



Main Features of a Traditional Society

Site Reference :

1. <https://www.sociologydiscussion.com/society/7-main-features-of-a-traditional-society/2922>
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_society

In sociology, **traditional society** refers to a **society** characterized by an orientation to the past, not the future, with a predominant role for custom and habit. Such societies are marked by a lack of distinction between family and business, with the **division of labor** influenced primarily by age, gender, and status.

The following points highlight the seven main features of a traditional society.

1. **“A society is traditional if behaviour is governed by custom and if ways of behaviour continue with little change from generation to generation”**. Such a society is averse to all sorts of innovation because of its abiding faith in the time-worn, traditional methods of dealing with problems confronting the society.

Loyalty to the past makes it blind to the scope and promise of non-traditional ways of dealing with the problems of society.

2. A traditional society is marked, in the words of Talcott Parsons, by ‘particularistic’ values as opposed to ‘universalistic’ values which characterize a modern society. Family and kinship ties are very strong. Inadequate development of transport facilities tends to limit spatial mobility which, in its turn, restricts marriage and all other kinds of social relationships within a narrow circle.

3. It follows from the above that social status in a traditional society is ascribed rather than achieved, as is the case in a modern society.

In the words of Hagen:

“In a traditional society the social classes form a pyramid, from the peasants and labourers at the bottom to the small group of powerful individuals at the top. The individual’s position in the society is normally inherited rather than achieved, except that a group sometimes gains political control of the country by force”.

4. A traditional society is basically agricultural in nature.... Agriculture, therefore, determines the thinking, patterns of living and behaviour of the inhabitants of a traditional society. Gemeinschaft relationships predominate over gesellschaft relationships.

5. Social mobility, like spatial mobility, is very much restricted in a traditional society. There is a clear cleavage between the elite and the masses. It is particularly so in countries which were under colonial rule.

In the particular situation of underdeveloped countries, intellectuals often represent modern Western culture and find themselves separated from, and in conflict with, the traditional cultural values of the mass of their fellow countrymen.

6. One can discern differences in the political activities of traditional and modern societies. Mass participation in politics, not simply in terms of voting periodically during elections but in terms of building powerful lobbies or pressure groups to influence political decision-making, is a very recent phenomenon in traditional societies.

Discerning observers of the Indian political scene have noted that “intellectuals, in a broad sense, have dominated political life in India since independence and that active participation in politics of the mass of the population such as occurred in the independence movement has only recently begun to revive, on a limited scale, with the emergence of peasant movements. Students are the principal source of recruitment to active political work, and this fact accounts in part for the prevalence of factionalism in the major parties”.

7. All the characteristic features of a traditional society are, for obvious reasons, reflected in the education system. Stagnant economy, absence of diversification in occupational patterns and allegiance to tradition—all these have a bearing on the system of education prevailing in these societies.

Literacy is low as compared to advanced societies. Enrolment in general stream is far greater than that in specialized fields. The reason is obvious. Agriculture and industry are not developed to the extent that they can absorb technical hands beyond a certain limit.

Traditional and modern

Traditional society has often been contrasted with modern [industrial society](#), with figures like [Durkheim](#) and [Pierre Bourdieu](#) stressing such polarities as community vs. society or mechanical vs. organic solidarity; while [Claude Lévi-Strauss](#) saw traditional societies as 'cold' societies in that they refused to allow the historical process to define their social sense of legitimacy.

Within [modernisation theory](#), traditional society is also the first stage of economic development as established in [W.W. Rostow](#)'s Economic Growth Model. Classified as "pre-newtonian," science and technology are not practiced. Life is [agrarian](#), and family or clan relationships are the basis for social structures.

However, theories positing the simple, [unilineal evolution](#) of societies from traditional to modern industrial are now seen as too simplistic, relying on an [ideal typology](#) revolving round such polarities as subsistence/growth; face-to-face/impersonal; [informal social control](#) or [formal social control](#); collective ownership/private ownership. Recent work has emphasised instead the variety of traditional cultures, and the existence of intermediate forms as well as of 'alternative' modernisations.

Ritual

Traditional societies have been seen as characterised by powerful collective memories sanctioned by [ritual](#), and with social guardians ensuring continuity of communal practices.^[9]

[Practice theory](#) however has recently emphasised the role of ritual in facilitating change, as well as continuity.

Diversity

[Fredric Jameson](#) saw 20th century modernisation as encountering two main kinds of traditional society, tribal, as in Africa, and bureaucratic imperial, as in China and India, but a much wider diversity of traditional societies has existed over time.

For most of human existence, small tribes of hunter-gatherers leading an almost static existence formed the only social organisation: where they survived into the 20th century, as

in Australia, paintings, songs, myths and rituals were all used to cement links to a deep-reaching sense of continuity with ancestors and ancestral ways.

The invention of farming some 10,000 years ago led to the development of [agrarian societies](#), whether nomadic or peasant, the latter in particular almost always dominated by a strong sense of traditionalism. Within agrarian society, however, a wide diversity still existed. [Homeric](#) Greece was a society marked by powerful kinship bonds, fixed status and rigidly defined social expectations; with the classical [polis](#), however, though festivals, in [M. I. Finley](#)'s words, still "recreated for their audiences the unbroken web of all life, stretching back over generations of men to the gods" new and more complex voluntary forms of social and public life balanced traditional society in a new equilibrium.

Medieval Europe was an intensely local society of self-perpetuating peasant households,^[18] living within a slow moving culture dominated by customary law and by respect for ancient authority^[19] and pervaded with an ahistorical political [mentality](#) focused upon the concepts of experience, usage, and law-as-custom. In some villages, you find digging being done as a community. People farm together and when harvesting time comes, they share the harvests. So there is communal work as a means of simplifying work and this earns them security to themselves and their produce. This is witnessed in some parts of Buganda like in Lumanyo, Maddu, Gomba District.

Enlightenment and post-traditionalism

Much of the focus of [Enlightenment](#) thinking was directed at undoing the mindset of traditional society, and replacing a focus upon such concepts as rural, hierarchical, customary or status with one centred on the ideas of urban, egalitarian, progressive or contractual. [Modernism](#) and [modernity](#) continued the process of challenging and overcoming traditional society.

Jameson, however, has seen as a defining feature of [postmodernism](#) the global elimination of residual, 'traditional' enclaves, giving it its one-dimensional, temporal nature that is no longer offset by living examples of the past alongside the new.

Internet

Global media such as the [Internet](#) have been seen as effective means of recreating traditional cultures.^[23] However, a key contrast now with traditional societies as they were is that

participation has become voluntary instead of being ascriptive: fixed in space, social stratification and role expectations.^[24]