a culture’s traditions.

Providing education for children is one of government’s most important functions, regardless of the type of government or where it’s located.

In fact, all cultures have ways to pass on from one generation to the next what it regards as important information about the past and what it considers important values (ideas that guide behavior, beliefs and views of the world).

Passing on important information and values to the next generation is the fourth way in which all cultures are similar.

In most places, parents assume a key role in the passing of information and values to their children.

They may do it verbally, by example, or through literature, oral or written.

In Nisga’a culture, mothers and aunts pass on to their daughters and nieces traditional methods of preparing salmon.

Fishing skills are handed down from father to son.

In Akan culture, ways to perform household chores are handed down in much the same way – from parent to child. Among other things, Akan

girls learn how to cook, as well as clean, from their mothers.

Besides parents, grandparents also may play an important role as instructors who teach the finer points of household chores.

Grandparents also may teach the proper care of fish nets, if they are Nisga'a.

Besides having ways to pass on important information and values, all cultures have at least one religious tradition or a philosophy that helps guide its members' behavior.

Religion also addresses the spiritual side of human existence.

In many cultures, various religious traditions are grafted onto each another, or combined.

Most Nisga'a are Christians, for example, but many of their native ways of worship have been incorporated into Christian beliefs.

At one time, the Nisga'a believed in totemism, that is, a belief in which each clan has a special, mythical relationship to a particular animal.

Totemism is often found in cultures that feel a deep kinship with nature.

Even though Christian missionaries brought different religious beliefs to the Nisga'a, they still retain many of their native religious customs.

Much the same can be said for the Akan of Ghana.

Although many are Christian (British colonists brought Presbyterian and Methodist beliefs to Ghana centuries ago), the Akan still retain their traditional beliefs, also.

They pray to their ancestors and to spirits found in their lands – in the mountains, trees and rivers.

As with the Nisga'a, the Akan feel a deep kinship with nature, undoubtedly because of nature's strong influence on their living patterns, and perhaps because they live in an area of breathtaking natural beauty.

Religion in Russia is another story altogether.

Before 1917, most Russians belonged to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

In that year, however, a violent revolution overthrew the monarchy that had ruled Russia for hundreds of years, and the new communist leaders, there vowed to destroy all religions, which they said were “the opiate of the people.”

Communism, which denies the existence of a Supreme Being, became the official, and only, publicly tolerated belief.

For more than a half century, Russians lived under a system of government that actively discouraged religious worship.

Today, however, Russian citizens can worship freely and openly.

So three factors, among others, that influence how people worship, are nature, a culture’s relationship to nature, and history.

Technology can be another factor that explains religious differences.

When Spanish explorers came to the new world, starting in the late 15th century, missionaries followed in their wake, converting natives to Roman Catholicism.

One reason nuns and priests were able to convert native populations was the superior technologies, especially in armaments, of the Spanish conquistadors.

To this point, we’ve discussed six key ways in which all cultures are alike.

They all have groups; methods to express ideas, information and emotions; ways to obtain food; ways to pass on to the next generation what it believes to be important information and values; religions and philosophies that help guide behavior and address the spiritual side of humanity; and governments.

We’ve also shown that technologies, history, a culture’s relationship to natural forces, geography, and climates can determine cultural similarities and differences – specifically, how people act, or their “cultural behavior.”

The “things” of a society – its tools, clothing and shelters and modes of transportation – are other important factors that help us analyze and understand cultures.

Cultures whose technologies are highly developed have shelters (buildings for commercial and residential use) that require huge amounts of human energy, natural resources and specialized technologies to build and maintain.

The same can be said for methods of transportation and the infrastructures that support them – roads, rails, bridges, docks and so forth. That is, high technology equals complex transportation systems.

Besides technology, geography plays a role in transportation.

St. Petersburg, Russia, for example, is built on 42 islands in the Neva River, so boats are used extensively there to get around.

It would be less likely for river craft to be found in the interior areas of Mexico, where there are no major navigable rivers.

In societies with less developed technologies, methods of transportation are generally more limited – by animal-drawn cart, for example, or by foot.

Cultures with technologies that are yet to be fully developed, such as those in Ghana, are also more likely to use as natural materials, such as clay, to build their shelters.

As you might imagine, economic resources, that is, the availability of money, is another factor that affects the “things” of a culture.

Large buildings are common in societies with abundant economic resources.

Climate is still another factor that affects the “things” of a culture, specifically how shelters are constructed.

Because rain is so plentiful in Ghana, for instance – and because it’s so warm there – walls are often open-aired.

Roofing material, most often corrugated tin in that West African country, is hard and nonporous. Rain can’t get through it.

Corrugated tin is also inexpensive. Most Ghanaians cannot afford anything more.

Tools also may differ among cultures.

In low-technology societies, tools are very simple or comparatively simple. Lack of funds is often a major reason for the use of low-technology tools.

Advanced technologies require enormous amounts of money, money that simply is not available in many third-world countries.

History also plays a role in the tools a culture uses.

Western societies, such as the United States, historically have placed a high value on technological advancement.

In short then, all cultures are composed of groups. All cultures have methods to express information, ideas and emotions; ways to obtain food; and ways to pass on to the next generation what it believes to be important information and values. All cultures have religions and philosophies that help guide behavior and address the spiritual side of humanity, and governments to regulate behavior.

Technologies, history, and a culture's relationship to natural forces, geography and climates can determine cultural similarities and differences.

The "things" of a society may differ because of varying levels of technology, history, geography, climate and the availability of money.

Knowing how cultures are the same and how they differ, and the reasons for those differences, help us understand our world and our place in it.