



CLOCKING CULTURES

What is time? The answer varies from society to society **By Carol Ezzell**

Show up an hour late in Brazil, and no one bats an eyelash. But keep someone in

New York City waiting for five or 10 minutes, and you have some explaining to do. Time is elastic in many cultures but snaps taut in others. Indeed, the way members of a culture perceive and use time reflects their society's priorities and even their own worldview.

Social scientists have recorded wide differences in the pace of life in various countries and in how societies view time—whether as an arrow piercing the future or as a revolving wheel in which past, present and future cycle endlessly. Some cultures conflate time and space: the Australian Aborigines' concept of the "Dreamtime" encompasses not only a creation myth but a method of finding their way around the countryside. Interestingly, however, some views of time—such as the idea that it is acceptable for a more powerful person to keep someone of lower status waiting—cut across cultural differences and seem to be found universally.

The study of time and society can be divided into the pragmatic and the cosmological. On the practical side, in the 1950s anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Jr., wrote that the rules of social time constitute a "silent language" for a given culture. The rules might not always be made explicit, he stat-

ed, but "they exist in the air.... They are either familiar and comfortable or unfamiliar and wrong."

In 1955 he described in *Scientific American* how differing perceptions of time can lead to misunderstandings between people from separate cultures. "An ambassador who has been kept waiting for more than half an hour by a foreign visitor needs to understand that if his visitor 'just mutters an apology' this is not necessarily an insult," Hall wrote. "The time system in the foreign country may be composed of different basic units, so that the visitor is not as late as he may appear to us. You must know the time system of the country to know at what point apologies are really due.... Different cultures simply place different values on the time units."

Most cultures around the world now have watches and calendars, uniting the majority of the globe in the same general rhythm of time. But that doesn't mean we all march to the same beat. "One of the beauties of studying time is that it's a wonderful window on culture," says Robert V. Levine, a social psychologist at California State University at Fresno. "You get answers on what cultures value and believe in.



You get a really good idea of what's important to people."

Levine and his colleagues have conducted so-called pace-of-life studies in 31 countries. In *A Geography of Time*, published in 1997, Levine describes how he ranked the countries by using three measures: walking speed on urban sidewalks, how quickly postal clerks could fulfill a request for a common stamp, and the accuracy of public clocks. Based on these variables, he concluded that the five fastest-paced countries are Switzerland, Ireland, Germany, Japan and Italy; the five slowest are Syria, El Salvador, Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico. The U.S., at 16th, ranks near the middle.

Kevin K. Birth, an anthropologist at Queens College, has examined time perceptions in Trinidad. Birth's 1999 book, *Any Time Is Trinidad Time: Social Meanings and Temporal Consciousness*, refers to a commonly used phrase to excuse lateness. In that country, Birth observes, "if you have a meeting at 6:00 at night, people show up at 6:45 or 7:00 and say, 'Any time is Trinidad time.'" When it comes to business, however, that loose approach to timeliness works only for the people with power. A boss can show up late and toss off "any time is Trinidad time," but underlings are expected to be more punctual. For them, the saying goes, "time is time."

Birth adds that the tie between power and waiting time is true for many other cultures as well.

The nebulous nature of time makes it hard for anthropologists and social psychologists to study. "You can't simply go into a society, walk up to some poor soul and say, 'Tell me about your notions of time,'" Birth says. "People don't really have an answer to that. You have to come up with other ways to find out."

Birth attempted to get at how Trinidadians value time by exploring how closely their society links time and money. He surveyed rural residents and found that farmers—whose days are dictated by natural events, such as sunrise—did not recognize the phrases "time is money," "budget your time" or "time management," even though they had satellite TV and were familiar with Western popular culture. But tailors in the same areas were aware of such notions. Birth concluded that wage work altered the tailors' views of time. "The ideas of associating time with money are not found globally," he says, "but are attached to your job and the people you work with."

How people deal with time on a day-to-day basis often has nothing to do with how they conceive of time as an abstract entity. "There's often a disjunction between how a culture views the mythology of time and how they think about time in their daily lives," Birth asserts. "We don't think of Stephen Hawking's theories as we go about our daily lives."

Some cultures do not draw neat distinctions between the past, present and future. Australian Aborigines, for instance, believe that their ancestors crawled out of the earth during the Dreamtime. The ancestors "sang" the world into existence as they moved about naming each feature and living thing, which brought them into being. Even today, an entity does not exist unless an Aborigine "sings" it.

Ziauddin Sardar, a British Muslim author and critic, has written about time and Islamic cultures, particularly the fundamentalist sect Wahhabism. Muslims "always carry the past with them," claims Sardar, who is editor of the journal *Futures* and visiting professor of postcolonial studies at City University, London. "In Islam, time is a tapestry incorporating the past, present and future. The past is ever present." The followers of Wahhabism, which is practiced in Saudi Arabia and by Osama bin Laden, seek to re-create the idyllic days of the prophet Muhammad's life. "The worldly future dimension has been suppressed" by them, Sardar says. "They have romanticized a particular vision of the past. All they are doing is trying to replicate that past."

Sardar asserts that the West has "colonized" time by spreading the expectation that life should become better as time passes: "If you colonize time, you also colonize the future. If you think of time as an arrow, of course you think of the future as progress, going in one direction. But different people may desire different futures." ■

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