2.5 How do texts reflect, represent or form a part of cultural practices?

OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER

- To understand the meaning of the term 'cultural practice'.
- To examine the representation of cultural practice in graphic novels.
- To explore how texts can represent and reflect family and gender as cultural practice.
- To explore how texts can represent custom and tradition as cultural practice.
- To consider how texts can form cultural practice.

Now is a sensible time to revisit the notion of culture. We have previously defined it as what the inherent values, beliefs and attitudes of the time and place actually are. These are shared by a distinct group of people, and they affect how they view the world and interact with it.

Our **guiding conceptual question** wants us to focus in particular on '**cultural practices**'. This generally refers to the traditional and customary practices of a particular ethnic or other cultural group. It refers to the physical rather than the abstract, as in how people act and interact in the real world. For example, some Vajrayana Buddhists believe that after death the body is an empty vessel and that we should be generous to other creatures – a **cultural belief**. This manifests itself in sky burials, where bodies are left in specially built towers to be eaten by birds – a **cultural practice**. These cultural practices are manifestations of cultural beliefs; they are often traditional practices that have been passed down from previous generations.

Cultural practices include the following:

- religious and spiritual practices
- medical treatment practices
- forms of artistic expression
- dietary preferences, culinary practices and traditional food
- housing and construction
- childcare practices
- approaches to and systems of governance and leadership
- power relationships and gender roles
- 'everyday life' practices (including household relationships).

DISCUSSION

Can you think of any practices that are particular to your own culture? They will almost certainly have been reflected or represented in texts – see if you can research any interesting examples. Some practices may even involve texts themselves, particularly with regard to religion.

This chapter will explore a variety of texts that **reflect**, **represent**, or **form** cultural practices; we will explore texts that show the cultural importance of clothing, food, dance, gender roles, death, and, most importantly, tea.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

CREATIVITY – CULTURAL PRACTICES IN GRAPHIC NOVELS

- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi
- *Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier
- *Aya of Yop City* by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie
- *Arrugas* by Paco Roca
- *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen
- *Palestine* by Joe Sacco

All texts require creativity, imagination and artistic craft, but none more so than the graphic novel. Even from the small sample above, a range of styles is evident, each a product of its artist/writer, and each artist/writer a product of their culture and background. The use of art and imagery to express ideas and communicate requires a very different approach to prose. Art has a unique, visceral impact on readers, and a well-designed panel can communicate more than words when created by a skilled artist with an impassioned message to convey. Art has always had an ability to challenge and surprise us, and in the graphic novel format those abilities are increasingly being put to imaginative and creative use to communicate **culture** and **identity**. Over the past couple of decades, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the graphic novel. We looked at some examples in Chapter 1.1 including the graphic novel *Maus* and its unique blend of testimonial, memoir, history and autobiography through visual storytelling. It is often within this text type that we find the most creative, artistic and imaginative ways of telling stories.

In the following few examples, we will see interesting and creative ways of reflecting and representing cultural practice. Before we look at them, let's consider why the graphic novel is such an effective vehicle for exploring these practices. Tezuka Osamu, an influential Japanese manga artist, summed it up best by saying:

> *'My experience convinces me that comics, regardless of what language they are printed in, are an important form of expression that crosses all national and cultural boundaries.'*
>
> *(Frederik Schodt 25)*

So, why are comics and graphic novels so effective at crossing national and cultural boundaries?

- **Universal visual language:** The most obvious factor is the use of predominantly visual narratives. Images are a universal language – we can all interpret a picture in a way that we cannot all interpret a Chinese character, for example, and this means that it is much easier to communicate in this form. For example, the graphic novel *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (as explored in Chapter 1.3) takes this to its extreme and does away with comprehensible written language entirely, communicating purely through images apart from the occasional use of a made-up language to put the reader in the alienated position of an immigrant.

An image of a tree as it would appear in a graphic novel, and the Chinese (traditional) character for a tree – which is easier to comprehend?

- **Simple written language:** A novel requires often quite complex language to describe imagery and feelings. Visuals render the need for these long, wordy descriptions unnecessary. Instead of hundreds of words building up the image of an Indian side-alley, a graphic novel can simply put the image in a panel. What language there is – usually almost entirely dialogue – is much shorter and simpler, reducing the time and difficulty of translating the text for other markets.

- **Creative visual storytelling:** That the visuals are drawn also allows far more creativity and imagination than would be possible through mediums such as photography or film, as these would need more elaborate special effects and editing. Modern graphic novels often use very creative imagery rich in symbolism to tell stories in new and engaging ways, as we will see with some of our extracts.
- **Modern technology:** You've almost certainly seen someone reading a comic or graphic novel on their phone, and this suitability for laptops, tablets and phones has caused an explosion in the sales of graphic novels. The ability for them to be distributed, downloaded, and viewed globally has made it much easier for writers to express their culture to a global audience via the graphic novel form.

These advantages have led to many graphic novels being released that explore culture and cultural practices. Some examples not included in this section but certainly worth seeking out are *Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, all fantastic expressions of culture and identity.

Representation and Reflection

Two of the functions included in our guiding conceptual question are to '**represent**' and to '**reflect**'. When we talk of **representation**, we mean just that: to represent aspects of cultural practice. This could take the form of a written description of a cultural practice, a photograph, a drawing, or even travel writing describing the practice for tourists. These representations are usually quite explicit and literal, conveying the actual act of the cultural practice to a reader. ***Reflections*** of cultural practice are often more subtle, and may show the tertiary effects of a cultural practice and how it has a broader impact on that particular society. Our next text is a good example – it often *represents* examples of actual Indian cultural practice, such as bartering at street markets, but it also *reflects* aspects of cultural practice by deliberately using bright, vivid colours that reflect the use of colour in Indian festivals and clothing. Let's look more closely …

Pashmina, by Nidhi Chanani (2017)

Our first text is *Pashmina* by Nidhi Chanani. Chanani moved from India to the United States at the age of 4 months old, and her mixed heritage as someone of Indian descent growing up immersed in the culture of the United States was the inspiration for her graphic novel. It focuses on a girl called Priyanka, a character loosely based on the writer, growing up in America but fascinated by her mother's Indian heritage and Hindu religion. She discovers a magical pashmina (a type of shawl from Kashmir, an area between India and Pakistan) that provides her with insights into her Indian cultural background. Scan the QR code for an interview with the author and an example of the style of the panels. If you can, try and source this text from your library or bookstore so you can complete the activity.

This text uses the graphic novel form to interesting effect. When Pri is in America, the panels are all in black and white, but when Pri is in India, the panels are flooded with vibrant, visceral colour. The black and white shows that her life in the United States is lacking something, and its darker palette reflects her mood of isolation and her feeling like an outsider. However, when wearing the pashmina, she is transported to an India rich with colour, culture and presence – this vivid use of colour **reflects** the presence of colour in Indian cultural practices, from colourful saris to events like the Holi festival (sometimes known as the 'festival of colour'). This juxtaposition represents the transformative power of cultural knowledge and its ability to fill in what may be missing in someone's life and identity. The pashmina itself symbolizes a link to her Indian heritage, demonstrating that items of clothing – representations of cultural practice – can act as a bridge to another culture. This is reinforced in one particular moment of the graphic novel when she gets clothed in Indian garments for the first time and exclaims that she 'feels so … Indian'. Her sari (a draped garment of cotton or silk), bindi (the adornment in the middle of her forehead, more often seen as a decorative red mark), and hairstyle all act as cultural artefacts and by embracing the sartorial cultural practices of India, she suddenly reconnects with her heritage. The **stative verb** 'feel' makes this very clear – she does not simply 'look' Indian, she 'feels' it. The jarring transition back to reality has all the more impact because of this return to black and white. She returns to her bland American clothing and the artist's depiction of her disappointed facial expression makes clear that adventure has awoken a new part of her, and she will not view her American life in the same way again. This would not be possible in traditional prose, and demonstrates the creative opportunities provided by the graphic novel form.

As demonstrated, this text explores notions of identity, being a third culture child, and rediscovering cultural practices that can sometimes be lost after immigration. The graphic novel's use of magical realism, with the anthropomorphized animals, transformations and magical clothing, allow fantastical elements to embellish the story and also reinforce the strong influence of mythology and religion on the Indian culture that she is rediscovering.

ACTIVITY 1

If you have access to the text, choose a spread of panels and write a commentary on how they represent or reflect cultural practice. A commentary is provided at the back of the book for pages 74 and 75 of the text for you to compare it with.

Shake a Leg by Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod (2011)

Shake A Leg by Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod is a graphic novel that revisits Aboriginal culture, something we have previously looked at in Eva Johnson's poem 'A Letter to my Mother' in Chapter 2.3. Pryor is an Indigenous Australian writer and Ormerod is a white Australian illustrator. In their text, some Australian children are buying pizza, but they are confronted with a chef that speaks Italian, but looks Aboriginal. This mixing of cultures surprises the children, who are then told about the chef's background and learn of Aboriginal cultural practices they were previously ignorant of.

(Jan Ormerod and Boori Pryor 26)

In this text, cultural practices such as dancing and body painting are **represented** and explored through the eyes of children. This is an important issue in Australia, with various government programmes currently being put in place to enhance the general Australian population's often poor understanding of Aboriginal culture. The image of Australian children being educated about Aboriginal culture is an ideal that the writers know the Australian government is aspiring towards. The children are introduced to 'warrima' (Aboriginal dancing). They use the tomato sauce to recreate the traditional bodypaint, and then become part of the dance. This playfulness shows the openness of Aboriginal culture and their willingness to share their heritage with non-Aboriginal Australians. Our extract includes a **splash page** featuring a two-headed snake; this is a figure from Aboriginal myth and is also sometimes a totem (a kind of spirit-animal) – in the image above, it symbolically links Italy and Australia to fit the story of an Aboriginal pizza chef. An **inset panel** is used to show an Aboriginal man explaining the totemic cultural practice in more detail. The mention of 'ochre' is reinforced with the image of an earth made up of this important clay and soil – in Aboriginal culture it is used for art, for body paint and for protection from the sun. The **code switching** between the Aboriginal language and English shows the multicultural nature of Australia and also the ability for meaning to cross cultural boundaries as the children quickly comprehend the new terms.

This graphic novel's focus on non-Aboriginal Australian children learning about Aboriginal cultural practices is a powerful example of culture being shared, and cultural boundaries being transcended. This is an increasingly important function of graphic novels as they are often being used to improve cross-cultural understanding. That our two examples have been aimed at children shows that the text type can be an excellent way of ensuring future generations grow up to be global citizens.

Aya of Yop City by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie (2012)

Our final graphic novel is actually known as a *bande dessiné*, a type of comic created for French-language readers. It is called *Aya of Yop City* and was created by Marguerite Abouet (an Ivorian writer) and Clément Oubrerie (a French illustrator). It is set in the Ivory Coast, a former French colony in Africa, and unlike our other graphic novels is aimed at an older audience. It follows a variety of characters who are all connected by the titular character Aya; Aya helps them overcome a variety of difficulties while trying to deal with her own often quite serious problems. The text explores themes such as sexuality, femininity, the blending of African and Western culture and coming of age.

Of particular interest is its appendices which provide step-by-step instructions on cultural practices such as how to wear Ivorian clothing, how to cook Ivorian food and even how to walk like an Ivorian. This mixes the text type of graphic novel with that of a kind of instruction manual, and makes very clear its intent to share and **represent** cultural practices. It shows clear step-by-step visual instructions that can help you embrace Ivorian culture. Beyond this, it even includes a step-by-step recipe to create traditional Ivorian food, much like Ha's cookbook in Chapter 1.5. This moves the text beyond simply being a reflection of cultural practices, but one that invites the reader to actively participate in them. This experiential approach to sharing cultural practices is a clever way of engaging outsiders and breaking down divisions between different cultures and cultural practices – rather than the writer jealously gatekeeping the cultural practices, the writer instead invites the reader to partake in them, helping to establish a sense of global community.

Summary

These extracts have given a taste of the kinds of cultural practices that are being represented, reflected, and even taught through graphic novels. Graphic novels are a unique form with a visual style that can disseminate cultural practices in a host of ways and to a variety of audiences. With such texts acting as a medium for sharing culture, they are playing an increasingly important role in helping to build global consciousness and understanding.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

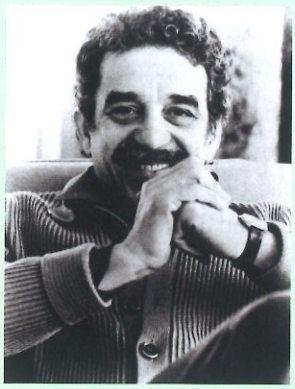
Consider practices associated with your culture. In the style of *Aya of Yop City*, create a graphical guide that you think communicates these practices to outsiders in an effective way.

Gender and Family as Cultural Practice

Both our role within the world and how we interact with it are, in part, defined by our culture and its attitudes. In our interactions with other people, we are putting into practice the values held by our particular culture. A small example of this is greeting a friend: some cultures may embrace in a hug, a kiss on one cheek, a kiss on both cheeks, shake hands, bow or touch noses together. This extends beyond simple greetings to how we more broadly treat each other and what we expect of each other. This is explored in our next text by looking at a South American family and their different roles and expectations in life.

Chronicle of a Death Foretold by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Gabriel Garcia Marquez



Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014) was a Colombian journalist and novelist. He is considered one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century, particularly within the realm of Spanish language literature. His most acclaimed novels are *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) and *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). He is notable for popularizing magic realism (fantastical elements in real-world settings, much like *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri in Chapter 2.2) and having a series of books that focused on the notion of solitude. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 and is remembered as the most notable Latin American writer in history.

Like many of his stories, Marquez set *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* in a Colombian township to explore the culture he knew best: his own. Though the main plot revolves around the honour killing of a man who had apparently slept with a new husband's wife, the text explores a variety of other cultural practices. They are explored by portraying the lives and interactions of a raft of characters that make up the community. One such family is the Vicarios; in our extract, we learn of the family's background and how the daughters of the family were brought up to be married.

Angela Vicario was the youngest daughter of a family of scant resources. Her father, Poncio Vicario, was a poor man's goldsmith, and he'd lost his sight from doing so much fine work in gold in order to maintain the honor of the house. Purisima del Carmen, her mother, had been a schoolteacher until she married forever. Her meek and somewhat afflicted look hid the strength of her character quite well. 'She looked like a nun,' Mercedes recalls. She devoted herself with such spirit of sacrifice to the care of her husband and the rearing of her children that at times one forgot she still existed. The two oldest daughters had married very late. In addition to the twins, they had a middle daughter who had died of nighttime fevers, and two years later they were still observing a mourning that was relaxed inside the house but rigorous on the street. The brothers were brought up to be men. The girls had been reared to get married. They knew how to do screen embroidery, sew by machine, weave bone lace, wash and iron, make artificial flowers and fancy candy, and write engagement announcements. Unlike the girls of the time, who had neglected the cult of death, the four were past mistresses in the ancient science of sitting up with the ill, comforting the dying, and enshrouding the dead. The only thing that my mother reproached them for was the custom of combing their hair before sleeping. 'Girls,' she would tell them, 'don't comb your hair at night; you'll slow down seafarers.' Except for that, she thought there were no better-reared daughters. 'They're perfect,' she was frequently heard to say. 'Any man will be happy with them because they've been raised to suffer.'

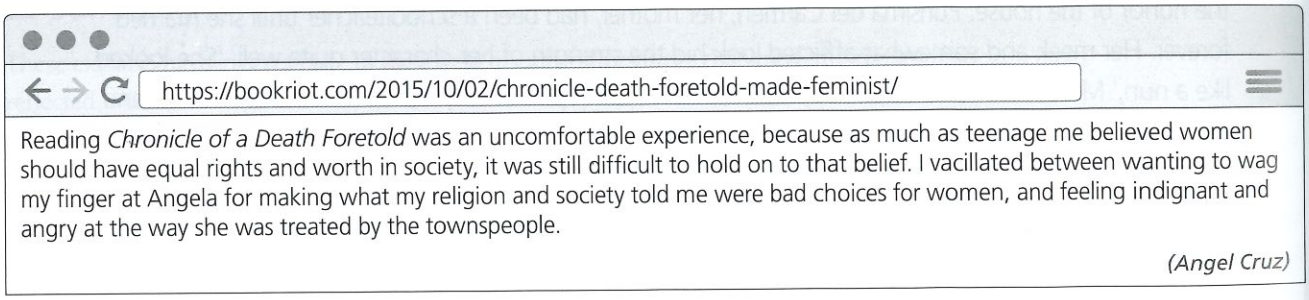
(Gabriel Garcia Marquez 30)

The way these characters interact with each other **reflects** the attitudes of this particular culture, and some of the customs described **represent** cultural practice. Marquez particularly focuses on gender roles within the Vicario family. The way these gender roles impact people's lives in terms of their treatment, opportunities, and education constitutes a cultural practice. Marquez uses the **perfect tense** when describing the mother's career as a teacher, making clear it is a thing of the past. We find she soon 'married forever' (lines 4–5), with the post-modifying adverb 'forever' making it seem like

a life sentence rather than a reason for celebration. In implying she lost her career due to marriage, we see that it is truly a defining commitment for a woman, and that they are forced to transition entirely to being child-rearers and domestic servants. She is described as 'devoted' (line 5) and the comparison to a 'nun' (line 5) implies the self-sacrifice women were expected to make in this culture. That 'at times one forgot she existed' (line 6) reinforces how invisible and taken for granted this devotion often becomes within the context of a Colombian family.

The next generation fare no better, as it is revealed that her daughters were 'reared to get married' (line 9), a description juxtaposed with the strong declarative of 'the brothers were brought up to be men' (line 9) and its implication that they would enter the world of work. The verb 'reared' is often also used with animals, and connotes a sense of training and submission for the sisters that is lacking in the phrase 'brought up' used when describing the brothers (the original Spanish text had a similar connotation). The girls are taught skills that are important in the domestic sphere, such as to 'wash and iron', but also skills in the superficial, such as to embroider and create 'artificial flowers' (lines 10–11). It is made clear at the end of the extract that the conventional idea of a perfect woman is one 'raised to suffer' (line 16) – a strong and bold statement illustrating the inferior position of women and the expectation of them to sacrifice their own pleasures and independence for the sake of others.

In **representing** and **reflecting** the cultural practices surrounding women and marriage, Garcia helps share the experience of being a woman in Colombia with the rest of the world. In showing how women are denied autonomy, he **reflects** attitudes he witnessed in Colombia when growing up, and how the reader reacts to them defines what impact a text like this has. To many, seeing a woman denied agency can be shocking, but to those with strongly religious backgrounds, these beliefs can clash. One blogger gave an interesting insight into her reading of the text, particularly regarding the character of Angela who is accused of having sex before marriage:



This is one outcome of presenting cultural practices in texts – they are there to be examined and questioned. In taking practices out of the everyday experience and placing them into works of artistic expression such as novels, they are put in a space that invites reflection and debate.

Summary

In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, cultural practice is presented as it was witnessed by Marquez in order to raise a question rather than provide an answer, much as Ibsen did so in *A Doll's House*. Sometimes, in having cultural practices in texts, they are at once being reflected and questioned. Inviting the questioning of such practices can sometimes be a catalyst for change.

Custom and tradition as cultural practice

Representing traditional cultural practices that are no longer common can also be a powerful function of texts, as we will see in our next work by Wole Soyinka.

DISCUSSION

If you think back to your parents and grandparents, there are almost certainly traditions they took part in that you yourself may not. Is this an inevitable consequence of progress and globalism? How important is it that these traditions are recorded in texts? You may even want to interview elderly relatives about any traditions they used to take part in and record them yourself.

Death and the King's Horseman by Wole Soyinka (1975)

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

The following text is by Wole Soyinka, a writer who was introduced in Chapter 1.5. Decide which of the following statements it true or false from memory, and then check Chapter 1.5 to see if you were correct:

- He was born in 1938.
- He is South African.
- He won the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- He spent two years in solitary confinement.
- He once escaped a country by motorcycle.

Death and the King's Horseman is about the true story of an incident that took place in Nigeria during the time of British rule. You may remember this work from Chapter 1.5, where we looked purely at the narrative structure of the play. This time, we are looking in detail at the cultural content of the play. According to Yoruba tradition, when the Yoruba King dies, his horseman must commit a ritual suicide to help the king's spirit ascend to the afterlife. If this does not happen, the king's spirit will wander the earth and bring harm to the Yoruba people. This caused a clash between European attitudes and African cultural practice, as the British prevented the ritual suicide by the horseman. When the horseman, named Elesin, fails to complete his duty, his seemingly Westernized son commits suicide in his place, affirming his cultural roots despite having been educated in England. Elesin then manages to commit suicide in his cell. Soyinka focuses on the theme of duty and culture as well as the lack of cultural understanding between the colonial powers and African people. Our extract is from the beginning of the play, soon after the Yoruba King has died. Elesin Oba, his horseman, is walking through the market embracing the honour he gains in having people know he will soon die and join his erstwhile King in the afterlife.

Scene one

A passage through a market in its closing stage. The stalls are being emptied, mats folded. A few women pass through on their way home, loaded with baskets. On a cloth-stand, bolts of cloth are taken down, display pieces folded and piled on a tray. Elesin Oba enters along a passage before the market, pursued by his drummers and praise-singers. He is a man of enormous vitality, speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions.

PRAISE-SINGER: Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind?

ELESIN *(slows down a bit, laughing)*: A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

PRAISE-SINGER: O-oh, you hear that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children …

ELESIN: This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers. I become a monarch whose palace is built with tenderness and beauty.

PRAISE-SINGER: They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary.

ELESIN: This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their seat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to find a new home but – Elesin Oba do you hear me?

ELESIN: I hear your voice Olohun-iyo.

PRAISE-SINGER: Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

ELESIN: The gods have said No.

PRAISE-SINGER: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?

ELESIN: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine.

(Wole Soyinka 7–9)

Elesin knows it is the day of his death and is proud of it, as it is an honour to die to accompany the King. He is going through the market and is celebrated by all, with the praise singers affirming his duty and his honour. On his final night on earth, no woman can deny him if he tries to sleep with her. He is walking through the market seeking a woman other than the mother of his child with whom to spend his final night. He metaphorically describes the market as his 'roost' (line 11) and the women his 'hundred mothers' (lines 11–12). This focuses on the maternal role of women in Nigerian society, not only as life givers, but nurturers. He relishes this attention and care, declaring himself to be like a monarch of a palace 'built with tenderness and beauty' (line 12). This idea of being served by the women extends to his sexual desires, and he talks of his need to 'smell their flesh, their seat' (line 15) – he wishes to luxuriate in women's bodies on his final night, taking them as if they are his right. He is warned about this distracting him from his duty by the praise-singer, who presciently declares 'the hands of women also weaken the unwary' (line 13). The praise-singer acts much as a chorus would in a Greek tragedy, foreshadowing the tragic arc of his narrative. The praise-singer reiterates the importance of this cultural practice, claiming that 'there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of a man'

(lines 27–28), and that if Elesin fails to complete his duty, it is believed the world could smash 'on the boulders of the great void' (line 29). The arrogance and capriciousness of Elesin is seen as unbecoming of someone about to partake in such a noble duty, and his desires of the material world cloud his spiritual purpose of ritual suicide, leading to dire consequences.

GLOBAL ISSUES ***Field of inquiry:*** **Culture, Identity and Community**

CULTURAL PRESERVATION

As we are looking at cultural practices, we are seeing works and texts that reflect how cultural beliefs are expressed in tangible ways. In this extract, we have been presented with the build-up to Elesin's ritual suicide. This aspect of Yoruba belief, that the King's chief horseman must journey with him to the afterlife, is a deliberately provocative and dramatic subject matter. Soyinka himself wished to play down the 'clash of cultures' element to the text as he felt it could be reductive and it asserts a Western perspective on viewing the practice. But this clash is still a fundamental driving force behind the narrative, and the exploration of how different belief systems can interact and come into conflict is a rich area for drama. In examining Yoruba beliefs clashing with British beliefs, Soyinka is able to explore the roots of modern Nigeria and, in effect, the roots of many other modern African countries. Through the colonial actions of European countries during the 1800s and 1900s, African beliefs were diminished and in some cases outlawed. Though the colonial era has passed, its impact on many countries' education systems, political systems, and cultural practices still lingers. A vast wealth of African cultural tradition and belief has been filtered through Western colonialism, and its legacy is a Westernization of many African countries. Soyinka examines the inflection point of this change, the moment a traditional belief and practice is stymied due to conflicting Western beliefs, in an attempt to remind modern Nigerians of their roots.

This reassertion of belief through works and texts is a powerful tool that can help begin to redress historical injustices and educate those who have lost touch with the beliefs of the past. It is apparent in *Death and the King's Horseman*, but also in many of the other extracts we have seen in this section. For instance, Chanani's *Pashmina* centred on a rediscovery of Indian cultural belief, and Johnson's 'A Letter to My Mother' contained a reassertion of Aboriginal cultural belief. The ability of texts to **reflect**, remind, and retain beliefs is a vital one, and it can help protect cultural heritage that may otherwise be lost.

This is a pertinent global issue as cultural traditions begin to fade under the conformative effects of globalism. There are many non-literary bodies of work that deal with the preservation of or reconnection with culture that could be used in your individual oral when paired with this work. You could perhaps look for a series of speeches, an advertising campaign, a series of magazine articles by the same writer or photographs by the same photographer that aim to celebrate and preserve cultures that are under threat.

Summary

Soyinka was passing comment on his country soon after it had entered a new era of independence. He explores the continuation of Nigeria's cultural practices and emphasizes the importance of cultural consciousness: he is reminding Nigerians of their roots and celebrating Yoruba culture. In showing the clash with Nigeria's former British colonial masters, he shows how easy it is for cultural practices to be outlawed, and shows the importance of cultural understanding.

Texts that form cultural practice

Our next texts also deal with death and the afterlife, but rather than **representing** a cultural practice, they actually **form** the practice itself. Texts that are part of cultural practice are often religious texts, for example the Jewish cultural practice of scheduled readings from the Torah that take place at synagogues throughout the world. The integration of texts into cultural practice shows the importance texts can have in a culture, as we are about to see.

Jisei – Japanese death poems

Japanese death poems were written by the Japanese literate class, mostly made up of the ruling class, samurai and monks. They were heavily tied in with the Shinto and Buddhist beliefs of Japan, particularly as Buddhism requires a focus and understanding of death. According to Buddhism, death reminds us that the material world is transitory and ephemeral, and that pleasures and worldly concerns are ultimately futile. These poems would prepare the person for death and often show a form of enlightenment or understanding about this transitory nature of existence. These are very different to the Western tradition of 'last words', which were often thought up in the moment or incidental. Contrastingly, these poems required deep rumination and sometimes even criticism and revision. In his book *Japanese Death Poems*, Yoel Hoffmann writes of a man who was so worried about his impending death, he wrote death poems from the age of fifty years onwards. He would send them for criticism by his poetry master Reizei Tameyasu; one such poem he sent read, 'For eighty years or more/ by the grace of my sovereign / and my parents, I have lived / with a tranquil heart / between the flowers and the moon.' His poetry master drily replied with 'when you reach age ninety, correct the first line' (Hoffmann 77). However, they were not always as serious. Moriya Sen'an, who died in 1838, humorously wrote 'Bury me when I die / beneath a wine barrel / in a tavern. / With luck / the cask will leak.'

KEY FEATURES JISEI – JAPANESE DEATH POEMS

- **Formal structure:** The poems were usually either written in 3 line, 17 syllable haiku form (5-7-5 syllables) or 5 line, 31 syllable tanka form (5-7-5-7-7 syllables).
- **Rumination on death:** Focus on death, usually from a Buddhist perspective, accepting and understanding that life is transitory and we live on in different forms.
- **Natural imagery:** Often be used as metaphors for death and moving on.
- **Acceptance:** Poems would show an acceptance of death, but some may reflect dark thoughts, others may be more hopeful – it would depend on the state of mind and the situation the writer found themselves in.

Below are a series of examples of death poems, some with additional context.

(a) This poem was written by a seventeenth-century Japanese woman who committed suicide. She had married an important political figure and bore him a male child, but was treated incredibly cruelly by his mother, eventually killing herself. This poem appeared in her will.

And had my days been longer	*Nagaraete*
still the darkness	*kono yo no yami wa*
would not leave this world—	*yomo hareji*
along death's path, among the hills	*shide no yamaji no*
I shall behold the moon.	*iza tsuki wo min*

(65)

(b)

There is no death; there is no life.
Indeed, the skies are cloudless
And the river waters clear.

(Taiheiki Toshimoto)

(c)

Inhale, exhale
Forward, back
Living, dying:
Arrows, let flown each to each
Meet midway and slice
The void in aimless flight
Thus I return to the source.

(Gesshu Soko)

(d)

Frost on a summer day:
all I leave behind is water
that has washed my brush.

(Shutei)

(e)

Empty-handed I entered the world
Barefoot I leave it.
My coming, my going —
Two simple happenings
That got entangled.

(Kezan Ichikyo)

Instead of **reflecting** or **representing** cultural practice, these poems actually *form* part of a cultural practice as they were a tradition performed in relation to death. Each is rich with symbolism and they contain much philosophical thought despite their brevity.

In **poem (a)**, for example, the moon symbolizes salvation in the world beyond the sufferings of the present life. There is a sense of resignation from the writer as, even if her days had been longer, she feels the 'darkness' would not have left the world, perhaps symbolic of her depression and suffering at the hands of her mother-in-law. The metaphor of a continuing path for death reflects the Buddhist belief that existence continues on after the material world, albeit in another form. Ultimately, the poem seems hopeful in looking to the future, despite being sorrowful when looking back at the past.

Poem (b) takes a more transcendental perspective. The poet is seeing beyond the human simplifications of death and life, and their inherent oppositions, instead seeing them as meaningless. To this writer, death is merely the end of the body, not the spirit. The adjectives 'clear' and 'cloudless' convey a sense of purity and clarity that the writer feels in the face of death, something approaching a sense of enlightenment.

ACTIVITY 2

Using the above commentaries of poem **(a)** and poem **(b)** to help you, analyse poems **(c)** to **(e)**. Example responses can be found in the back of the book.

TOK Links

Can texts truly express thoughts and feelings related to notions as complex as death? Or is language too imprecise and referential to capture the true essence of existence and notions such as love, life and death?

EE Links: English A – Literature category 2

Category 2 extended essays require you to compare a literary text or texts with another literary text or texts that is/are in translation. You could compare a collection of Jisei poems with English language poems or elegies related to death, exploring how each provides particular insights into their respective cultures. A possible research question could be: **To what extent do selected Jisei poems and Auden's 'Stop All the Clocks' provide insight into their respective cultures' attitudes to death?**

Summary

These poems are themselves a cultural practice, and provide a fascinating insight into another culture's attitude to death as well as a glimpse into the Buddhist notions of existence. Through figurative language, we learn of an accepting and understanding attitude to death, and similarities can be seen with the Yoruba attitude to death in our previous extract. Both of these examples show an attitude of facing up to mortality that can sometimes be lacking in other cultures and their cultural practices.

Depictions of cultural practice in travel writing

Our final two texts both look at cultural practice from the perspectives of outsiders. Our first is by Bill Bryson, an American who has written many successful books of travel writing and often **represents** cultural practices of the places he visits. Our second text is a **guide** for partaking in a Japanese tea ceremony, a tradition that has been practised for centuries.

Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson (1995)

Bill Bryson

Bill Bryson, born 1951, is an American who has spent almost his entire adult life living in Britain. He has written very successful books on travel, the English language and science. Bryson attended Drake University in Iowa, United States, before dropping out to backpack through Europe. In 1973 he visited the UK and ended up getting a job at a psychiatric hospital; it is here he met the Englishwoman who would become his future wife. After moving back to America so he could finish his degree, the couple settled in England in 1977. He has since been awarded an OBE by the Queen of England, been the chancellor of Durham University and won numerous awards for his writing.

KEY FEATURES TRAVEL WRITING

- **First person:** Travel writing is generally written from a first person perspective as it documents the personal experience of someone travelling through a particular country or place.
- **Perspective:** The reader is presented with an outsider's perspective to help convey the writer's sense of exploring a new place on their travels.
- **Chronological:** Most travel writing is chronological as it documents the progress of the writer's travels in sequence as they journey through the country or place.
- **Informative:** Most travel writers also try to provide context to the place they are visiting; this often involves including historical information and additional contextual research about the places they visit.
- **Descriptive:** In many ways, travel writing offers the reader a chance to vicariously visit the place being described. This requires creating a sense of place through descriptive language.
- **Culture:** Travel writing often tries to convey the culture of a place through describing its people and their cultural practices.
- **Entertaining:** Travel writing is written to be engaging and to capture the excitement of travel. This can be done through humour, evocative description, and detailed thoughts and feelings of the writer as they experience their travels.

As we discussed in Chapter 2.3, an outsider can often provide particular insights that an insider to a culture may fail to appreciate. A prominent example of this is *Notes from a Small Island*, a bestselling book about Britain that, despite being written by an American, ended up being voted by BBC Radio 4 listeners as the book which best represented Britain. In the book, Bryson travels the length and breadth of Britain writing a travelogue that documents the people he meets, the heritage of the places he visits, and describes the culture of the island that he now calls home. Our extract captures the typical style of the book – we have interesting vignettes and historical anecdotes followed by observations about British culture and cultural practices.

Context	United Kingdom – 1995
Genre	Travel wring
Audience	Those interested in travel, British culture
Purpose	To inform and to entertain

SO LET'S TALK about something heartening. Let's talk about John Fallows. One day in 1987 Fallows was standing at a window in a London bank waiting to be served when a would-be robber named Douglas Bath stepped in front of him, brandished a handgun and demanded money from the cashier. Outraged, Fallows told Bath to 'bugger off' to the back of the line and wait his turn, to the presumed approving nods of others in the queue. Unprepared for this turn of events, Bath meekly departed from the bank empty-handed and was arrested a short distance away.

I bring this up here to make the point that if there is one golden quality that characterizes the British it is an innate sense of good manners and you defy it at your peril. Deference and a quiet consideration for others are such a fundamental part of British life, in fact, that few conversations could even start without them. Almost any encounter with a stranger begins with the words 'I'm terribly sorry but' followed by a request of some sort – 'could you tell me the way to Brighton', 'help me find a shirt my size', 'get your steamer trunk off my foot'. And when you've fulfilled their request, they invariably offer a hesitant, apologetic smile and say sorry again, begging forgiveness for taking up your time or carelessly leaving their foot where your steamer trunk clearly needed to go. I just love that.

As if to illustrate my point, when I checked out of the Caledonian late the next morning, I arrived to find a woman ahead of me wearing a helpless look and saying to the receptionist: 'I'm terribly sorry but I can't seem to get the television in my room to work'. She had come all the way downstairs, you understand, to apologize to them for their TV not working. My heart swelled with feelings of warmth and fondness for this strange and unfathomable country.

And it is all done so instinctively, that's the other thing. I remember when I was still new to the country arriving at a railway station one day to find that just two of the dozen or so ticket windows were open. (For the benefit of foreign readers, I should explain that as a rule in Britain no matter how many windows there are in a bank, post office or rail station, only two of them will be open, except at very busy times, when just one will be open.) Both ticket windows were occupied. Now, in other countries one of two things would have happened. Either there would be a crush of customers at each window, all demanding simultaneous attention, or else there would be two slow-moving lines, each full of gloomy people convinced that the other line was moving faster.

Here in Britain, however, the waiting customers had spontaneously come up with a much more sensible and ingenious arrangement. They had formed a single line a few feet back from both windows. When either position became vacant, the customer at the head of the line would step up to it and the rest of the line would shuffle forward a space. It was a wonderfully fair and democratic approach and the remarkable thing was that no-one had commanded it or even suggested it. It just happened.

(Bill Bryson 311–312)

Here, Bryson is examining the British cultural practice of manners and of queuing. The extract begins with an anecdote regarding John Fallows. This is an effective segue into a topic as it takes an extreme and humorous example of queuing etiquette in order to make a broader point, and is a feature that is often used in travel writing. The colloquial 'bugger off' (line 4) being directed towards a man with a gun shows bravery on the part of Fallows, but also illustrates the importance of manners. Bryson's addition of 'approving nods' (lines 4–5) implies this was a shared feeling among the other people in the queue, suggesting it is an inherent part of being British; their reaction also brings to mind the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' posters we looked at in the previous chapter.

Bryson then uses contrast to emphasize his point, comparing the typical two queues you would find when there are two windows serving people as full of 'gloomy people convinced the other line was moving faster' (lines 26–27). This negative lexis is in strong contrast with words like 'ingenious' (line 29), 'democratic', 'fair' (line 31) and 'sensible' (line 28) used for the British queuing system. Its formation is described with the adverb 'spontaneously' (line 28) to suggest it is an inherent characteristic of British people and an instinctive part of their culture. As ever when dealing with stereotypes, we as readers need to be wary of broad characterizations. The cultural practice Bryson is describing reinforces a well-known stereotype that readers may have gained from other texts: the British are polite, and queuing is a national pastime. Bryson will undoubtedly have encountered poor queuing etiquette in his time in Britain, but focusing on characteristics that readers recognize can be more satisfying to the reader and more humorous to write about. This is another common feature of travel writing – as texts they are there to provide insight but also aim to explore what makes each culture unique and interesting, and this often leads to focusing on existing stereotypes, similar to the **exoticisation** we discussed when looking at *Shantaram* in Chapter 2.3.

DISCUSSION

Consider the cultural stereotypes you have of British people – how many of them have you actually seen or experienced in real life, and how many of them are purely through texts and the wider media? More often than not, most of our stereotypes are second-hand information through texts and the media – what are the dangers of this?

A Rough Guide to: the Japanese tea ceremony

In the age of cheap air travel, we no longer just experience exotic cultural practices vicariously through texts, we often experience them in person on holiday. When out of our element, we can sometimes make ignorant mistakes that can cause offence or embarrassment. Our final extract is from a series of travel guides called 'Rough Guides' that help people avoid committing such cultural faux pas. They are an accessible series of guides advising travellers on where to go and how to act in various parts of the world. This particular guide walks the reader through a traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

www.roughguides.com/article/a-rough-guide-to-the-japanese-tea-ceremony/

The Rough Guide to: the Japanese tea ceremony

Hushed voices, the scratch of a bamboo whisk, then a bow, a nod and a bowl of steaming *matcha* is handed around. Any delicate sounds in the room are amplified by the formality of the occasion – so quiet you can hear people holding their breath – which heightens the sense that something very important is going on. This is a tea ceremony in full swing: the ultimate in Japanese hospitality.

There's so much more to it than simply stirring a teapot; it's Zen Buddhism in a cup. Intrigued? Here's everything you need to know about 'the way of tea'.

What is it all about?

Chado or sado ('the way of tea'; sometimes also called *chanoyu,* 'hot water for tea', or *ocha,* literally just 'tea') is the ritual of preparing and serving green tea. It takes place in a room, sparsely decorated with tatami mats and a hanging scroll or flower arrangement, with up to five guests kneeling on cushions. There are countless types; a full-length formal event lasts about 4 hours and includes a meal and two servings of tea.

Rooted in Chinese Zen philosophy, the tea ceremony is a spiritual process, in which the participants remove themselves from the mundane world, seeking harmony and inner peace. It takes decades for the host to master the art of serving tea, through study of philosophy, aesthetics, art and calligraphy, as well as learning the meticulous preparations.

Everything is done for the wellbeing and enjoyment of the guests. All movements and gestures are choreographed to show respect and friendship. Beautiful ceramics with seasonal motifs are hand-picked to match the character of individual guests. Even the utensils are laid out at an angle best admired from the viewpoint of the attendees. It's important that each tea gathering is a unique experience, so the combination of objects is never used twice.

What are the dos and don'ts?

The guest is not a passive participant; everyone has a role and etiquette is an important part of the ceremony. Here are the basic rules:

1. Wear a kimono or, failing that, dress conservatively.
2. Make sure you arrive a little early.
3. Remove your shoes at the entrance and put on a pair of slippers, then wait to be invited in.
4. Avoid stepping in the middle of the tatami and use closed fists when touching the mats.
5. All guests should show their appreciation by complimenting their host on their efforts, admiring the room and the delicious tea and sweets.
6. Don't make small talk; conversation is expected to focus on the ceremony itself.
7. Finally, if you're one of several guests, don't forget to make a quarter turn of the bowl before you drink and wipe the lip of the bowl afterwards. This is mainly for hygiene reasons, to avoid drinking from the same place as the other guests.

(Ros Walford)

Reflecting the text type, this guide uses a variety of features to make the cultural practice easy to understand and follow. It is structured so that it builds the reader's knowledge up slowly and remains engaging. It begins by creating an evocative sense of place to capture the reader's interest, and then gives historical and cultural background before moving on to practical and informative

instruction. It uses subheadings to delineate the sections and make it easy to follow. In being so ordered, it reflects its purpose of informing and uses the conventions of the guide text type. Each section has its own particular style of language.

The opening is there to evoke a sense of being in Japan and to capture the reader's imagination. To do so, the writer employs sensory imagery to put the reader in the position of someone at a tea ceremony. The references to 'bamboo' (line 1) and 'matcha' (line 2) both have strong connotations of Japan. The adjectives 'hushed' (line 1) and 'delicate' (line 2) emphasize the formality of the situation, and the writer describes the 'heightened' sense of something important going on. This creation of tension and excitement puts the reader in the imagined situation, making them want to read on to hear about the main event.

The following section is introduced with the subheading 'What's it all about?' (line 10), a question that is then immediately answered, an example of **hypophora** that builds your confidence in the writer and the knowledge they are passing on to you. This section has a style that has shifted to a more informative one, with fewer adjectives and a greater use of declarative sentences and parenthetical information to help build the reader's understanding. Each sentence concisely builds the reader's knowledge, providing them with the contextual background to truly appreciate a tea ceremony.

The final section is introduced with the subheading 'What are the dos and don'ts?' (line 27) At this point, the style switches to numbered information. The style becomes more imperative, as the writer provides simple commands with modal verbs such as 'should' (line 34) that make clear what you need to do in a tea ceremony. This inspires confidence and is easy to follow and remember due to its format. Its chronological ordering allows the reader to imagine every step, and by the end it is as if you have experienced a tea ceremony.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Earlier in the chapter, you created a visual guide to a cultural practice of your own. Demonstrate your understanding of the 'guide' text type by transforming it into a style similar to the tea ceremony guide above.

Summary

Much like the appendices of *Aya of Yop City*, this text invites the reader to take part in a cultural practice. We feel a part of the culture being described, and consequently more a part of the global community than we did before we read the text. This is an important role of texts – to break down barriers and enhance intercultural understanding. As we build our intercultural understanding, we feel more like a global community rather than a range of competing cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how texts reflect, represent or form part of cultural practices. As previously stated, this is a vital role of texts as it promotes global consciousness and intercultural understanding. In sharing the rich variety of our cultures and cultural practices, we can gain an appreciation of the sheer range of cultural expressions across the globe, and often spot similarities that show there is more that binds us than divides us. These texts are all heavily tied in with **time** and **space** and show direct links between **text** and **context**.