

How The World Dresses

How the World Dresses:

Clothing and Global Culture



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Our Guarantee

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The Program

Summary

If you were suddenly transported to a city anywhere on earth, could you identify your location solely by the clothing? We'll give you a chance to try.

Join us for a video tour of how the world dresses, and explore the amazing diversity of clothing worldwide. Help your students understand how their own clothing choices fit on the world's stage.

Your “cool conscious” students might be surprised to discover how tradition shapes their choices. What is the difference between tradition and fashion?

- How do people dress on the other side of the planet?
- Does ethnic garb still rule or do they dress pretty much like Americans?
- Why robes, turbans and veils?
- How does religion influence fashion?
- Why is there no American “ethnic costume”?

No course in clothing and textiles is complete without a realization of the cultural meaning of everyday garments.

Key Ideas

1. When asked why we dress the way we do, most young people answer in terms of fashion and/or comfort. But their clothing is also influenced by culture and its traditions. From buttons and belts, to dresses and trousers we follow traditions set by our ancestors.
2. We tend to see non-Western clothing as cultural and influenced by the past but rarely see that our own clothing is also shaped by tradition.
3. Most of the world (especially in larger cities) dresses in western clothing. You would have a hard time guessing your location on the globe based solely on clothing.
4. Young people the world over might wear blue jeans and t-shirts, but they still maintain many of the traditional values of their culture. They wear jeans for the same reason you do – they're practical and comfortable. There is clearly a global fashion, but it's a stereotype to assume that those who "dress like me" therefore "think like me."
For research on this topic see *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 50-52 "Rock Solid", and 54-55, "Children of Plenty."
5. One reason for the "westernization of clothing" is that women in most parts of the world are freer than in the past to play varied roles in society. As women choose their roles, they tend to spend less time making and repairing clothing. The result is that they buy clothing from the worldwide garment industry.

In cultures where the role of women remains mainly at home, western clothing might be less common. How a culture dresses is very much influenced by the role of women in its society.

6. Ethnic or national dress is not worn as much for everyday wear as in past centuries, but it has not disappeared. In fact, ethnic costume is enjoying somewhat of a revival worldwide. Ethnic costume is very much a part of special celebrations and is worn with great pride in festivals and important social occasions.
7. Ethnic costumes do not reflect the "way people used to dress in the old days." Instead they are modeled on the way ordinary people once dressed for extraordinary celebrations.
8. In fashion, we imitate our contemporaries. In tradition, we follow the lead of our elders. Fashions change quickly, traditions slowly.
9. The idea that men wear trousers is a western tradition based on past conquests, revolutions, and military needs.
10. One of our "hidden" traditions is to wear clothing that is pre-shaped and produced in standard sizes in garment factories. Much of the world prefers garments that are more "draped" than "shaped." From kimonos, to sarongs, to galabia, to turbans, single pieces of fabric become garments by the act of wearing.

11. Pre-shaped and sized clothing is labor intensive. Even a simple shirt requires over a hundred separate operations. Shaped clothing almost demands a garment industry.
12. Headwear in Western tradition consists of pre-shaped hats or caps. Headwear in Europe and the United States once reflected social standing. Westerners today are more “hatless” than at any time in the past. This hatlessness reflects a desire to hide surface differences in social standing.
13. Turbans are a form of draped headwear. They are made from a narrow strip of cotton or silk and wound around a cap or the head. They are worn by Sikhs and some Muslims and Hindus as a sign of belief.

Hindus wear turbans for ceremonies and important occasions, but Sikhs wear them all the time, except to sleep; it is part of the code of conduct for male Sikhs -- a religion that combines elements of Hinduism and Islam. To Sikhs, the turban is a symbol of dignity and self respect.

Traditional Arab headwear for men is a Kaffiyeh, a piece of fabric draped over the head and shoulders and held in place by head bands. Color and design often shows political belief or tribal membership.

Head coverings for women in most of the world are draped from a single piece of fabric. Indian women often wear a shawl or veil called a *dupatta*.

How The World Dresses: Quiz

1. _____ Most people in this country own hanbok for family celebrations, and the traditional custom of bowing before grandparents on New Year's Day.
2. Why is there no "ethnic costume" that represents the United States?
3. The program presented a five question quiz about how you dress everyday. It asked if you wear pre-shaped and sized garments, if you fasten clothing with buttons or zippers or with a sash, how you cover your head, etc. What was the purpose of this quiz?
4. The program talks about some of the historical reasons that Western men today wear trousers. Give one reason mentioned in the program.
5. The program talks about two types of clothing — draped and shaped. Give one example of a draped garment and give one advantage draped garments have over shaped.
6. A hundred years ago, most people in the United States and Europe wore hats in public. What purpose did hat wearing serve in Europe and the U.S. in past centuries?
7. The program shows Muslim women completely covered head to foot. Give one of the observations about this practice made in the program.

How The World Dresses: Quiz Answer Key

1. Korea Most people in this country own hanbok for family celebrations, and the traditional custom of bowing before grandparents on New Year's Day.

2. Why is there no "ethnic costume" that represents the United States?

The United States has no "ethnic costume" because such dress springs from a culture rather than from a nation.

The United States contains many cultures, many of which proudly display ethnic dress on special occasions.

3. The program presented a five question quiz about how you dress everyday. It asked if you wear pre-shaped and sized garments, if you fasten clothing with buttons or zippers or with a sash, how you cover your head, etc. What was the purpose of this quiz?

The purpose of the quiz during the program was to make clear that we are all influenced by tradition. It is designed to counter the idea that people "far away" wear traditional clothing while Americans wear fashionable, modern wear. Our clothing choices are influenced by traditions, even if we are not aware of them when we select our wardrobe.

4. The program talks about some of the historical reasons that Western men today wear trousers. Give one reason mentioned in the program.

Reasons for Western men wearing trousers include the influence of conquering "barbarians," the need for practical military wear, and the influence of the 18th Century French Revolution.

5. The program talks about two types of clothing — draped and shaped. Give one example of a draped garment and give one advantage draped garments have over shaped.

Draped garments include (but are not limited to) kimono, sarong, dashiki, galabia, djellaba, sari, lungi, and turban. Draped garments are easier to manufacture than shaped garments, they need not be replaced when the wearer changes size or shape, and they can be worn differently to fit local climate or conditions.

6. A hundred years ago, most people in the United States and Europe wore hats in public. What purpose did hat wearing serve in Europe and the U.S. in past centuries?

Hats served as a means to communicate social status. One example in the program is that the "upper class" wore top hats while most others wore simple caps.

A comparable idea for women would be elaborately decorated hats versus a simple head scarf.

Hat wearing declined for practical reasons (the expense of purchase and the hassle of maintenance) and because distinctions in social class became less important to show in public.

7. The program shows Muslim women completely covered head to foot. Give one of the observations about this practice made in the program.

The program makes the following observations about Islamic dress for women: The Qur'an urges modesty in dress but says nothing specific about veiling. Islamic law demands women dress modestly in public. The requirement is for public appearance, not for at home wear. Most Moslem women wear the clothing out of religious conviction, not out of fear. Veils are more common among older women. Clothing among Islamic populations shows considerable variety.

Projects And Discussion

1. Have students bring examples of ethnic costume to class and talk about its use and meaning.
2. Assign small groups to select a culture and research its clothing. Have each group make a brief class presentation — with pictures or actual clothing examples.
3. Research the influence of religion on clothing. Assign research projects for: Muslim, Sikh, Amish, Hasidic Jews, and Hindu. Assign one group to research the controversy and regulation regarding Muslim girls in public schools in France.
4. Research and prepare a report on the relation of men to trousers. In which cultures today do men NOT usually wear trousers? Will skirt-type apparel become acceptable for males in North America in the future?
5. Research and prepare a report on the contemporary use of turbans worldwide. Explain their meaning and differences. Demonstrate how to make a turban.
6. Research and report on the social history of hats and caps in the United States. Why did American men go from nearly always wearing hats to seldom wearing them? Why don't women wear elaborate hats today as in the past?

Notes On The Turban

Turbans are made of a strip of cotton or silk up to twelve feet in length. Some Muslims and Hindus and all Sikhs wear them. Only about 10% of the male population in India wears a turban daily.

Note that a Muslim is a follower of Islam. Less than 15 percent of the world's one billion Muslims are Arab, and more than twice as many Muslims live in South Asia as in the Arab world.

Hindus tend to wear turbans for important occasions, but Sikh men wear them all the time except to sleep. Sikh is a religion which combines elements of Hindu and Islam. The Sikh turban is peaked so as to cover their long hair, which out of respect for God's creation, is never cut. The most devout Sikhs do not cut their beards either. To Sikhs, the turban is a symbol of dignity and self respect. To take away the turban means humiliation. *"When God takes away the turban," says Prophet Isaiah, "he takes away the dignity of man."*

White turbans are the most common since that is the color believed to have been worn by the prophet Muhammad. Many Muslim men wear green, because it represents paradise. In North Africa, blue is more common and the color can indicate the tribe of the wearer.

Resources For World Clothing

Use the Internet to research the controversy over the French ban on the head scarves worn by Muslim girls attending public schools. Learn how U.S. schools deal with the same issue.

Newspapers and magazines carried numerous articles on this topic in 2003 and 2004. Try www.findarticles.com and search on the word "hijab."

The Visible Self by Joanne B. Eicher, Sandra Lee Evenson, and Hazel A. Lutz (Fairchild Publications, NY, 2000).

This second edition college textbook would be a difficult read for most high school students but is an excellent reference.

Ethnic Dress by Frances Kennett (Checkmark Books, 1995).

Contemporary costume throughout the world is beautifully photographed in this attractive volume. The book focuses on the dress of people who "do not adhere to the trends of Westernized fashion." Kennett includes concise descriptions of cultures and their dress. Over 500 photographs.

This is the most accessible and comprehensive book on "how the world dresses" we've found. Unfortunately, it is now out of print.