

INTRODUCTION

Umbrellas are handy when it rains, but where were the first umbrellas used? Where did gold, chess, and pasta originate? What is a typical American custom? Such questions can be the basis of a lively lesson on the movement of ideas, traditions, and practices from one culture to another. Most people have absorbed traits of other cultures into their daily lives, and many have imposed aspects of their own customs onto others as well. In today's interconnected world, facets of culture are exchanged faster than ever—through trade, travel, advanced communications, and the media.

FROM WHICH CULTURE?

On a typical morning, Libby wakes to the music of a British rock group on her clock radio. She is probably unaware that the first experimental public radio broadcast took place in 1906 from a small Massachusetts station a decade after an Italian named Guglielmo Marconi patented the radio, or wireless.

Once dressed, Libby pours a glass of orange juice, a drink made from a fruit once popular in ancient China. The orange juice concentrate was preserved by a freezing process invented in Florida in the 1940s. Her mother uses an electric coffee grinder to grind beans imported from Brazil. The machine was invented in Ohio in the 1930s. (Manual grinders date to the seventeenth century.) Her mother pours the ground coffee into a Melitta filter cone that was invented around the turn of the century by a German woman, Melitta Bentz.

Libby decides to have a bowl of Kellogg's corn flakes, named after the American family that developed the cereal in the

late 1890s. As she eats, she reads the newspaper. The first regular weekly newspapers appeared in Germany in the early seventeenth century.

After breakfast, Libby brushes her teeth. The Chinese claim that they invented the toothbrush in the late fifteenth century. She says goodbye to her father, who is shaving with a safety razor—patented in 1901 in the United States by King Camp Gillette, a salesman from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Centuries ago the first razors were made of shells and sharks' teeth. The safety razor dates back to late eighteenth-century France.

Libby packs up her school belongings, including the saxophone she is learning to play. The saxophone was invented in the 1840s by Adolphe Sax of Belgium. She also grabs her Walkman, invented in the late 1970s in Tokyo, Japan. Even though she just brushed her teeth, she pops some gum into her mouth as she heads out the door. For centuries the Indians of Mexico and Central America chewed a substance called chicle that came from wild sapodilla trees. It was not until the 1860s that Americans discovered the chewing pleasure of chicle.

As Libby leaves the house, it starts to rain. A low-pressure system that swept down from Canada sends her running back inside for her umbrella, which was made in Taiwan. Depicted in paintings that date from ancient Egypt, umbrellas have reappeared throughout history either in cere-

monial roles or as protection from the elements.

Back outside, she runs across the street when the traffic light turns green. The first working gaslight traffic signal was installed outside the Houses of Parliament in London, England, in 1868. The modern electric version is an early twentieth-century invention by an African American named Garrett A. Morgan.

Solid, smooth roads, like the one in front of Libby's house, were built using a surface developed in part by the British engineer for whom it was named—John Loudon McAdam. His early nineteenth-century "macadam" design became popular in much of England and the United States.

Along comes the city bus to take her to school. The first bus line was established in Paris, France, in the seventeenth century, but it was short-lived. Not until the early nineteenth century were horse-drawn buses a regular feature in cities such as Paris, London, and New York.

And Libby is off to school.

The reading "From Which Culture?" is adapted from Ralph Linton, "One Hundred Percent American," *The American Mercury*, 50 (1937): 427-429.



VOCABULARY (define each word in your own words)

Culture-
Customs-
Cultural-
Diffusion-
Artifact-
foreign-

BACKGROUND

Culture—the shared way of life of a large group of people—includes languages, religious beliefs and customs, foods, educational systems, forms of recreation, consumer goods, styles of clothing, attitudes, arts, architecture, literature, holidays, celebrations, and technological advances. Cultures develop in two ways: spontaneously (through local invention) or by borrowing aspects of other cultures. The movement of cultural elements from one group of people to another, called cultural diffusion, occurs when cultures come in contact with each other. Today, most cultures are blends of other cultures. Many of the everyday artifacts and customs that may be thought of as “American” were once considered foreign. They were borrowed from other cultures, then adapted to fit specific cultural needs, and are now familiar parts of our daily lives. Intercultural contact can take place through trade, travel, exploration, immigration, wars or conquests, organized exchange programs, and the communications media.

CONCLUSION

Three possible reactions to newly diffused ideas, customs, and inventions are acceptance, rejection, or adaptation and modification to suit the needs of the receiving culture. What are examples of cultural diffusion taking place in the world today? With advanced communications cultural diffusion can take place more rapidly than ever.

ASSIGNMENT

1. Read the story, underline each artifact or custom, and note its place of origin.
2. Place an X on the map at each location, using atlases to identify unfamiliar places. (Hint: some places mentioned in the story: Florida, Ohio, and Wisconsin in the United States, as well as Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Central America, China, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, and Taiwan.)
3. Write a complete paragraph about the movement of culture from one group of people to another, answering: *By looking at the map, how can you tell how and why any of these items traveled from one culture to another?*

WORLD MAP

