Cultures are classified using many different criteria. The concept of culture includes both material and nonmaterial elements. **Material culture** includes all objects or “things” made and used by members of a cultural group: buildings, furniture, clothing, artwork, musical instruments, and other physical objects. The elements of material culture are visible. **Nonmaterial culture** includes the wide range of beliefs, values, myths, and symbolic meanings that are transmitted across generations of a given society. Cultures may be categorized and geographically located using criteria based on either or both of these features.

Let’s explore how these criteria are used to identify, categorize, and graphically delineate cultures. According to literary critic and cultural theorist Raymond Williams, culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, people began to speak of “cultures” in the plural form. Specifically, they began thinking about “European culture” in relation to other cultures around the world. As Europe industrialized and urbanized in the nineteenth century, a new term was invented, **folk culture**, to distinguish traditional ways of life in rural spaces from new, urban, industrial ones. Thus, folk culture was defined and made sense only in relation to an urban, industrialized culture. Urban dwellers began to think—in increasingly romantic and nostalgic terms—of rural spaces as inhabited by distinct folk cultures.

The word folk describes a rural people who live in an old-fashioned way—a people holding onto a lifestyle less influenced by modern technology. Folk cultures are rural, cohesive, largely self-sufficient groups that are homogeneous in custom and ethnicity. In terms of nonmaterial culture, folk cultures typically have strong family or clan structures and highly localized rituals. Order is maintained through sanctions based in religion or the family, and interpersonal relationships are strong. In material cultural terms, most goods are handmade, and a subsistence economy prevails. Individualism is generally weakly developed in folk cultures, as are social classes.

In the poorer countries of the underdeveloped world, some aspects of folk culture still exist, though few if any peoples have been left untouched by the forces of globalization. In industrialized countries, such as the United States and Canada, unaltered folk cultures no longer exist, though many remnants can be found (Figure 2.1).

Folk geography, a term coined by Eugene Wilhelm, may be defined as the study of the spatial patterns and ecology of these traditional groups.

Popular culture, by contrast, is generated from and concentrated mainly in urban areas (Figure 2.2). Popular material goods are mass-produced by machines in factories, and a cash economy, rather than barter or subsistence, dominates.
Figure 2.2 Popular culture is reflected in every aspect of life, from the clothes we wear (left) to the recreational activities that occupy our leisure time (right).

Relationships among individuals are more numerous but less personal than in folk cultures, and the family structure is weaker. Mass media such as film, print, television, radio, and, increasingly, the Internet are more influential in shaping popular culture. People are more mobile, less attached to place and environment. Secular institutions of authority—such as the police, army, and courts—take the place of family and church in maintaining order. Individualism is strongly developed.

Another major category is indigenous culture. A simple definition of indigenous is "native" or "of native origin." In the modern world of sovereign nation-states, the word has acquired much greater cultural and political meanings. In fact, the International Labor Organization’s (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169 (Article 1.1) presents a legal definition that recognizes indigenous peoples as comprising a distinct culture. According to the ILO, indigenous peoples are self-identified tribal peoples whose social, cultural, and economic conditions distinguish them from the national society of their host state. Indigenous peoples are regarded as descending from peoples present in the state territory at the time of conquest or colonization.

Although they may share some of the material and nonmaterial characteristics of folk cultures, their histories (and geographies) are quite distinct. Indigenous cultures are, in effect, those peoples who were colonized—mostly, but not exclusively—by European cultures and are now minorities in their homelands. This definition is applied globally, suggesting that indigenous cultures worldwide share common traits and face similar perils and opportunities. The United Nations helped focus global attention on indigenous cultures when it declared 1995-2004 to be the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People.

In most cases, folk and indigenous cultures can be thought of as subcultures in relation to a dominant popular culture. In reality, none of these categories is homogeneous. We can use our five themes – region, mobility, globalization, nature-culture, and cultural landscape – to study geographies of cultural difference.

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