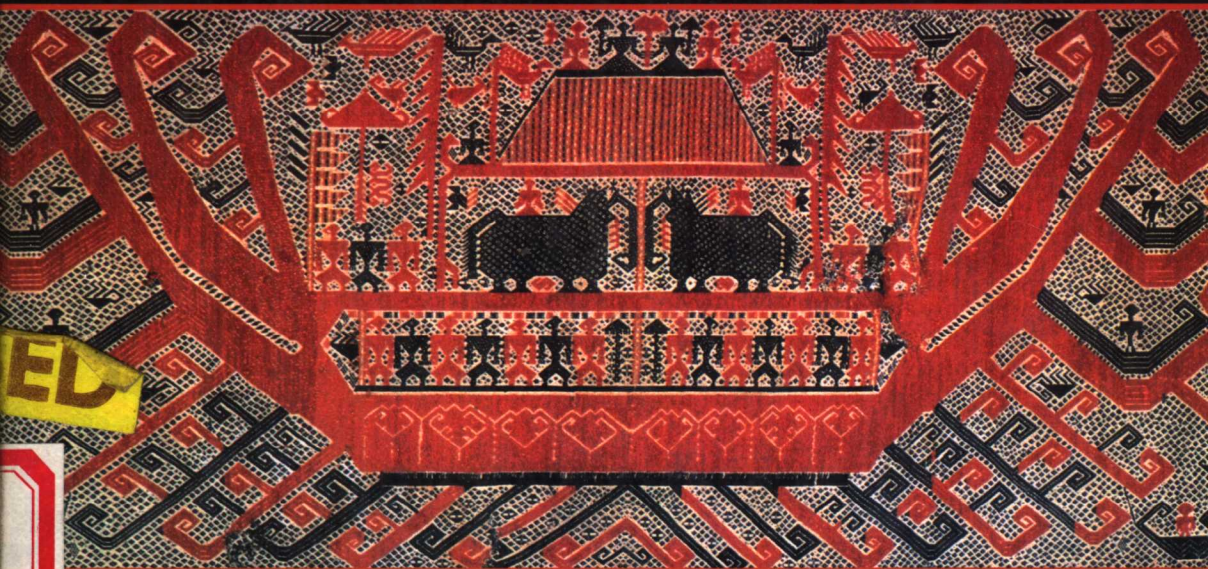


# THE TAPESTRY OF CULTURE

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AN INTRODUCTION  
TO CULTURAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY

FOURTH EDITION



ABRAHAM ROSMAN • PAULA G. RUBEL

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An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

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Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel

Barnard College, Columbia University

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## **The Tapestry of Culture**

An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

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## About the Authors

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Abraham Rosman and Paula Rubel began their collaboration in 1971 when they published a comparative study of the potlatch in six northwest coast societies entitled *Feasting with Mine Enemy*. They have done fieldwork together in Iran, Afghanistan, and Papua New Guinea, and in 1978 they published *Your Own Pigs You May Not Eat: A Comparative Study of New Guinea Societies*. They have also published many articles on their fieldwork and comparative research. Their most recent article, "Structural Patterning in Kwakiutl Art and Ritual," was published in 1990 in *Man*.

## Preface

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Anthropology in the nineties has become increasingly concerned with a number of issues. Although some of these have been with us since the beginnings of the discipline, contemporary commentators and critics within and outside of anthropology have compelled us to confront them anew. These issues include how anthropologists collect their data, particularly how fieldwork is conducted; how societies conceptualize gender differences and the relationship between males and females; and lastly, how to comprehend and translate into our culture's terms the ideas and behaviors of others.

In this fourth edition of *The Tapestry of Culture*, we have devoted attention to these issues. We have examined the concerns of anthropologists regarding the implications of power and status differences between anthropologists and informants. We have considered problems raised by feminist scholars concerning the relationship between cultural constructions of gender and the anthropological concepts and categories used to study such constructions. We have attempted to treat, in depth, the concern with meaning which pervades anthropology today. This edition of *Tapestry* is characterized not only by increased attention to these matters but also by a general updating of discussions and examples in accord with current thinking in the anthropological literature.

To many anthropologists today, ethnographies are seen as the heart of the discipline. One of the best ways for students to learn about anthropology is by reading ethnographies. Seeing the Trobriand Islands through Bronislaw Malinowski's eyes as he describes them in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* conveys enthusiasm and a sense of discovery to the student. However, in order to understand and appreciate ethnographies, the student must be provided with concepts and theories which anthropologists have developed. This book was written to give our students a concise and up-to-date conceptual framework with which to understand an ethnography. We have chosen a range of ethnographic works, from those depicting small-scale societies, like the Yanomamo of the South American tropical forest, to those describing aspects of industrialized societies, like the subculture of San Quentin prison. However, an instructor can select ethnographies which suit his or her interests. While we want the student to capture Malinowski's sense of adventure while he was in the Trobriands, we also feel it is necessary to provide a framework for critical evaluation of such an

ethnography. Although every ethnographic description is of a society which could be considered unique, anthropology also goes beyond the description of unique characteristics to the level of comparison in order to make generalizations about human behavior.

The title of our book refers to culture metaphorically as a tapestry, composed of many interconnected threads, but the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Standing back from the tapestry, one no longer sees the individual threads but an overall design. The anthropologist doing fieldwork does not see "culture," though, the overall design of the tapestry. Rather he converses with individuals around him and observes their actions; this is the equivalent of the threads. From this the anthropologist builds a picture of the culture when he or she writes the ethnography. Culture is therefore an analytical concept, an abstraction from reality; but, like a tapestry, it can be taken apart and examined. And, like a tapestry, culture has an overall design, even though we take it apart and study it by using analytical categories such as kinship, economics, and religion.

This new edition could not have been written without assistance from many people. First of all, we would like to thank the students in our introductory anthropology classes who, over the years, have asked us many penetrating questions. We are continuously in their debt. We are particularly grateful to the professors who have used *Tapestry of Culture* in their introductory anthropology courses and have given us their pithy comments and observations. Jerome Handler, Southern Illinois University, has continued to give us criticisms in his own refreshing manner; Ira Buchler, University of Texas, provided us with his thoughtful and helpful critique; Jay Powell, University of British Columbia, helped us to reorganize some of the text by spiritedly telling us his own approach to the material; Elvin Hatch, University of California at Santa Barbara, gave us many constructive suggestions; Jack Potter, University of California at Berkeley, frankly told us which parts of the text he liked; Luther Gerlach, University of Minnesota, described how he used the text to introduce anthropology to his students; and Mario Zamora, College of William and Mary, urged us to pay more attention to Third World peoples. To these individuals and all the others who have helped us in the past we owe a debt of gratitude for raising questions which have contributed to a significant improvement in the organization and clarity of this book.

Over the past two years, while they were students majoring in anthropology in our department at Barnard College, Meg Rheingold and Ruthie Cushing provided us with a quality of research assistance for which we are eternally grateful. Finally, our thanks to Phil Butcher and Lori Pearson Bittker, our sponsoring editors, for their help in making the transition from one publisher to another a relatively painless one, and for all of their assistance in launching this, the fourth edition of *Tapestry of Culture*.

Abraham Rosman  
Paula G. Rubel

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## CHAPTER 1

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# The Anthropological Point of View

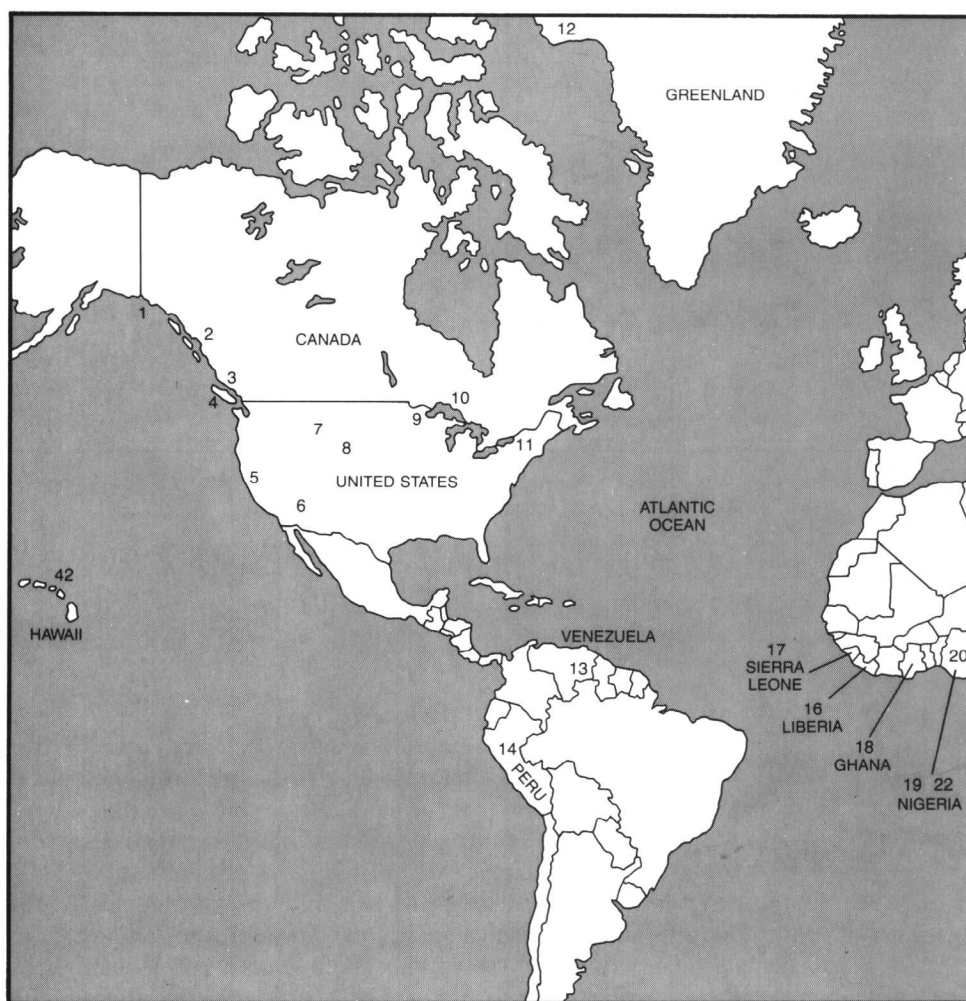
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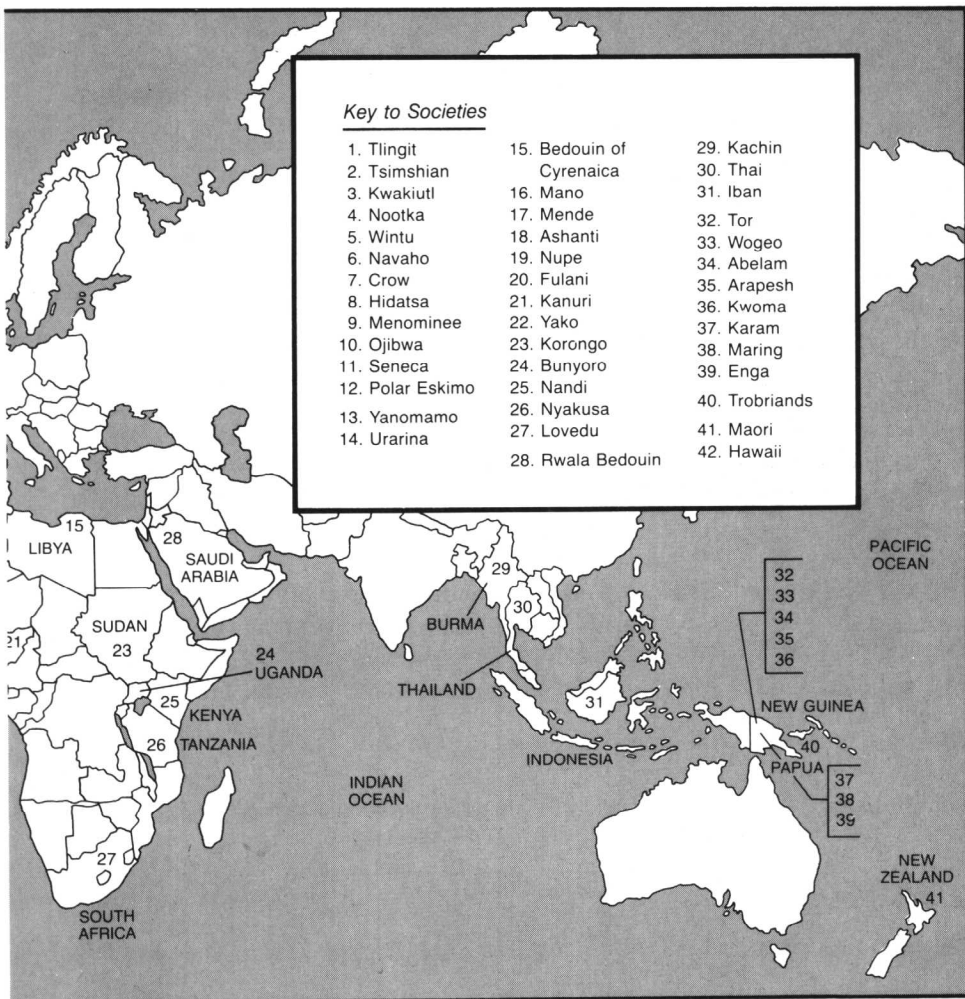


Anthropology teaches us about other peoples, and in the process it teaches us about ourselves. The anthropologist's method is different from that of other social scientists, and this influences the nature of the discipline—its theories, concepts, and procedures. Anthropological research involves a journey, a journey in space, a journey through time, a psychological journey into an alien world. It resembles Alice's trip through the looking glass into another universe where the "rules" may be turned on their heads and people may behave in very different ways. Anthropological investigation of a way of life or a culture other than one's own may seem at first like a trip into Alice's wonderland. However, like the world through the looking glass, different cultures have an underlying logic of their own. The behavior of people makes sense once we understand the basic premises by which they live. The anthropologist's task is to translate that culture and its premises into something we can comprehend.

Some centuries ago, people in Europe who considered themselves civilized viewed the ways of life in "faraway places" as uniformly the same and therefore of no interest. When Boswell presented Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century compiler of a dictionary, with a copy of Captain Cook's *Voyages to the South Sea*, Johnson remarked, "These voyages, who will read them through? . . . There can be little entertainment in such books; one set of Savages is like another." Samuel Johnson, so wise in other ways,



shared with many people of his time, armchair philosophers and the like, the view that “all savages are alike.” For Johnson, the label “savages” was used for any people not his kind (civilized Western society). But Samuel Johnson was proved wrong. Many people did indeed read accounts by great voyagers such as Bougainville, Malaspina, Vancouver, and Cook, in which they graphically described the different people they encountered and their “exotic” customs. Explorers and voyagers like Captain Cook were struck by the cultural differences they encountered, sometimes of an extreme sort. Their accounts and illustrations depict some of these differ-



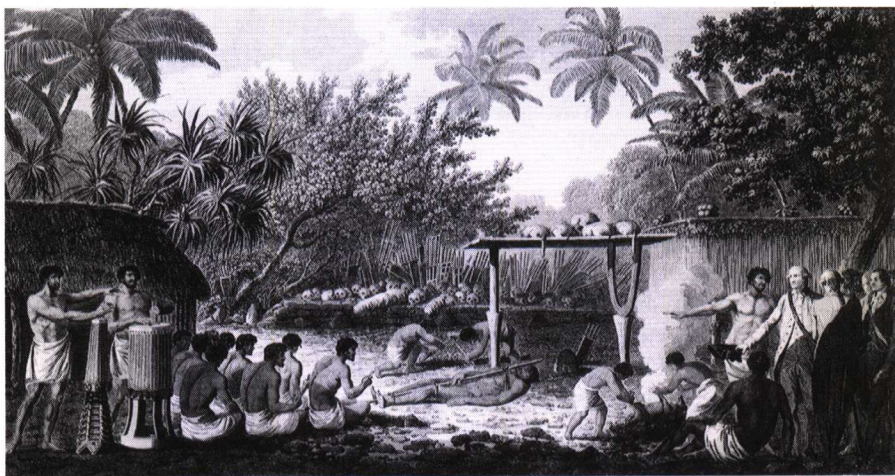
ences, although sometimes fancifully. Webber, the artist who accompanied Captain Cook on his third voyage, depicts a human sacrifice on Tahiti (see the illustration). On an earlier voyage, Cook had brought Omai, a Tahitian, back with him to England as a "specimen" who illustrated these cultural differences. Omai returned to Tahiti on Cook's third voyage, and he is depicted in European dress, along with Cook, in the right-hand corner of the picture. The appearance of people like Omai and the numerous publications of voyagers' accounts of people from other parts of the world made eighteenth-century social philosophers like Voltaire and Diderot more

aware of cultural differences. They used these accounts to raise questions about the “God-given nature” of their own societies’ practices, such as the divine right of kings to rule and the patriarchal position of fathers within the family. Cultural differences were more systematically studied as the field of anthropology developed, and it soon became apparent that “all savages” were not alike.

Even today, despite the worldwide distribution of Pepsi-Cola and McDonald’s, a visitor to another culture will still be impressed with cultural differences. People in China may eat sea cucumbers, while people in North America will refuse to eat them. People in every culture think that what they eat is “the right stuff” and healthful for everyone. The way in which families are formed also differs from one culture to the next. In the village of Lesu, in Papua New Guinea, after marriage the couple goes to live with the wife’s parents; in Morocco the couple goes to live with the husband’s parents, while in our own culture the couple moves off to start a new family, independent of either set of parents. The belief that one’s own culture represents the natural and best way to do things is known as *ethnocentrism*. Anthropology opens up the world of cultural differences to overcome this point of view.

If the first thing one notices is that there are cultural differences, the second is that all cultures have a degree of internal consistency. We have called this book *The Tapestry of Culture* because the imagery of a tapestry well conveys the integrated nature of culture. Many strands, many colors,

*A human sacrifice on Tahiti, as depicted by the artist John Webber, who accompanied Captain Cook on his voyage around the world in 1776–1780.*



many patterns contribute to the overall design of a tapestry, just as many items of behavior and many customs form patterns that, in turn, compose a culture. The patterns and regularities of culture do not remain the same in an eternal, unchanging fashion. Anthropologists view cultures as more or less integrated in relatively distinct ways.

Anthropology goes beyond the description of single cultures to the comparison of cultures with one another in order to identify similarities and differences of patterning. This comparative approach looks beyond cultural differences to seek out what cultures have in common. For example, the Rwala Bedouins of the Saudi Arabian desert depend primarily on their camel herds for subsistence, while the Kazaks of Central Asia rely on their herds of horses in the grassland steppe environment in which they make their home. Anthropologists characterize both these peoples as *nomadic pastoralists*. Despite the fact that the environments in which they live are totally different, they share a number of cultural features. They both move with their animal herds from place to place over fixed migration routes during the year in order to provide pasture for their animals. They live in similar sorts of communities—nomadic encampments consisting of several related groups of people, each with its own tent. In each case, the nomads must depend on exchanging the products of their herds with sedentary communities for commodities like flour and tea which they cannot provide for themselves. Cultures may be grouped together on the basis of similarity in many different criteria, such as type of economic organization, family system, religion, language, political organization, and so on.

## Basic Concepts

In order to analyze cultures in terms of their similarities and differences and to group them together into types based on these features, a set of basic concepts is necessary. These basic concepts are commonly agreed upon heuristic tools developed within the discipline that help us to organize the data and make comparisons. The goal ultimately is to formulate generalizations about culture.

### *Culture*

The central concept of anthropology is *culture*. This term, as we have indicated, is used to refer to the way of life of a people. It emphasizes the integrated totality of that way of life—including the people's behavior, the things they make, and their ideas. Other disciplines study the different kinds of human activity universally carried out in all societies, but each discipline studies a different sector of this activity. Thus, economics studies economy; political science studies government; art history, music, and religion each study particular activities of humans as if those activities were



largely autonomous. All these fields are investigated by the anthropologist, but the emphasis is on their interrelationship. By focusing on culture as the organizing concept, the anthropologist stresses the relationship between economics, politics, art, religion, etc.

While we stress the integrated nature of culture, we do not mean to imply that all cultures are well-integrated wholes. Integration is a matter of degree. Often there are internal inconsistencies and contradictions in cultures, as we will illustrate in later chapters. Nor should culture be thought of as a single monolithic entity. When we refer to American culture, for example, we recognize that there are many American subcultures based on occupation, social class, region, etc. The subculture of jazz musicians differs from that of truck drivers, but all these subcultures belong to a larger American culture. That American culture is what all Americans have in common.

Culture is learned and acquired by infants through a process referred to by anthropologists as *enculturation*. It has a transgenerational quality, since it continues beyond the lifetime of individuals. Culture therefore has continuity through time. This does not imply that cultures never change. Rather, there is a consistency of pattern through time, despite the fact that culture is continually being reworked. The changes may be brought about as a result of changes in environmental conditions or contact with other cultures. Anthropologists study this process of culture change through time by examining historical, archival, and archaeological data derived from the excavation of prehistoric sites. The process of culture change can also be examined when a culture is studied for the second time years after the first study.

Some anthropologists focus upon culture as primarily a set of ideas and meanings that people use based on the past and that they construct in the present. The role of the anthropologist is then to grasp, understand, and translate those ideas and meanings. Other anthropologists see culture as the means by which human beings adapt to their environment. This perspective emphasizes what humans have in common with other animal species. The concept of culture is so broad that it encompasses both of these points of view. The differences between them represent differing theoretical perspectives, which will be explored later in this chapter.

### *Cultural Rules*

What is learned and internalized by human infants during the process of enculturation are *cultural rules*. For example, cultural rules govern what one eats, when one eats, and how one eats. We drink milk and the Chinese do not. We eat with knife and fork; the Chinese and Japanese eat with chopsticks; and the Kanuri of West Africa eat with the fingers of the right hand only, since eating with the left hand is forbidden. Rules also govern sexual behavior in terms of with whom it is allowed, as well as



when, where, and how. For example, in Lesu it is acceptable for sexual intercourse to take place before marriage. The marriage relationship is symbolized by eating together. When a couple publicly shares a meal, henceforth they can eat only with one another. Even though husband and wife may have sexual relations with other individuals, they may not eat with them. Fifty years ago, in our society, couples engaged to be married could eat together, but sexual intercourse was not permitted until after marriage. The act of sexual intercourse symbolized marriage. If either of the spouses had intercourse with other individuals after marriage, this was considered a criminal act, though either spouse could have dinner with someone of the opposite sex. From the perspective of someone in our society, the rules governing marriage in Lesu appear like our rules "stood on their heads." The more extended meaning of eating together and of sexual intercourse in these two societies must be seen in relation to the underlying logic characterizing each society.

For human beings, all biological drives are governed by sets of cultural rules. The enormous variety of cultural differences is due to differences in cultural rules. Frequently people from a particular culture can tell the anthropologist what the rules are. At other times, they may behave according to sets of rules that they cannot verbalize. Defining these cultural rules is like trying to identify the rules on which a language is based. **All languages operate according to sets of rules, and people follow these rules in their speech.** However, they may be unable to state the rules that govern the way they speak. Just as it is the linguist's job to determine the rules of grammar (which the speakers of the language use automatically and are usually not aware of), **it is the anthropologist's job, working with informants, to determine the cultural rules of which the people may also be unaware.**

### *Cultural Rules and Individual Behavior*

Anthropologists also explore the relationship between culture and the individual. Though cultural rules exist, it is individuals who interpret them and either act according to these rules or violate them.

Each person speaks his or her unique version of a language, which linguists refer to as one's idiolect. The vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation one uses represent one's interpretation and use of the sets of rules underlying the language being spoken. **In the same manner, individuals act according to their interpretation of the rules of their culture.** This frequently involves choosing from among a number of cultural rules that present themselves as options or alternatives.

Individuals may also on occasion violate the cultural rules. All cultures have some provision for sanctioning the violation of cultural rules as well as rewards for obeying them. Both rewards and sanctions differ from one culture to another, in the same way that the sets of cultural rules differ.