



Age and Culture

Are you old?

How you answer this question may tell others what culture you are from.

Most research shows that attitudes toward growing old are more favorable in primitive societies and decrease as societies grow more modernized. In other words, under-developed societies have a lower rate of abandonment and deprivation for the elderly.

This is not true, however, in all cases. Some modernized cultures still keep their traditional values about age that are applicable to their senior citizens. For example, in Japanese culture, an old widow holds a great deal of respect and power. Older men in the Middle East are at life's summit, attaining prestige and higher status. Even the term, "sheik," (Arabic for *leader*, and English slang for a *charming man*), has Semitic roots to "shakha," meaning to *grow old*.

There is an inclination in more modernized, Western cultures to offer power and prestige to the youth, especially the individuals who shine in the lime light, such as movie stars and rock legends. Many of these cultures also avoid describing individuals as *old* and use more politically correct terms such as *senior citizen* and *elder*.

Why modernized cultures view growing old more negatively is still up for debate. This may stem from the belief that as people grow older, they have less to offer society. Is it perhaps that these societies do not see death as a natural part of the life cycle, and hence, become more youth-oriented? In societies that view life and death within the same process, such as Japan and the Middle East, fewer taboos about growing old exist, and in turn, they offer prestige to the old because these individuals are seen as productive and wise.

How does this correlate with communication patterns from culture to culture? It's commonplace in Asian cultures to ask individuals their age, their occupation, and even their marital status. This may appear to be inappropriate in Western eyes, but in actuality, they are trying to find your social status in relationship to theirs so that they can use the



appropriate language with you. Even if you are only a few years older than your friend, your friend will use venerating language while addressing you.

At the same time, respect for age comes with a mixture of benefits and obligations. In Korean culture, the oldest person at the dinner table typically pays the entire bill. Ouch.

So, I ask you again: Are you old?

This may or may not be such a bad thing.

Interesting tidbit on AGE in Eastern cultures:

Did you know that you may be two years older in Korea?

It's true. This East Asian age calculation started in China and spread as far as Japan and Vietnam. Today, it is still used in Korea. At birth, you are considered to be one-year old and at each turn of a new year (rather than a person's birthday) you add one year to your age. This results in individuals being between one to two years older in Korean terms than in Western terms. In other words, by American standards, a forty-year old in the States is actually forty-two years old in Korea.

Coming of Age Ceremonies:

In earlier times, many religions celebrated coming of age with their teenagers. It was there right of passage into marriage and coincided with puberty. For many cultures, boys and girls as young as twelve years old possessed the right to marry. Even though these cultures still celebrate these holidays (e.g., Bar Mitzvah in Judaism, Confirmation in Scandinavian Christian communities, to name a few), their laws pertaining to age and marriage have changed considerably.

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