

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHIES OF HOUSTON



The above indigenous-inspired mural, entitled *Future Tribes* (created by Royal Sumikat, with the help of Jesenia Arredondo), was designed to demonstrate the strength of cultural diversity. The artist Royal Sumikat is Houston-based, and calls Houston home, yet was born in the Philippines. She dedicated this mural to her ethnic ancestors who have inspired her to be a better global citizen by appreciating the perspectives of others from outside her own ethnic experience. In short, the vibrant figures in her mural suggest our futures (note the futuristic eyewear) are bright when people from all cultures unite to fly their flags side by side. The mural is located at Sawyer Yards in Houston.

The module is designed for geography and/or social studies teachers to use to teach aspects of human geography. The module focuses on defining culture and incorporates the identification of different cultural elements. Teachers are encouraged to have their students consider their own cultural backgrounds, as well as other elements evident across the cultural landscape within which they live, particularly that represented by food, ethnic traditions, and street art. In the end students will be sharing their own culture and showing their understanding of what culture is and what influences it has based on ethnicity, place, religion, etc.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture refers to the set of learned characteristics of behavior (language, religion) that a group of people share, or tangible manifestations (food, architecture, clothing) of these learned behaviors.

- Culture can encompass religion, language, cuisine, ethnicity, social behaviors, art, literature, music, modes of dress, etc.
- Culture tends to be learned in place of birth, or place of residence, but all culture is dynamic. For example, culture can change over time as one moves to different geographic locations or when one receives influences from other places (e.g., immigration or other forms of diffusion).
- Some aspects of culture are very geographically widespread, whereby many people share the same sets of values, beliefs, and origins. Other aspects of culture are spatially distinctive and unique to a limited geographical area. Accordingly, such unique cultural traits are generally adhered to by a smaller number of people (e.g., global versus local culture). However, the value of culture cannot be determined by its spatial or demographic extent.

BACKGROUND: EXAMPLE OF CULTURE AND THE DYNAMIC BLENDING OF CULTURE RESPONSIBLE FOR HOUSTON'S MULTI-CULTURAL STEW



Crawfish Boil



Chicken & Sausage Gumbo

It has been argued that food is the ultimate expression of culture, as it literally defines what we consume to live. Food can also be the ultimate metaphor for how cultures blend and/or change over time.

BLENDING OF CULINARY CULTURE IN COASTAL LOUISIANA

A culinary tradition common across southeastern Texas, including Houston, is the crawfish boil. This dish, which generally includes crawfish (crayfish or crawdads), most often boiled with potatoes, sausage, corn, and lemons, is often considered the signature food tradition of New Orleans or coastal Louisiana.

The traditions of the Louisiana crawfish boil trace their roots to the Atchafalaya swamp in western Louisiana and the various peoples who settled there: the Acadians, or Cajuns, who migrated from French Canada and the French-speaking African-Caribbeans, or Creoles, from Haiti and other Caribbean islands. In a similar fashion, gumbo also developed in coastal Louisiana, as early residents from France, Africa and Spain combined their cooking techniques to create the hearty stew. Likewise, jambalaya, a rice-based dish with chicken and sausage common across the same region, recalls both Spanish paella and West African jollof rice.

CAJUN/CREOLE CULTURE DIFFUSES TO SOUTHEAST TEXAS



The original Ragin' Cajun on Richmond hosted the city's first crawfish boil in its parking lot in 1976. The restaurant is considered the first in the city to offer crawfish on its menu.

In the mid-to-late 1960s through the 1970s, increasing numbers of people from Louisiana migrated to the Houston-area for jobs in the oil and gas industry. These migrants brought the cultural traditions with them, and in time, the crawfish boil and other forms of culture linked to the coastal Louisiana, became a common part of the cultural landscape across southeast Texas.

VIETNAMESE-CAJUN CRAWFISH

Beginning in the late 1990s, the tradition of crawfish boils in southeast Texas started exhibiting the ethnic influence of yet another immigrant group. In the mid-to-late 1970s, Vietnamese migrants fleeing the tragic conflict in their home region began arriving to southeast Texas in significant numbers. Crawfish are a commonly eaten across southeast Asia, and eventually these Vietnamese migrants merged their own culinary traditions – for example, the use of

ginger, lemongrass and garlic in a crawfish boil – with the pre-existing traditions common to Cajun culture. This re-blended mix of culinary culture is responsible for what is now known across Houston as Vietnamese-style or Viet-Cajun crawfish.



Vietnamese-style, or Viet-Cajun, crawfish typically includes a number of different ingredients, including garlic.

In short, the culture of food evident across Houston exhibits multi-layered cultural influences from a variety of ethnic groups, all of whom arrived from a variety of source regions, yet all of whom now call Houston home.

Key Terms:

Cajuns – people of French-speaking ancestry native to the Gulf Coast region of the United States, mostly the coast of Louisiana.

Creole - people and culture of the Native American, French, Caribbean, African, and Spanish settlers of the American Gulf Coast, especially the state of Louisiana.

Culinary culture – related to the learned traditions of cooking

Cultural landscape – the imprint of human and cultural activity on the landscape (e.g., on streetscapes, buildings, fields, urban areas, residential environments, etc.)

Diffusion - the geographical spreading of something more widely

Ethnic group - grouping of people who identify with each other on the basis of shared cultural traditions (such as place of origin, religion, nationality, and/or region) that distinguish them from other groups.

Jollof Rice - West African dish made with rice, tomatoes, vegetables, and peppers.

Metaphor - word or phrase used to represent something else, or an understanding of one concept in terms of another concept.

Paella – Spanish dish made with rice, chicken, seafood, vegetables, and the spice saffron

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Summary:

Students will be telling their own stories, but will also be describing the imprint of ethnicity (e.g., ethnic food traditions) on the cultural landscapes within which they live. Students will be in groups where they share their own culture and describe elements of a different cultural context they have seen on the landscape.

Learning goals and intentions:

- Students will be able to identify and describe the essential defining characteristics and functions of culture
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of their own culture's connection to geography and place

Instructions:

The teacher will begin by writing “culture” on the board and have a classroom discussion about all the aspects of culture. Students should be asked to provide specific examples of different cultural elements.

Students will then work in small groups (preferably around 3) to discuss what makes up their own culture. They will turn in a list for each other, although it may be possible that some groups are comprised of students that identify with the same culture. If possible, students should also make videos describing their own culture outside of class. As part of this discussion, each student should identify and describe at least one culinary dish that is traditional to their own cultural group (perhaps something eaten on certain ethnic holidays, days of religious observance, celebrations, etc.). Students should be expected to identify the geographical origins of these culinary traditions. This may encourage students to discuss their ethnic origins with older family members.

Students in each group will also collectively identify aspects of culture evident on the landscapes where they live and/or go to school, cultural elements that reflect some ethnic traditions other than their own (restaurants, street and/or school names, grocery stores, graffiti & street art, murals, statues in public parks, churches and/or other religious institutions). If possible, students should video or take photographs of cultural landscapes they encounter outside of class.

Students should be expected to identify or research the geographical origins of these ethnic traditions.

Students should be encouraged to take their own pictures and video for this assignment (if feasible, if not feasible, then observations can be drawn on paper or described via writing). The video and/or written descriptions should allow students to tell their own stories about their culture and focus on elements of culture that shape their own lives and the lives of those around them. The main point is that students express their understanding of what culture is and what influences connect culture and geography.

OTHER RESOURCES FOR CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY:

Language Diversity Index: Use MapMaker Interactive to explore linguistic diversity across the globe today <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/language-diversity-index-map> (interactive activity)

The Global Network: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/global-network> (article and activities)

Hula: See how Hawaii's native dance, hula, has become a source of identity and pride. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/hula> (article, videos, activities)

Lunar New Year: Learn a little about the festivities, food, calendars, and colors of the Chinese Lunar New Year. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/lunar-new-year> (article, activities)

Cultural Differences: Watch as the Lost Boys of Sudan experience for the first time what most Americans take for granted and as they gain valuable insight on American 'norms.' <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/cultural-differences> (video and article)

Sense of Place and Community: In the United States, the Lost Boys reflect on the culture they left behind and reminisce about life back in Sudan. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/sense-of-place> (video and article)

Climate Migrants: Use this StoryMap to see who Climate Migrants are, where they are located, and what is forcing them to leave their homes. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/climate-migrants> (interactive map)