

Diffusion of Culture: British, German-Austrian, and American Schools

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One is often struck by similarity of culture elements in different groups of people that are widely separated from each other e.g., the presence of pottery items made in Khurja (a small town in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India) by people in different parts of the world or the use of French perfume by people across the globe. Another example of the spread of culture elements is that of cuisine. Most of us are aware that culinary preparations not only belonging to different states within the country but also those belonging to different countries are readily available in restaurants. Many restaurants specialize in specific international cuisines. Thus, there are Chinese restaurants, Italian restaurants, Thai restaurants and others that serve food of a particular country only. What comes out clearly is the understanding that there is regular flux or exchange between cultures and in this sense, cultures are not insulated and isolated from each other. In fact, the notion that elements of culture travel from one location to another is roughly two centuries old. In anthropological parlance, diffusion refers to the process of transmission of culture elements from one society to another. It is estimated that more than about 90 per cent of the content in a given culture is derived from diffusion (see Murphy 1989). The elements of culture that are amenable to transference are both, material (i.e., tangible) consisting of objects, and artifacts as also non-material (i.e., non-tangible) consisting of customs, beliefs, and values.

At this stage, it may be noted that diffusion is not the only process by which transfer of culture elements takes place. Another process through which mingling of cultures takes place is acculturation. While diffusion refers to the spread of culture elements, acculturation refers to exchange of culture elements warranted by direct contact between two separate cultures in which both the cultures undergo change. More specifically, "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits 1936: 149-150). The term acculturation was first used in the context of immigrant groups with the understanding that the group which comes into contact with another one abandons its own culture and accepts the culture of the other one completely. Apart from immigrant groups, acculturation was said

to be operative in the context of culture contact established through conquests. It is naïve to believe that one group of people can replace its own culture fully with another one. In real life situations, this is not possible. What actually takes place is admixture of the two cultures in the course of which hybrid cultures develop with traits (defined as the smallest identifiable units of culture) not only drawn from both the cultures but also those that belong to neither of them. Linton (1936) explains this clearly with the example of Italians in America who, in most cases lose their cultural identity by the third or fourth generation as more and more of the culture they find themselves in pervades their lifestyles. Yet, interestingly, this is not the same culture which their ancestors encountered on arrival. Over the span of third or fourth generation, the 'original' culture got enriched by acceptance of a fair number of Italian elements (e.g., opera, spaghetti dinners). Similar situation arises when one group of people defeats another one in war. The numerical strength of the conquered gets somewhat balanced by the superior prestige of the conquerors so, the hybrid culture is a blend of culture elements of both the cultures.

Acculturation differs from diffusion in that it is derived from demonstrable contact between cultures. Diffusion assumes that the contact between cultures did take place sometime because of which elements of one culture are traced in another. In the words of Herskovits (1955:472), "diffusion is the study of *achieved cultural transmission*; while acculturation is the study of *cultural transmission in process*." The other difference between acculturation and diffusion is in terms of the nature of transmission. As mentioned earlier, acculturation leads to the rise of hybrid culture that consists of a combination of traits drawn from both the cultures in a way that it consists of elements that are not found in either of the parent cultures. Unlike acculturation, diffusion consists of borrowing or taking on of culture elements of a culture by one or more cultures.

Features of Diffusion

The process of diffusion may be understood appropriately in its operative form. Here, not just the spread of a culture trait but also the factors contributing to the spread, the response it evokes in the people among whom it spreads, and the adaptations which the acceptance of the trait calls for in the culture assume significance. Linton (1936) identifies three processes through which diffusion takes place: presentation of new culture element(s) to the society; acceptance by society; and integration of the accepted element(s) into the pre-existing culture. The following are major features of diffusion.

- (i) The nature and extent of diffusion of a culture trait largely depends on its ready availability for acceptance in another culture. Certain traits (e.g., ways of fishing or cultivation of land) clearly expressed through simple acts and verbalization are more easily diffused than those that are not amenable to verbalization and convenient communication (e.g., profound tenets of philosophy of life that lie embedded in the interpretations of arduous rituals or those attitudes, beliefs and values that are not articulated in simple terms).
- (ii) The acceptance of a culture trait depends on two principal factors: utility and compatibility with the traits of the culture which receives it. Ideally, a trait, which stands out in sharp conflict with the traits of the receiving culture is least likely to be accepted. Linton (1936) demonstrates this with an example of the reaction of Apache (American Indians who dominated much of the south west during the nineteenth century) to peyote (which was intended to induce visions in individuals and in doing so bring them in close contact with supernatural beings) presented to

them by certain tribes. While the Apache do attach much importance to visions, they rejected peyote. The reason was that the Apache believed that visions generated a distinct power in an individual. This power was at risk because it could be stolen easily by other medicine men. They did not accept the regular pattern of peyote consumption in a group ceremonial because of the belief that the supernatural power developed as a result of eating peyote would be stolen away by others particularly if the person who acquired it was completely off guard. Another example is that of diffusion of television set. Since the ownership of television involves a purchase price and the requirement of electricity connection, the per-capita income of people in a society and the availability of home electrification greatly affect its diffusion. Other factors that influence the acceptance of a trait is the prestige of the donor group and that of the individuals who present it to the view society. It is known that a trait associated with or presented by those whom the receiving culture holds with awe and respect is readily accepted.

- (iii) Diffusion of any culture trait depends upon contact between societies. It is least likely that a society, which exists in complete isolation, incorporates traits that belong to other societies. In other words, the greater the physical distance between groups, the lesser is the likelihood that diffusion would take place between them. Culture traits are taken up by societies that are close to their places of origin before societies that are far removed or have less direct contact with their places of origin. Consider three societies: A, B, and C located in a way that B lies between A and C so that the only means of contact between A and C is through B. Any culture trait that develops in A will first be received by B. Only when B has accepted the trait will it reach C. Naturally then, it will take longer for that trait to reach C than it would take to reach B. If A and C are located at equal distance from B then duration which a trait developed in B will take to reach A and C will depend on the number and degree of contacts between B and A; and B and C.
- (iv) The changes or modifications in a culture trait (that has already undergone diffusion and reached other societies) lag behind the original culture trait. So, even long after the modified culture trait is established in its place of origin, its original form would survive and continue to exist at the margins of the diffusion area. This is the principle of marginal survival. Consider the example of a telephone set that was developed in a particular region. Now, over a period of time it reached several other regions. Meanwhile, in say about five years or so, new features are added to the telephone set at its place of origin and the advanced telephone set replaces the original one there to an extent that the earlier type cannot be located anywhere. The advanced telephone set will take a long time to reach and replace the older one at all the places. According to the principle of marginal survival long after the advanced type was developed, the original one will be traceable in one or the other remote places for a considerable period of time.
- (v) The traits that originate in a particular center may spread irregularly and at different speeds. Linton (1936) clarifies this with the example of maize cultivation which originated in Mexico. From here it spread over the Mississippi valley, eastern United States and got firmly rooted in the Southwest. In the east, it reached New England, the Dakotes and the peninsula of Michigan while in the west it barely reached southern California. It is interesting to note that southern California is fairly close to the Southwest where maize cultivation was well established.

- (vi) The rate of spread of new traits gets retarded when they are not or reluctantly accepted. This by no means suggests that the process of diffusion comes to a halt. It does, however, get considerably inhibited because groups that do not readily accept a new trait may in effect, create a barrier between the place of its origin and the remote groups for whom exposure and accessibility to it is routed through them. These groups could have been willing to incorporate the new trait in their cultures provided the opportunity was made available to them. Often, even if the intermediate reluctant groups accept the trait, much time is lost. Rate of diffusion of different traits, therefore, is far from uniform.
- (vii) Though diffusion of single culture traits does take place, those that are functionally related tend to get diffused together. Diffusion of tobacco, for instance, gets linked with various methods of using it. In the course of its diffusion, new methods of using tobacco developed in places of its spread and these got diffused too along with.
- (viii) It is common to assume that a trait which is more widely distributed originated before another one whose distribution of which is comparatively limited. This correlation of a trait's age with its distribution may be misleading. The simple reason for lack of correlation between the two (i.e., age and distribution of a trait) is that distribution of a trait does not depend solely on the time but on several other factors (that have been explained earlier). Certain traits tend to spread with greater rapidity than others. This is often determined by the nature of the trait. It must be understood that all traits do not possess equal culture possibilities because of their differential preparedness. Let us consider the example of a ballpoint pen. Its diffusion depends on the development of writing skill in cultures. If its origin area is juxtaposed with say three other cultures out of which one is based on oral tradition, the second is characterized by writing on palms leaves, while the third is known for generating literary works on paper. In all likelihood, the ballpoint pen will be adopted readily by the third culture and reluctantly by the second culture. The first one, which is based on oral tradition, may not be able to ascribe utility to it hence reject it. On the other hand, another trait of greater compatibility with the three cultures but of more recent origin may exhibit longer extent of diffusion. The ballpoint pen may, therefore, take a considerable duration of time to diffuse in other cultures. In other words, "The culture to which the trait is taken must be ready to accept it, or the visiting trait finds no lodgment, is an unwelcome guest. The counterpart to the dynamic of traits is suitable soil in the culture areas into which the trait travels. The adjacent area is not always fertile soil for the new trait; contiguity does not always assume continuity" (Wallis 1925: 94).

Schools of Diffusionists

Diffusion of culture emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as a critical response to the theory of evolution of cultures. Diffusion challenged the distinct stages of socio-cultural evolution laid down by the evolutionists in stating that there is/are center(s) of cultures from which cultural traits spread to different region through the process of diffusion. While agreeing with the basic premise of diffusion as an explanation for spread of culture traits accounting for similarities among cultures (many of which may be separated by long distances), diffusionists differed in terms of basic postulates. Two major schools of diffusionists emerged in Europe: the British school and the German/Austrian school. Alongside, a diffusionist school of thought with emphasis on 'culture area' developed in the United States which came to be referred to as the American school.

1. British School of Diffusion

The British school of diffusion was founded by Grafton Elliot Smith. Other chief architects of this school were William J. Perry and W. H. R. Rivers. In fact, the approach of Smith and Perry has been labeled as extreme diffusionism for their insistence that Egypt was the only center of origin of culture from which it spread to other parts of the world. It is for this reason that extreme diffusionism is alternatively referred to as the heliocentric or the pan-Egyptian approach. W. H. R. Rivers's approach differed from that of Smith and Perry in that it accounted for similarities and differences among Melanesian and Polynesian cultures in terms of contact with other cultural groups not just those in Egypt. This is referred to as moderate British diffusionism. At this stage it is worthwhile to explore the approaches of British the major diffusionists.

(i) Extreme Diffusionism

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1931) was a distinguished anatomist and surgeon who remained associated with the University of Cambridge for long. In the course of a visit to Egypt in order to study the anatomy of mummies he was deeply impressed with the complex procedures of mummification employed by ancient Egyptians as much as by their pyramids and large stone monuments. He returned to Egypt completely convinced that the Egyptian stone monuments were the forerunners of megalithic structures such as the Stonehenge in England as also in Europe. Taking a step further he proposed that Egypt was the only place in which ancient culture originated and it was from here that it travelled to other places. Smith identified two elements as important in Egyptian culture, (i) worship of the sun; and (ii) construction of large stone monuments. In order to establish his proposal firmly, Smith began to look for elements of sun worship in different cultures of the world. His approach centering around sun worship is said to be heliocentric (the term 'helio' means sun). To him, apart from evidence of sun worship, other Egyptian cultural traits constituting a complex consisted of irrigation and agriculture, mummification, pyramids and other megalithic structures, and ear-piercing and circumcision practices. He believed that Mayan pyramids, Japanese pagodas, and American Indian burial moulds were inspired from Egyptian prototypes.

The question that confronted Smith was, what made Egypt the centerpoint of culture? According to him, wild barely grew in the fertile soil along the banks of the river Nile. Later, Egyptians started to cultivate it using the water of Nile for irrigation. In this way hydraulic system of agriculture developed. Cultivation led to the need for storage of grain for which the people invented pottery and constructed granaries. Later, granaries evolved into dwellings. Provision for storage of grain relieved people of the daily anxiety of fetching food which generated leisure. In the period of leisure, the people developed the skill of basketry, matting and weaving. They also invented the wheel and the plough; developed metallurgy, and began to domesticate cattle. They established towns, cities and other large-scale structures and monuments for law and governance. The king would predict the course, movement, and timing of flooding of the river Nile and in this way control the fate of the people. He was regarded as the embodiment of the sun and as immortal even after his body was mummified. Elaborate religion based on worship of the sun developed. Ceremonies, drama, dance, and music were performed to protect the royal corpse from corruption. These were the rudiments of religion.

Smith believed that before the spread of culture from Egypt, the earth was inhabited by 'Natural Man' who was bereft of clothing, religion, social organization, hereditary chiefs, customary laws, ceremonies of marriage or burial, as also houses and domesticated animals. It was only in approximately 4000 BC that the inhabitants of Nile valley travelled far and wide in search of precious metals and other raw materials. This had two important

consequences, (i) they mastered the skill of navigation; and (ii) in the course of travel, they passed on the traits of sun worship and culture to people in distant lands. More specifically, Smith demonstrated the mortuary practices and other customs of the Australian aborigines as degenerated derivative of Egyptian prototypes. In Smith's words (1928:25), "There is also evidence to establish the fact that such elements of culture as are possessed by the aboriginal Australians – their mummification of the dead, their social organization and totemism, their methods of initiation, et cetera – are degraded and otherwise modified results of the adoption of alien practices and beliefs". Hence, the word alien is used to refer to the Egyptian. He went to the extent of laying down routes through which cultural traits would have spread from Egypt to the farthest corner of the world. He suggested that while several new centers of archaic civilization such as the New World Maya degenerated to the extent that they died out, others declined but did manage to survive. Cultures differed in terms of varying degrees of consonance with Egyptian culture. In essence, Smith's scheme of thought rests on following dogmas (cited here from Lowie 1937:161):

1. Man is uninventive; hence culture arises only in exceptionally favourable circumstance, practically never twice independently.
2. Such circumstances existed only in ancient Egypt; hence elsewhere culture, except some of its simplest elements, must have spread from Egypt with the rise of navigation.
3. Civilization is naturally diluted as it spreads to outposts; hence decadence has played a tremendous role in human history.

William J. Perry (1887-1949) was a school headmaster and an ardent supporter of Elliot Smith. Perry was overtly impressed with sun temples at Cairo to an extent that he studied the beliefs and practices associated with sun-worship intensively based on which he published the book, *The Children of the Sun* in 1923. Here he emphasized that Egypt was the only cradle of culture and the ephemeral character of art and craft. He believed that the transmission of art and craft across cultures was inevitably accompanied with the process of degradation.

(ii) Moderate Diffusionism

W. H. R. Rivers (1864-1922) was trained in both medicine and psychology. Thereafter, he turned to experimental psychology and sought to integrate ethnology with psychology. He got familiarized with the writings of Elliot Smith and W. J. Perry at the fag end of his life. Unlike both Smith and Perry, Rivers undertook ethnographic fieldwork. He studied the Torres Straits Islanders from close quarters through fieldwork (which meant being with them, and talking and interacting with them on a day-to-day basis). In the course of intensive fieldwork, he developed the technique of genealogy (the comprehensive presentation of kinsmen in the form of a synoptic chart used to study patterns) which was immensely useful for recording kinship nomenclatures and tracing descent of individuals. In addition to the Torres Straits Islanders, he studied Todas (tribal community in Nilgiris hills of south India) and the Melanesians. Despite the fact that the culture of Todas did consist of traits from Hindu religion, Rivers did not refer to diffusion as the basis of explanation. In fact, he adopted the diffusionist perspective much later in his career. In one of his books, *The History of Melanesian Society* published in 1914, Rivers employed the diffusionist perspective to account for similarities and variations in cultural patterns across regions. He explained that here diffusion took place through a series of migrations between islands (Melanesia is one of the three broad geographical – cultural areas of the Pacific comprising the islands of New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuata, and New Caledonia).

He explained disruption in ethnographic evidence supporting presumed sequence or pattern of diffusion in terms of auxiliary mechanisms. Struck by the absence of Canoes on some islands, Rivers was convinced that Canoes must have been used by the people in the past for, it was not possible for them to have done without them in reaching the present habitat. Later, due to the dying out of the island's canoe making guild, the trait must have been lost. He conjectured that the practice of craft was pursued (as in Polynesia) by religious officials. Understandably, then it was given up and lost to posterity after their death. The absence of pottery, bow and arrow, sturdy sea going vessels were explained in similar terms. Stated clearly, Rivers sought the explanation of contrasts among Melanesian and Polynesian cultures in terms of original complexes. He asserted that these original culture complexes had spread by way of successive migrations. He sought to analyze Oceanian culture (Oceania is a general name applied to the isles of the Pacific ocean comprising Polynesia, Melanesia, Australasia, and sometimes the Malaysian islands) in terms of several culture complexes that were carried far and wide across the globe by those who migrated to different regions. Migration enfolded the twin process of spread of culture traits as also loss of some traits. The presence of five different burial rituals in Australia was explained as a consequence of series of migrations. More interestingly, Rivers suggested that the migrants to native Australia were only small groups of men with technology superior to that of the natives. Being small in number, they settled down and married the local women. Their racial strain could not find expression in the large population of the natives. Consequently, the children lost the racial features of their forefathers. Since learning the local dialects was essential for communication with their wives, their original language was no longer in use and disappeared over a period of time. The menfolk got completely assimilated into the lost culture to an extent of abandoning their own way of life. They did, however, retain burial rites because of exceptional emotional attachment to their practices associated with them. Why the local people gave up their own burial practices in favour of alien rituals remained unexplained.

(iii) Critical Appraisal

The British School of diffusion was based on the assumption that people are, by and large, uninventive. They tend to borrow traits from other cultures rather than improvise them. Smith (1928:20) writes, "Those field-workers who have acquired an intimate acquaintance with relatively uncultured people have repeatedly called attention to the lack of the inventiveness which the theorists are so fond of taking for granted, or rather to their failure to appreciate the need for inventing devices that we regard as obvious and essential in character." The possibility that some traits could be invented independently was completely denied. Also denied was the possibility of multiple diffusions and situations of cultural convergence.

The major weakness of extreme diffusionists was to propose that all innovations originated only once and at one place one place (i.e., Egypt). More importantly even if Smith's and Perry's proposal that the basis of development of Egyptian culture was agriculture and the security of food is accepted, it becomes difficult to understand why similar sequence (i.e., rise of culture after adoption of agriculture as means of subsistence) could not have occurred elsewhere. The other contention was the excessive dependence on specific cultural traits (rather than cultural complexes) and the insistence on historical contact and diffusion based on vague similarity in the outward form. This entailed immense possibility generating incorrect conclusions. Herskovits (1955) explains that Elliot Smith and Perry exemplify much of their argument on the basis of pyramids in Egypt. The stone platforms in Polynesia were held to be vestigial forms of Egyptian pyramids. Similarly, the thigh bone of a dead African king, (which was preserved by the people for ritual purposes) was treated as an example of diffusion of the Egyptian practice of mummification. This amounts to stripping a culture of the ingenuity to ascribe its own meaning and purpose to its own practices. It is often said that

British diffusionists were given to fantasies that could not gather support from facts. Lowie (1937:176) mentions, "There is no real problem, but a sham problem resting on the dogma of aboriginal uninventiveness; and it is solved by interweaving possible but under demonstrated determinants into a scheme supported not by a simple verifiable fact. "

2. German-Austrian School of Diffusion

The German school of diffusion was founded by Fredrick Ratzel (1844-1904). Other proponents were, Leo Frobenius (1873-1938), Fritz Graebner (1877-1934), and Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954). They distinguished themselves from their British counterparts in adopting a less extreme viewpoint and addressing the methodological problems that had hitherto remained unattended. Again, the diffusionists belonging to the German School based their conclusions on ethnographies based on fieldwork. Much like British diffusionists, German diffusionists agreed that human beings are largely uninventive; and that spread of traits and their recombination into new patterns and combinations led to cultural developments. They however, upheld that there were not one but multiple centres of creativity in which culture complexes (to be understood as a combination of traits e.g., beliefs, and practices associated with a phenomenon). While the British proposed the diffusion of traits in their singular capacity, the Germans proposed that culture complexes diffused in totality through actual movement or migration of people. Schmidt (1939:25) explains, "During these migrations peoples and cultures came into contact with each other and this mutually influenced each other. . . . this mutual influence has been exercised to a greater extent than had hitherto been admitted. It has also been the cause of new creations and modifications of culture, and wherever positively established it makes the assumption of independent origin untenable and superfluous. The German perspective came to be known as the cultural historical school, or the culture-circle school, and historical ethnology (see Sidky 2004).

It is interesting to note that German diffusionists ascribed similarities between cultures (many of which were separated from each other by long distances) to diffusion or historical contact till such time as absence of such a contact was conclusively proven. This means that unless absence of historical contact was firmly established, they assumed that migration leading to diffusion had taken place between cultures that exhibited similarities. They did not take the separatedness between such cultures into account in proving or disproving contact. Thus, even among widely separated cultures (among whom it may be difficult for us to accept that migration had occurred sometime history) that displayed similarity, diffusion was believed to have occurred.

(i) Methods to Determine Historical Contact

The chief concern of German diffusionists was to determine connections and relationships among cultures. That was the only way through which diffusion could be conclusively established. Similarities, among cultures posed a major puzzle before them. They accepted that there were two kinds of similarities: one based on functional reasons (e.g., spears must have sharp points failing which they would not be useful for hunting); and second based on historical contact (e.g., presence of the elements of matrilineal descent in two cultures). The task then was to distinguish between them to which end the German diffusionists laid down two specific criteria.

Criterion of Form

The criterion of form (referred to as 'criteria of quality' by Schmidt, and as 'criteria of form' by Graebner) was proposed by Friedrich Ratzel who was trained in zoology. Later, he took to geography and held the Chair of the Department of Geography, University of Leipzig in

Germany following which he studied anthropology and established himself as a cultural geographer. In the year 1891, Ratzel focused on specific similarities such as cross-section of the bow shaft, mechanism of fastening of the bowstrings, material from which they are made, and the way feathers are attached to the arrows between the bow and arrow used in West Africa and in Oceania. He argued that these features had nothing to do with the function of the bow and arrow. This could be indisputably established because the bow and arrow could be used effectively even in the absence. Similarity, in these features, therefore, confirms historical contact between West Africa and Oceania.

Ratzel's criterion of form may be stated as, "similarities between two culture elements which do not automatically arise out of the nature, material, or purpose of the traits or objects should be interpreted as resulting from diffusion, regardless of the distance which separates the two instances" (Harris 1968:384). He applied the criterion of form to the study of culture traits in Mongolia and Africa. Ratzel concluded that Mongolians have adopted the lotus flower as a symbol of Buddhism from India. Over a period of time, the lotus flower became an inseparable part of Mongolian culture. In the same vein, the bow and arrow in Africa was borrowed from Indonesia. Ratzel said that culture traits may become simplified or complicated in the course of their diffusion.

Criterion of Quantity

The criterion of quantity was developed by Leo Frobenius- a pupil of Ratzel. Frobenius observed that since culture traits do not diffuse as single components but together as culture complexes diffusion between two or more regions could be established when certainty of similarity is found between multiple traits. This was referred to as the criterion of quantity. In clear terms the criterion of quantity may be stated as, "the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional items showing similarities increases. . . ." (Harris 1968: 384). The similarity between bow and arrow in West Africa and Oceania was complemented with similarity in the house types, shields, masks, clothing and drums in the two regions. As the number of items bearing similarity increased, the possibility that diffusion had taken place also increases. He drew attention to internal changes or adjustments that the introduction of new culture traits leads to within a culture. In other words, while some traits are accepted and become a part of the new culture, others that are not of much consequence are rejected and tend to disappear.

In addition to cultural traits, Frobenius was greatly interested in mythology. He found that in Indonesia several myths were interrelated to constitute an epic while in Africa they occurred independent of each other. From this observation, Frobenius concluded that these myths would have originated in Indonesia and got disjointed in the process of diffusion. The reason for loosening of the myths constituting an epic was, however, not presented.

(ii) Culture Circles

German diffusionists developed the concept of *kulturkreis* or culture circles in order to explain how certain cultures could actually get transmitted from one region to another and how they could produce extant cultures all over in the world. Father Schmidt and Father Koppers are known as the founders of the Austrian school of diffusion. It may be noted, however, that often the contribution of the Austrian school of diffusion is subsumed under the broad spectrum of German school of diffusion. In most anthropological writings the two are presented together as German-Austrian school of diffusion.

Schmidt (1939) explained that culture circle could be compared to a living organism. The essential dimensions of economy, material culture, social life, custom, and religion are interrelated with each other in a way that it was possible to draw inference(s) about one

dimension from another one. Whole culture complexes (rather than discrete culture elements or small groups of elements) migrate. It is sufficient unto itself, however, if it fails to meet one or the other need, then it borrows the substitute for this need from another culture. A culture circle would cease to exist independently if the number of such substitutes was fairly large. In simple words, a culture complex spreads as an integrated whole of constituent elements and in the process adopts elements that it lacks to meet the specific needs of cultures it comes into contact with.

The leader of the *kulturkrise* school was Fritz Graebner who was formerly a museum curator in Germany. He believed that in early times human beings lived in isolated groups somewhere in Asia. They invented language, tools and other basics of culture. Over a period of time, however, they organized themselves into distinct bands that isolated themselves from each other. These bands of people developed their own cultures and spread far and wide hence came to occupy different parts of the world. The task before world historians was to trace the links and relationships between and among various *kreise* (i.e., the distinct, unique culture of each band). To begin with, cultures spread through land routes. After watercrafts developed, they spread to Oceania, Polynesia and other places that were not connected by land bridges. When cultures came into contact with each other there got fused, displaced, or destroyed.

Graebner suggested that development of all dimensions of culture was not uniform. It was for this reason that cultures with simple technology could exhibit complex social structure. In Oceania itself, he identified six successive layers of cultures, Tasmanian Culture, Old Australian Culture, Totemic Culture, Moiety Complex, Melanesian Bow Culture, and Polynesian Culture. Graebner pointed out that these cultures were evolved by people living in isolated places with no means of communication between them. With the advancement in mode of travel, these cultures came to spread largely in aggregate form. He related Melanesian bow culture with Neolithic age of central Europe owing to similarity in pile-dwellings, rectangular ground plan, mode of hafting adzes and other factors. Sidky (2004:98) writes, "As for evidence for the diffusion of cultural complexes, the best and the most significant examples was once thought to be the spread of Neolithic mode of production based upon domesticated plants and animals. It was thought that the Neolithic complex originated in the Middle East and then spread to Europe, Asia and Africa through a process of diffusion".

German diffusionists visualized a network of culture circles one intersecting with the other and being intersected by others in no systematic way. It is possible that an entire culture complex comes into contact with another one on the boundaries of two cultures regions. When this happens what results is 'contact action' which is of short duration. If, however, one culture complex displaces a large part of the alien culture region and stays there what results is a 'mixture' in which blending between culture elements covering a large district occurs. This takes longer time to occur. Sometimes culture contact leads to the rise of compound cultures constituted of fusion of several cultures. According to Graebner (see Schmidt 1939), compound cultures could be identified from the occurrence of single functional elements (e.g., house forms belonging to different cultures) in two different concurring forms. When the heterogeneous elements are not of concurring nature (e.g., a house form from one culture circle, a form of navigation from another etc.), then the compound character of the culture can be derived from comparison with related conditions. Another way of determining chronological relationships was through assessment of spatial distribution of culture circles. Schmidt (1939) proposed that the more widely distributed complexes could be safely assumed to be older than those that remained more restricted in terms of spatial spread. He further explains that the continents of Africa, Oceania and

America (important places from which the history of the preliterate could be developed) are joined with Asia through narrow connections that restrict the possibility of large scale immigration. It is, therefore, logical to assume that the youngest complexes lie near the gate of entry while the oldest is pushed to the most distant district of the respective continents. More, comprehensively, the relative age of immigration of a culture complex may be adjudged by determining its distance from the point of its entry.

Interestingly, German diffusionists delineated several original culture circles which they arranged into different grades based on their chronological order. Schmidt (1939) proposed that there were four grades: primitive cultures, primary cultures, secondary cultures, and tertiary cultures. According to him, the first grade was of 'primitive cultures' (constituted of hunting and foraging people) represented by three culture circles: the central circle (comprising the Pygmies of Africa and Asia known to be exogenous and monogamous); Antarctic circle (comprising south eastern Australians, Bushmen and Tasmanians known to be exogamous and had sex totems); and Arctic circles (comprising Samoyeds, Eskimos, and Algonkians known to be exogamous and egalitarian). The second grade was of primary cultures characterized by domestication of plants and animals. Here, nomadic pastoralism (based on herding of cattle) marked with control of economic activity by men leading to patrilineal descent coexisted with horticulture in which women predominate economic activities leading to matrilineal descent. Monotheism was replaced with magical beliefs and practices. The third grade was of secondary cultures characterized by intensive agriculture which served as the chief mode of subsistence. Here, pantheon of deities emerged as also the practice of deifying the kings. In this grade, patrilineal cultures of Polynesia, Sudan, India, Western Asia and Southern Europe as also matrilineal cultures of Southern China, Indo-China, Melanesia, and North-eastern South America are included. The fourth grade was of tertiary cultures which comprises the oldest civilizations of Asia, Europe and America. Schmidt conjectured that all religions owe origin to monotheism and belief in a personal supreme being. He believed that there was a time in history when god actually appeared before the people which laid the foundation of true religion. The 'time religion' established by god himself got deteriorated as pantheon of deities came to be worshipped. It is important to note that German diffusionism conjoined theology with ethnology in a distinctive way (see Sidky 2004).

(iii) Critical Appraisal

The major criticism leveled against the German School of diffusion is the excessive emphasis it laid on 'trait complex'. It is not clear how the fundamental complexes are established as historical realities. It also rules out the possibility of independent origin of at least some elements. Again, the network of traits seemed to be too complex to sort out and understand clearly. Malefijt (1974:170) puts it candidly, "To accommodate these and other complications a very elaborate vocabulary was constructed: there were primitive, secondary, and tertiary *kriese*, each of which consisted of sub-circles, and those that did not hit anywhere were either marginal, peripheral, or overlapping *kriese*. In other words, the system did not work and in fact all it probed was that cultural spread and development did not take place in the way posited by the *kulturreis* scholars". Furthermore, stating that all the cultures of the world are derived from only few basic cultures seemed to be far-fetched. The association of certain elements associated with each culture circle was subjective, arbitrary, hence, amenable to error.

3. American School of Diffusion

Diffusion emerged as a significant paradigm in American anthropology sometime in the first part of the twentieth century. It was triggered by Franz Boas's insistence on the significance

of cultural elements in terms of chronology and space. Franz Boas (1858-1942) —widely known as the Father of American Ethnology was born and educated in Germany. It is understandable, therefore, that his ideas that laid the foundation of the American school of diffusion were influenced by the German school. Franz Boas upheld that each cultural group had its own history which consisted primarily of peculiar inner development of the social group as also the foreign influences on it. Anthropologists had to engage themselves in recording, documenting, and describing these particularities in history of each culture. The American scholars (unlike their British and German counterparts who focused on a kind of universal diffusion) explained diffusion as the spread of cultural elements only in a limited area.

(i) Culture Area

American diffusionists believed that people are given to learning and borrowing elements from cultures they come into contact with. As the frequency and duration of contact between two or more cultures increases the likelihood of borrowing and learning from each other also rises. Herskovits - one of the students of Boas, wrote (1955:296) that cultures in an area tended to form clusters that are “sufficiently homogenous that regions on which they occur can be delimited on a map”. Culture area refers to the geographical space in which similar cultures are found. The rationale of the American school of diffusion was that by the mapping spatial distribution of traits in specific geographical areas (i.e., culture areas) it would be possible to explain the similarities and differences between cultures, particularly Native American Cultures. One can trace the roots of the concept of culture areas in American ethnographic research. It was first used to classify the tribal groups of North and South America. Way back in 1895 Otis T. Mason used the term culture area in an article entitled, “Influence of Environment upon Human Industries or Arts” which appeared in the *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*. Here, Mason identified no less than eighteen culture areas. Later, however, Clark Wissler provided a systematic treatment of the concept in classifying Native American tribal cultures by correlating dominant cultural traits with geographical areas. Wissler (1938:220) explained this clearly, “if ... we take, all traits into simultaneous consideration and shift our point of view to the social or tribal units, we are able to form fairly definite groups. This will give us culture areas, or a classification, of social groups according to their culture traits”. He proposed that subsistence could be a relevant basis for identifying culture areas. This was because being the basis of existence itself, subsistence influences other aspects of culture. Furthermore, it has a bearing with environmental conditions. On the basis of subsistence, he identified eight culture areas as given in the table below.

Culture Areas proposed by Wissler

Subsistence	Cultural Areas
Caribou	Eskimo, Mackenzie (and north part of Eastern Woodland)
Bison	Plains
Salmon	North Pacific Coast, Plateau
Wild Seed	California
Eastern Maize	South east, Eastern Woodland (except north non-agricultural portion)
Intensive	South west, Nahua-Mexico, Chibcha, Inca-Peru

Agriculture	
Manioc	Amazon, Antilles
Guanaco	Guanaco

Subsequently, Wissler stated that a culture center was present within each culture area. It was from here that social, economic, political, and religious activities of the culture area were governed. The culture traits were known to diminish as the distance from culture area increased. Wissler (1926) explained the phenomenon of spread of culture traits from the culture area with an example from the Great Plains culture area (Great Plains is the region of central North America. It is a sloping plateau of 650 km width bordering the eastern base of the Rocky Mountains from Alberta to New Mexico and Texas) which included traits such as developed leather work, use of circular shield, social organization of as the band type (the band is a group of hunter-gatherers. They move together and perform socio-economic activities together. The band is one culture type; others are tribe, chiefdom, and state) sun dance ceremony, and absence of agriculture. Group located in the culture center possessed all the traits. Wissler was deeply aware of the relationship between ecological conditions and the cluster of the culture traits in the culture center.

Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876-1960) identified six basic 'culture areas' of native America (Arctic zone, North-West Coast, South-West Coast, Intermediate and inter-mountain area; East and North area; East and North area; and Mexico-Central American area) based on geographical and ecological considerations, treatment of cultures as historical and non-equivalent; defining and analyzing cultural climaxes sharply; and relations between basic cultural areas and other cultural areas. He proposed that a cultural area should be understood in the broader framework of its cultural contact and classified the six basic cultural areas into about 84 sub-cultural areas. He argued that since, (i) the term 'culture center' bore the connotation of geographical space; and (ii) in a culture area, the expression of core culture is high i.e., at a stage of climax, the term culture area was inappropriate and should be replaced with 'culture climax'. Kroeber (1952:39) defined culture climax as, "the point from which the greatest radiation of cultural material has taken place in the area." As cultures become richer (i.e., develop a precise calendar system, a complex interrelation of rituals or social units, religious hierarchies, detailed laws and norms etc.), their level of organization increases. This tendency is accompanied with rise in the potential to assimilate and incorporate new material that could be generated internally or be drawn from other cultures. Further, highly intensive cultures (i.e., those that are greatly systematized, contain not only more traits but also more material that is unique to them and exhibit more precisely and articulated interrelationships between materials) are more absorptive and productive than simple cultures.

(ii) Age-Area Hypothesis

Wissler proposed the age-area hypothesis to explain the relative age of a cultural trait. The age-area hypothesis rests on the assumption that a trait which is more widely distributed around the culture center is older in age than the one which is of limited distribution. The culture-area concept gets complicated by three factors (see Jha 1983): shifting of culture centers and their boundaries from one period in history to another; profound change in the nature of the culture to an extent that culture in a given period may have greater resemblance with cultures in another area than with its predecessors or successors in the same area; and dissimilar structural patterns in the portions and sub-divisions of the area.

Sapir, whose work precedes Wissler's suggests that one needs to be cautious in accepting the basic premise of continuous distribution of culture traits enfolded in the age - area hypothesis because, the spread of culture traits may be more rapid in one direction than in other ones; the chronologically oldest culture trait may undergo massive transformation at the center (i.e., its place of origin) which may be to the extent that the actual point of origin may be wrongly determined; and population movements within the area of distribution of a culture trait may have repercussions that lead to a misinterpreted type of culture distribution.

(iii) Critical Appraisal

The culture area concept which was the main anchor of the American school of diffusion has been subjected to severe critical appraisal. At the outset, there was no consensus on the understanding of the concept of basic culture trait which formed the very basis of a cultural area. Should the ship for example, be counted as a simple unit or as a conglomeration of traits based on the nature and design of the arrangement of seating space, type of wood, and the decorations on it? Further, all the traits in a cultural complex were assigned the same significance. Thus, the number of oars in a ship and the number of wives a man had or the number of husbands a woman had were treated as being of equal diagnostic value. The differences in the function a trait performed in two cultures were not taken into account (see Sidky 2004).

The other criticism leveled against the cultural area concept was with regard to the criteria determining the territory of a cultural area. Large numbers of criteria were delimited to determine the boundaries of a cultural area and based on these criteria several sets of cultural areas have been identified by anthropologists, however, will no agreement. One also needs to understand that cultural areas interact with each other often symbiotically. One geographical area may be the common territory of several ethnic communities each with its own culture traits as also common culture traits. This complicates the situation excessively. Again, if the sole cause of assemblage of culture traits is identified as geographical condition, then it becomes impossible to explain why similar geographical conditions in different parts of the world do not give rise to similar cultures. Even the same geographical conditions have afforded different cultures in different periods of time.

The proponents of the culture area concept assumed that free diffusion occurred within cultural areas giving no attention to the forces that resist easy acceptance to culture traits. The notion of free diffusion was a hypothetical one which was far removed from reality in which there is no neat, free-flow distribution of culture traits. It is difficult to establish that traits diffuse evenly and follow the pattern laid down by in the cultural area concept. Steward (1955 cited here from Harris 1968: 377) discussed, the consequences of reliance upon culture - area typologies with respect to three problems: "(1) center and boundary change with passage of time; (2) culture within the area may change so that it resembles cultures in different areas at different times; (3) portions of the area may be regarded as containing radically different cultures despite sharing of many features. "

The second set of criticism against the American school of diffusion relate with the age-area hypothesis. One of the most severe critics of the age area hypothesis was Dixon (1928) who challenged Wissler's basic assumptions. He stated that even if one accepts that the principles of the age-area hypothesis remain somewhat valid in the cultural area, they do not hold ground when the traits diffuse from one area to another. Wallis (1925) mentions that the tendency among anthropologists has been to use distribution as equivalent to diffusion and to take for granted that a continuously distributed trait has only one point of origin in the area of distribution. No correlation can be laid out between age of a trait and its distribution. To infer the age from distribution of a trait is misleading because traits do not spread continuously.

There is contraction of culture traits as also their expansion. The age area hypothesis precludes the dynamic tendencies which characterize culture traits. Whether a trait spreads at all, and the rate at which it spreads depends on the nature of the trait. Moreover, the spread of a trait depends also on the receptivity of the culture it reaches out. This is exemplified by contrasting the spread of agriculture with that of pottery or basketry. Surely, agriculture could have spread with greater rapidity than pottery or basketry.

Conclusion

While diffusion did provide an explanation for spread of culture traits it could not explain the origin of the trait. In focusing on the spread of culture traits from one area and its acceptance by another area, it minimized the creativity of human beings. In fact, one of the major debates in anthropological literature of earlier times was on diffusion vs. invention. It was said that diffusion could not account for independent invention or for culture change. Situations of prolonged periods of contact between two or more culture in which each adhered to its own distinctive way of life or those in which culture contact leads to selective borrowing pose a threat to the validity of the general premise of diffusion. Also remaining unexplained is the situation of culture that have had no contact with each other or with any other culture, yet exhibiting similarities and parallels with each other.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the diffusionist school captured the attention of anthropologists for a long time nurturing their faculty of critical appraisal. More seriously, the diffusionist school represented a modest attempt to explain the presence of similar culture traits in widely separated cultures through contact between them. It was not easy to discount it as a principle devoid of any merit. In fact, it provided the foundation for the development of crucial ideas and concepts that were employed not only by anthropologists but specialists of other disciplines. In doing so it served as a melting pot of inter-disciplinary critical thinking.

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