

Survival of a Folk Culture: The Old Order Amish

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A folk culture is a small, self-reliant community that is technologically simple and traditional in nature. The term "folk culture" also refers to the artifacts of this community's material culture (such as tools, clothing, and houses) as well as the nonmaterial culture (traditions and institutions). This essay describes how one folk culture -- the Old Order Amish -- has successfully resisted acculturation and assimilation into the dominant mainstream culture of North America for more than two centuries.

A Thriving Subculture

Long extinct in Europe, the Amish subculture has fared well under the spirit of religious freedom and political accommodation given them in North America (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994). A sustained high fertility rate of seven children per family over the past century has contributed to a steadily growing population (Luthy, 1992; Ericksen et al, 1979). Of the estimated 176,550 Amish who live in the United States, almost 74 percent are considered "Old Order Amish" (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994; Hostetler and Huntington, 2001). Approximately 70 percent of the Amish population is concentrated in the states of Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, with the largest settlement in Holmes, Tuscarawas, and Wayne counties in northeastern Ohio (see Figure 1, a map of Amish church districts in the northeastern U.S.).

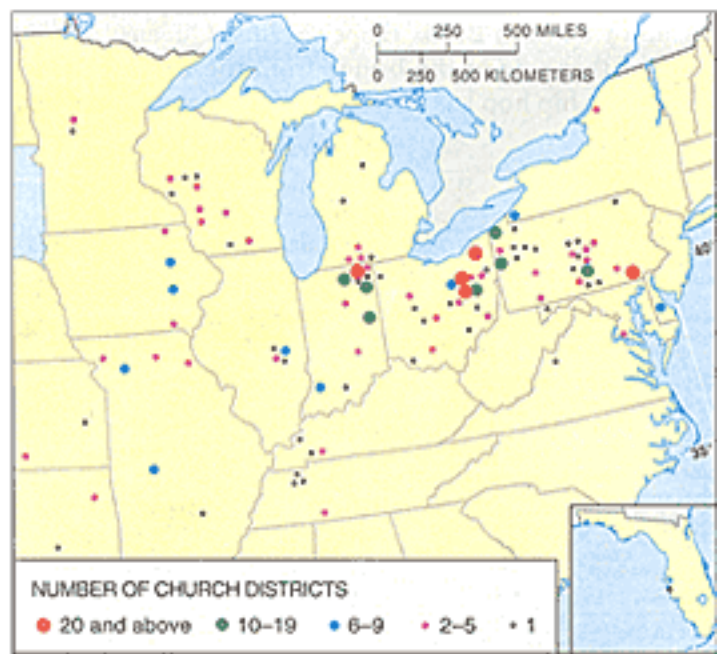


Figure 1

The Old Order Amish flourish as a tradition-based folk culture in the midst of a progressive dominant culture whose values are very different. They lead a simple lifestyle based on self-sufficiency and a rich sense of interdependent community that has changed very little in the past three centuries. Separate from American mainstream culture, the Amish preserve their culture and identity by excluding the outside world in as many aspects of their lives as possible. Their policy of separation is based on scriptural admonitions to be a separate people and not conform to the world's system.

They are uncomfortable with change and choose to limit their contact with the outside world as much as possible. From infancy, Amish children are sheltered from the outside world both physically and linguistically. The language of the Amish home and community is an unwritten Pennsylvania German dialect; English is only spoken with outsiders.

Gemeinschaft, or a strong sense of community, is deeply ingrained in Amish society. Early socialization practices begun in the family establish the precedence of the community's welfare over the interests of the individual. Amish children attend Amish parochial school between the ages of six and 15 to learn the skills

needed to live productive lives within the Amish community. The same values learned at home and in the community are reinforced in the classroom (Hostetler and Huntington, 2001). After school is finished, the Amish youth experiences a period of freedom and exploration called rumspringa (Hostetler, 1993). When this period is over, the Amish youth turns back to the safe harbor of family and community. Approximately 80 percent of Amish adolescents choose to be baptized into the Amish faith (Friedrich, 2001).

Selective Adaptation of Modern Technologies

The Amish present a paradox. Their rejection of many, but not all, forms of modern technology perplexes modern society. For example, why do they refuse to utilize public utility electric lines, yet make liberal use of generators to charge their electric fences? Why are the Amish forbidden to own or drive an automobile, yet are permitted to hire drivers to chauffeur them to the store or the workplace? And why do some Amish groups permit the use of new technologies that other groups expressly forbid?



The Amish do not regard modern technology as inherently evil. However, they fear that widespread acceptance of certain technologies will have a negative impact on their strong, tightly knit communities. The rejection or acceptance of a new form of social organization or technology is based on its effect on the long-term welfare of the group. Members of the community debate the long-term effects of the new item or practice. If its use is believed to hinder their goal of separation from the world, the technology or practice will not be adopted. For example, the Amish believe the use of mainline public electricity would foster the use of a television or radio in the home. These devices would provide the Amish family with an open pipeline to mainstream culture and could undermine their closeknit family structure.

The adoption of a new technology is also based on group consensus. This issue becomes divisive sometimes, however, because the community must survive economically. The use of tractors, when first invented in the 1930s, was especially problematic in several Amish farming communities in Kansas. The dispute arose because horses were unable to withstand the intense heat of the hottest part of the summer -- a time when fields had to be plowed for planting winter wheat. Several Amish farmers believed they could not continue to survive economically unless they were allowed to use the tractor, so they split from the Old Order Amish and formed their own community.

Negotiated Compromises

The Amish have achieved and maintained self-sufficiency in three important areas of life: religion, education, and socialization patterns. First, the Amish share the right of every American to practice their religion. In addition, Supreme Court decision (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 1972) exempted Amish children from attending public schools and gave the Amish the right to establish their own school system (see Figure 2, photograph of an Old Order Amish school).

Finally, based on their history of persecution in Europe, the Amish mistrust government and prefer to care for their members without its assistance. In those three areas, the Amish have successfully negotiated resourceful compromises that allow them to retain their cultural identity without being assimilated into the dominant American culture (Kraybill, 2001).



Figure 2

Nevertheless, rapid population growth combined with the high cost of farmland and large startup investment requirements have forced the Amish out of agriculture and into ever-increasing interaction with the world for economic survival. While making separation from the world more difficult, this closer interaction has opened the door to more job opportunities. The Amish of many of the larger settlements in Ohio and Indiana now work in factories, and many in Pennsylvania work in family-owned shops and small businesses. The trend toward nonfarm occupations has generated more income and given the Amish more spending power. Unfortunately, better economic opportunities often arrive with a price tag. The move away from the agrarian lifestyle has cost the Amish their traditions of working together and eating meals together.

One way Amish families have coped with those changes is by starting small family-owned businesses such as sawmills and pallet factories. The small, family-owned business is a negotiated compromise between working on a farm and working in a large factory. It allows the Amish to survive both culturally and economically by enabling them to work together as families and make sufficient income. Every compromise the Amish negotiate helps to build community solidarity and enables them to survive economically in modern society. In the past, cultures that were too rigid to adapt to change often failed to survive. Over the decades, the Amish have managed to adapt, survive, and even thrive, without losing their distinct cultural identity. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will continue to protect this folk culture from assimilation into mainstream American culture.