

DIFFUSIONISM

Historicism developed out of dissatisfaction with the theories of the unilineal socio-cultural evolution. The socio-cultural evolution theory concerned with the development of the human society was rooted in the earlier work of the late 18th century which claimed humanity rose to civilization through a series of gradually developing lineal stages towards the alleged perfection of the civilized world.

DIFFUSIONISM

They emphasized upon the idea that man was basically un inventive and thus the important inventions were made only at a particular place, from where they **spread through the rest of the world by diffusion or migration**. Diffusion is taking over of traits by imitation while migration implies that the carriers moved to other places from their original settlements carrying their cultural inventory with them, but adapting them as per changed environmental condition.

Therefore, cultural diffusion is a process by which cultural traits, discovered or invented at one place or society are spread directly or indirectly to other society or places. Although, it is difficult to trace the exact origin of specific cultural trait. Yet diffusion of a traits can fairly be traced.

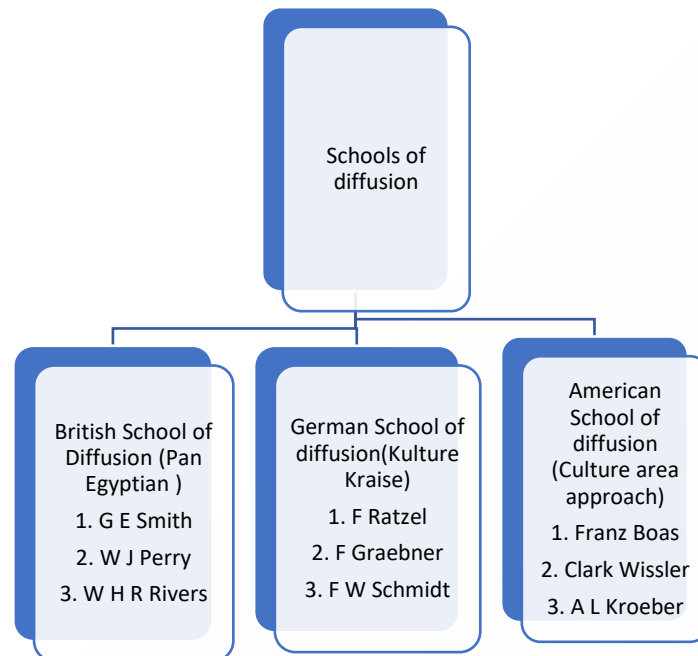
The following factors are influential in the process of diffusion:

1. Relation and communication
2. Need and desire for new traits
3. Competition with old traits and their opposition
4. Respect and recognition of those who bring new traits

Condition Related to Cultural Diffusion

Diffusionists have explained some conditions and characteristics of cultural diffusion which are as follows:

1. **Any cultural group will adopt a culture trait** of the other cultural group, **only when it would be meaningful and useful** either economically or socially of both.
2. In course of diffusion, **culture traits may not remain in original form**, but changes in it can take place due to different environmental situations.
3. Process of diffusion of **culture traits always follow from high culture to low culture** or developed culture to underdeveloped culture.
4. Process of Diffusion may **create culture change in groups adopting culture of other groups**.
5. There are **some obstacles in culture diffusion**, such as lack of transport a communication facilities, ocean, river, mountain, desert, etc.



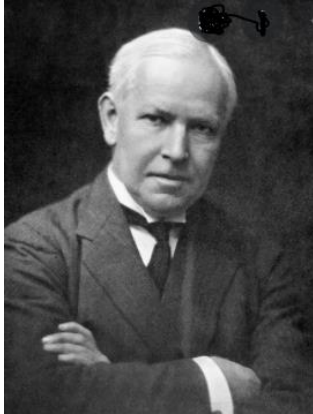
BRITISH SCHOOL OF DIFFUSIONISM

This school is also known as **Pan Egyptian School**. This school was led by **Elliot Smith and W J Perry**. They argued that all of cultures and civilization was developed only once in Egypt (which was relatively advanced because of its early development of agriculture) and then the diffused throughout the world through diffusion and migration. Therefore, **all cultures were tied together by this thread of common origin** and as a reaction of native cultures to this diffusion of culture from the Egypt and could be understood as such.

They are also called **Extreme diffusionists**, because for them, Egypt was only center of culture from where culture traits diffused or migrated to other parts of world.

G.E. Smith:

He once visited to Egypt and became great admirer of ancient civilization of Egypt. He saw similarities between Egyptian complex of large stone monuments in association with Sun worship, and that of English Megaliths. These similarities made him draw a conclusion that English Megaliths were crude imitation of Egyptian Pyramids. He then studied Maya pyramids, Japanese pagodas, Cambodian and Balenese temples and American Indian burial mounds. They all displayed certain similarities with Egyptian pyramids. He gave his theory in 2 books- '**The Origin of Civilization**' and '**Diffusion of Culture**'.



Smith was aware that man was more older than civilization. Many primitive or non-literate societies were without pyramids or monuments indicating no influence of Egypt. He called all people outside the civilization as '**Natural Man**'. He described their cultures as collection of **negative traits**, as there was no clothing, housing, ornaments, government, burials etc.

A revolution in life of 'Natural Man' came into existence, when they borrowed civilizational traits from Egypt. He popularized this idea on the ground that man was uninventive.

William J. Perry:

W.J. Perry was a devout supporter of Elliot's scheme of diffusion of culture. He did not make any special theoretical contribution. Perry once visited Cairo to take part in archaeological excavations. He, thus got opportunity to see remains of Sun Temples in Cairo. He collected information on belief and attitudes related to Sun-worship among sun-worship among the people of Cairo. He published the information collected in a book under the title 'The Children of Sun'. In this book he called Egyptians as children of Sun, because only Sun-God was regarded as a universal deity. Such idea related to Sun-God diffused all over the world from Egypt. Among Egyptians, it was believed that Sun-God incarnated as rulers. Thus Sun-God not only commanded natural happenings, but as a ruler he used to command his children on earth.

He was of opinion that pyramid structures temple building, use of gold and silver ornaments etc. were all the creation of Egypt's civilization. Thus, whatever the civilizational traits the world is possessing today, are the boons of ancient Egyptian civilization.

William H.R. Rivers:



By profession Rivers was a doctor of Britain. He was the member of the famous Torres Strait expedition. This was the first interdisciplinary anthropological expedition meant to cover all sides of primitive life by trained investigators. Rivers examined the psychological abilities of natives, more specifically their sensory capacities. In course of his study, he arrived at conclusion that there was no racial difference in pure sense ability.

His famous article entitled "A Genealogical Method of collecting Social and Vital statistics", was published in Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. He followed methods of Genealogy in study. Since then genealogical method became a scientific method for collecting data in kinship organization.

In 1904 Rivers came to India to study Polyandrous Toda of Nilgiri Hill. In monograph on Toda, Rivers highlighted interrelatedness of Toda culture with buffalo complex.

In 1912 he published an article entitled "Disappearance of Useful Arts." In this paper he dealt with degeneration together with uninventiveness of human mind.

In his book History of Melanesian Society, he explained that some of Melanesian people had no canoes, but once they must have known these items because without them they could never have reached there in first place. The canoe craft guild had died out (Theory of degeneration).

In Australia he noted the presence of 5 different kind of burial rituals in an otherwise homogenous population within a fair small geographical region. These simple and uninventive aboriginals could not have developed so many variations just by themselves. Thus, he arrived at a conclusion that small successive migrations have occurred among them (From Egypt).

Physical similarities between the people were explained by the logic that only males came and they married local women, their off spring lost racial characteristics. The males learnt language of their wives and completely assimilated with their host culture. Now they had no objections to abandon all their original habits, except one, namely, burial rites.

WEAKNESSES OF BRITISH SCHOOL OF DIFFUSIONISM

- They **believed that people were uninventive** and invariably prefer to borrow the inventions of another culture rather than develop ideas for themselves. This school of **thought did not hold up long due to its inability to account for independent invention.**
- They **took into account only material aspects** of the culture while explaining cultural diffusion.
- According to them, world civilization was a gift of Egypt. But this is not true, there are **many contemporary civilizations in the world.**

GERMAN SCHOOL OF DIFFUSIONISM (KULTURE KREISE SCHOOL)

The German school led by **Fritz Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt** were **not extreme diffusionists**. To account for independent invention of cultural elements, the **theory of culture circle was utilized**. According to them development of culture does not take place only at a particular place like Egypt, but at several different places at different times.

They were of the view that discoveries of all things were not possible at the same time and at the same place, rather they were discovered at several places by several generation. Invention and discoveries were continuous process. **They held opinion that cultural traits or complexes developed at different places and reaches into places of world by migration in concentric circles or cultural circles.** Thus, worldwide socio-cultural developments could be viewed as function of interaction of cultural circles with native cultures and other cultural circles.

The German diffusionists argues that the civilization was developed in few isolated regions and that independent invention of cultural complexes was not a common event. However, people moved around and developed contacts with the neighbors and civilization was passed through these contacts. Over time

these few isolated regions would have passed on their civilization to their neighbors that diffused in concentric circles called culture circles. The German diffusionists works to identify the centers of culture circles and trace the spread of ideas and technology from the centers through contact with the surrounding cultures.

The two basic rules, proposed by German Diffusionists in general in connection to the culture circle were as follows:

1. **Criterion of form/ Quality:** states that similarities between two culture elements which do not automatically arise out of nature- material purpose should be interpreted as resulting from diffusion, regardless of distance which separates the two instances.
2. **Criterion of Quantity:** It states that the probability of Historical relationship between 2 items increases as the number of additional items showing similarities increases i.e. several similarities prove diffusion more than single one.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904):

Ratzel famous book Anthro-po-geography studies the people's relationships to neighbouring countries particularly in terms of trait distributions. He rejected the idea of independent inventions supported by evolutionists like Bastian.

According to him, the most important consideration was to discover from where cultural traits came and where they went. He warned that not every similarity could be taken as a proof of historical connection because objects of material culture, in order to have utility at all, must possess certain features. For example, a canoe paddle must have a blade, and an arrow head or a spear must have a point. However, if there is any similar qualities unrelated to use that can be considered as an evidence of historical relationship. So if paddles have similar incised ornaments or spears have feathers attached to their shafts, this cannot be accidental, it must certainly imply borrowing or migration, even though respective cultures may be widely separated in time and space. Ratzel called this principle as **Formgedanke** or '**Criterion of Form**'. Applying this to African bow and arrow, he observed that cross section of bow shaft, and featherings of the arrows were quite like those in Indonesia. Thus, he assumed that borrowings must have taken place.

Leo Frobenius:

He was a student and colleague of Ratzel. Largely self-educated as a social scientist, Frobenius led 12 expeditions to Africa between 1904 and 1935 and explored centres of prehistoric art in the Alps, Norway, Spain, and northern and southern Africa. Frobenius attributed a common origin to the cultures of Oceania and West Africa. He advocated the idea of cultural diffusion and arranged areas of the same cultural distribution into what he called Kulturkreise (cultural clusters, or cultural complexes). This concept was further extended by Fritz Graebner.

He demonstrated that many elements of material and mental culture are by no means scattered at random over the world but are always densely concentrated in certain areas and always occur in a characteristic combination with other cultural manifestations. Frobenius inferred from the identical geographical distribution of certain elements of culture that these could not be fortuitous combinations, but that there had to be a close relationship among several of the elements. He therefore grouped areas of identical distribution into what he called Kultur kreise; these, in turn, he arranged in relative chronological order so as to provide a historical back ground for nonliterate cultures.

In his trip to Africa he found that not only bows and arrows were similar in West Africa and Indonesia, but they also resembled each other in form of house, shields, masks and drums, which indicate migration has taken place. He, thus added another criterion i.e. Geographical statistics. It means that one should count the number of similarities. Further he developed another criterion namely, development criterion. By this he meant that internal changes have to be taken into account. Because when people migrate into a different environment, their cultures would have to be adjusted.

Ratzel's criterion of form and Leo Frobenius geographical statistics were rigorously combined in the strategy of Kulturkreise School whose main figures were Graebner and Wilhelm Schmidt.

Fritz Graebner

Born in Berlin, Graebner studied history in Marburg and Berlin and received his PhD in 1901. Subsequently, he worked at the anthropological museum in Berlin and became the curator of the anthropological museum in Cologne in 1906. In 1925, he became the director of that museum, and a year later, he was appointed as professor at the University of Cologne. Owing to chronic illness, he retired in 1928.

Graebner's main interest was in the relation between cultures and their historical development. Perhaps due to his background in history, he intended to outline methodological principles for how to identify mutual influences between cultures. During his time, the cultural historical method was in vogue at most anthropological institutions, universities, and museums in the German-speaking countries.

He applied the culture circle and culture strata idea on a world basis. He spelled out the methodological principles of this culture circle movement in his book **Method of Ethnology**. In this book he attempted to elaborate the criteria for identifying the historical relationships. The two basic rules accepted by both Schmidt and Graebner were:

The first, called by Graebner the "**Criterion of Form**" and by Schmidt the "**Criterion of Quality**," states that 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.

The second, called by both the "**Criterion of Quantity**," states that the probability of historical relationship between two items increases as the number of additional items showing similarities increases; i.e., "several similarities prove more than a single one"

Graebner reasoned that early man invented the basic of culture, such as language and tool making but soon formed a number of small bands that become isolated. Each of those developed their own distinctive cultures and they were the Urkulturen, whose members in due course of time spread out in different directions, eventually populating all the continents. It was the task and aim of culture historians to reconstruct the various Kreise or circle.

On the basis of researches carried out in Oceania, Graebner reconstructed six successive layers of cultural development which are as follows:

- i) Tasmanian Culture (the earliest one)
- ii) Australian Boomerang culture
- iii) Totemic hunter culture
- iv) Two-class horticulturalist culture

- v) Melanesia bow culture
- vi) Polynesia patrilineal culture

Graebner assumed that all present cultures had developed through the diffusion of traits from a limited number of original cultural centers and that the history of those cultures that do not have written records could be reconstructed by analyzing the material elements of those cultures and by tracing the respective elements to an original cultural center. He distinguished his notion of cultural circles from the Boasian concept of culture areas by the fact that they represent historical links rather than mere geographical proximity.

Following Graebner's lead, every culture can be described through a grid of similarities and differences, which also constitute the kinship of that respective culture. Perhaps, it is not an exaggeration to call him a taxonomist of cultures, since he locates cultures' relative position in a larger system of kinship of cultures.

Wilhelm Schmidt

By applying their spurious culture-historical method to the known distribution of contemporary culture traits, Graebner and Schmidt claimed to be able to reconstruct a limited number of original culture circles. All of world history was thus to be understood as the diffusion of these Kreise out of the regions in which they were supposed to have evolved. Bearing in mind that there were many points of disagreement among the members of the school, we may take Father Schmidt's list of Kreise as the most influential example. Schmidt distinguished four major phases or "grades" of culture circles: Primitive, Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary.

Within each of these grades there were several Kreise.

Thus in the **Primitive or hunting and gathering grade** we find:

1. the central or exogamous Kreis, corresponding to the Pygmy peoples of Africa and Asia, distinguished by their exogamous hordes and their monogamous families.
2. the Arctic Kreis (Samoyeds, Eskimo, Algonkians, etc.), exogamous with sexual equality; and
3. the Antarctic Kreis (Southeastern Australians, Bushmen, Tasmanians, etc.), exogamous with sex totems.

In the next or **Primary grade** there are also three culture circles:

1. patriarchal cattle-raising nomads.
2. exogamous patrilineal totemic higher hunters.
3. exogamous matrilineal, village-dwelling horticulturalists.

The remaining grades and their Kreise are as follows:

III. Secondary grade.

Free patrilineal systems Polynesia, the Sudan, India, western Asia, southern Europe, etc.

Free matrilineal systems, (southern China, Indo-China, Melanesia, northeastern South America, etc.).

IV. Tertiary grade.

Earliest higher civilization of Asia, Europe, and America.

The most striking feature of this scheme is its evolutionism. The succession of "grades" is nothing less than the familiar sequence of "stages" leading from hunting and gathering types of sociocultural systems through horticultural and pastoral types and on to complex stratified civilizations.

Schmidt's evolutionism was by no means confined merely to the, generalities of the hunting, gathering civilization sequence. His notion of a matrilineal-horticultural Kreis was heavily in debt to the evolutionary logic of Bachofen, Morgan, and Eduard Hahn. According to Schmidt, during the hunting and gathering stage, women specialized in the collection of wild plants. This led women to invent horticulture and thus to become the owners of the products of the soil and of the land itself. On the basis of their economic ascendancy, women insisted on matrilineal residence and matrilineal descent.

The supreme deity was given feminine attributes, girls' puberty rites were stressed, and the couvade instituted: full gynecocracy reigned. Schmidt (1935:253) called this the "classical phase of mother-right." Since this phase is no longer found in existence, Schmidt had to explain what had happened to it. Gradually, he claimed, the brothers of the ruling women began to take over "duties and tasks which could be better performed by men than by women" (ibid.: 254). This trend eventually resulted in the usurpation of female rights, with males administering the family property and passing their authority on to their sisters' sons-what Schmidt called a "masculinized mother-right."

It is true that Schmidt made no attempt to arrange the three Kreise of the Primary Stage in an evolutionary order; i.e., he did not propose that the matrilineal Kreis had evolved before the two patrilineal Kreise. All three Kreise of the Primary Stage apparently existed side by side, having evolved out of the Primitive hunting-gathering stage along separate lines. Nonetheless, the evolutionary sequence which Schmidt outlined for the matrilineal-horticultural Kreis covered an extensive series of transformations. Property rights, for example, were supposed to have gone from equality in the Primitive stage, to female-dominated in classic mother-right, to male-dominated under masculine mother-right. The highly speculative nature of these reconstructions did not fail to impress Lowie with their close resemblance to Morgan's privileged insights into sociocultural systems which no one had ever seen. Said Lowie (1933b:290) of Schmidt: "His discussion of the matrilineal Kulturkreis ... is wholly evolutionistic, schematic, unhistorical, and full of a priori psychologizing." Actually, the only difference between Morgan's and Schmidt's evolutionistic schemes is that Schmidt's main sequence was supposed to have happened only once, whereas aspects of Morgan's sequence were supposed to have happened over and over again.

WEAKNESSES OF GERMAN SCHOOL

- It could not establish any culture circle.
- Criteria of Quality and Quantity couldn't yield realistic result, because too many other influences result.
- The greatest weakness of this school was that it never explained how diffusion took place.
- It did not present any historical record.

AMERICAN SCHOOL OF DIFFUSION

A separate American school of diffusionist led by **Clark Wissler and Alfred Kroeber** also arose in first few decades of 20th century.

German diffusionist talked about complex form of diffusion of culture, but they failed to explain as to why diffusion took place. American diffusionists attempted to solve this question. They were of the view that empirical researchers were evidence to refer to that give and take of culture traits and complex had taken place through the medium of transport and communication.

On the question as to why diffusion takes place, American diffusionists answer it in the following ways:

1. The **process of imitation** cause diffusion of cultural traits and complexes from one place to other or from one cultural group to another.
2. Sometimes **it looks easy to borrow some traits** from other cultural groups instead of inventing separately.

In the process of diffusion, the groups borrowing may adapt culture traits so that they might be useful for them. Thus, according to them, diffused traits may or may not exist in original form.

In order to show that diffusion of the cultural traits and complexes, American anthropologist devised a methodology which is known as **Culture Area Approach**. They did not analyses cultural diffusion prevalent all over the world at the same time. **Instead they divided the world into different cultural areas on the basis of geographical regions**. They were of the opinion that geographical aspects of the culture cannot be ignored in the study of culture area. If one passes through Europe, he or she may come across different cultural areas. If those areas are compared, it will be found that cultural groups residing in close geographical areas represent more uniformity than those residing in distant geographical regions. **Thus, concept of culture area reveals geographical area of cultural similarities.**

The methodological issues, followed in the study of culture area, were to divide world or continent or country into different cultural areas. Then from each area, list of cultural elements or traits was prepared which reached there in course of diffusion. The origin of culture occurred in the culture center of the culture area.

Age Area Principle (Wissler): If a given trait diffuses outward from a single culture center, it follows that the most widely distributed traits found to exist around such a center must be the oldest traits.

Clark Wissler:

Wissler was among the first to emphasize and illustrate the importance of early historical records. Concurrent and continuing interests were the significance of regional clusterings of certain traits and the relation between physical environment and culture. In *The American Indian* (1917) he outlined the principal culture regions; as criteria for delineating areas he used mainly the characteristics of the physical environment and the distinctive elements of material culture. He indicated the distribution of certain traits and their regional adaptations. In *Man and Culture* (1923) and *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America* (1926) he further discussed diffusion and adaptation, and **adduced two principles: one has to do with the manner in which traits spread; the other, with the inference of the relative age of traits from the extent of their distribution.**

Wissler suggested a patterning of diffusion: **A trait spreads in all directions, as waves move out in circles when a stone is dropped into a quiet pool; hence, the greater the spread, the older the trait. A trait is most elaborated at and near its place of origin, and least at the periphery (Culture center).** As an example, he cited the Plains Sun Dance, which in some tribes had a greater number of constituent traits in the complex than it had in others. The most elaborate expression of the Sun Dance revealed its place of origin. Wissler recorded no exceptions to his patterns, nor did he indicate why diffusion could not have taken place from the periphery to the center. His age-area concept stimulated the compilation of trait distribution lists but never contributed to the formulation of historical or functional interpretations (Woods 1934).

Using subsistence as a common factor Wissler divided entire America as 8 food areas

Subsistence	Area
Caribon	Eskimo
Bison	Great Plains
Salmon	North Pacific coast
Wild seeds	California
Eastern maize	South east and eastern woodland
Intensive agriculture	Mexico peru
Maniac	Amazon region, caribbean
Guanaco	Guanaco

Alfred Kroeber:

Alfred Kroeber was born in New Jersey in 1876, much of his research on Native American life and language occurred during the twilight American Indian independence. Kroeber's family were uppermiddle-class German Americans who insisted on a challenging educational regime of tutors, private schools, and hard work. He entered Columbia College at the age of sixteen and majored in English, later receiving an M.A. with a thesis on British plays.

Kroeber's early education directly led to his more "humanistic" approach to anthropology. Kroeber drifted into anthropology when he took a seminar in American Indian languages from Franz Boas, a seminar that met around Boas's dining room table (Steward 1973:6). Kroeber received the first Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia University (Jackins 2002). Boas supervised Kroeber's doctoral dissertation on the art of the Arapaho; it was only twenty-eight pages long (Kroeber 1901).

Kroeber was one of the first members of the anthropology department at the University of California, Berkeley. He was hired to study the Indians of California, essentially doing "salvage ethnography" to recover the vestiges of precontact language and society before they were completely wiped out by Euro-American society. Kroeber published some seventy writings on the ethnology of native California, but his magnum opus was the Handbook of the Indians of California (1925). This onethousand- page summarized Kroeber's investigations of every native group in California. It is a remarkable compendium, including aboriginal population estimates, lists of native toponyms, and details of subsistence, cosmology, kinship, and social organization. Kroeber made numerous field trips, interviewed dozens of informants, summarized published sources, and scoured mission registers. It remains an important source of information, in many cases the only source.

Kroeber's salvage ethnography led to a basic approach of ethnographic analysis: the culture element distribution list. He faced a basic set of problems (Kroeber 1939:4–6): (1) How are cultures to be defined? (2) How are their precontact practices to be reconstructed from current knowledge? and (3) How are the interactions between cultures to be measured? In native North America there were some obvious differences in the geographical distribution of cultural practices: Indians in the American Southwest and east of the Mississippi grew maize; Indians of the Northwest Coast and Great Basin did not. But such rough classifications failed to capture more subtle variations within particular cultural areas, nor did they account for the blurred edges of all such areas, and they assumed that certain aspects of culture—for example, agriculture—were more important than others.

Kroeber divided culture into minimal units that could be characterized qualitatively. For example, did a specific group practice “polyandry” or “cremation,” did they use a “sinewbacked bow” or “beaver-teeth dice,” “eat acorn mush” or did their young men drink a dangerous hallucinogenic made from jimsonweed? These lists were prepared, and graduate students were sent out to interview native informants and check off the elements; the results were tabulated and published. The element surveys were plotted in space in an attempt to understand the boundaries of particular cultures, and that led to the issue of interaction between cultures.

Kroeber revised Wissler's original division and eventually mapped seven grand areas, twenty areas and sixty-three subareas for North and Central America.

He added the concept of **cultural intensity and culture climax**

In hindsight, the element survey approach has a number of flaws. First, it atomizes culture into bits and pieces and considers each element to be of equal significance (certainly the use of beaver teeth dice and the practice of polyandry have different levels of importance). Second, the approach assumes that the presence of that cultural element in one society is equivalent to the presence of that cultural element in another. For example, the swastika was used in native North America, India, Nazi Germany, and is used in the United States today. Even though the swastika is found in all these places, it clearly has several different meanings.

WEAKNESSES OF CULTURE AREA SCHEME

Culture area scheme has been subjected to many criticism

- Culture area is a **mental construct not a physical reality**.
- A great caution has to do with the nature of the concept of cultural centers and marginal area. These are construct in some way as cultural area. Culture center is a place where a cluster of traits is found.

Marginal culture is one where traits from a neighboring area are to be discerned. **Difficulties arises in establishing cultural center and cultural boundaries.** Because migrations cause many cultural traits to appear side by side. It becomes difficult to trace the exact place from where traits appear.

- Culture area approach is also criticized for the reason that **its scope is narrow**. It divided world or a nation into different regions and, thus fails to explain worldwide diffusion of culture.

- **Cultural areaists emphasized too much on material aspects** of culture but they failed to explain clearly non-material aspect of culture.
- They **emphasized too much on the geographical areas** and ignored other aspects that also marks the area feeling among inhabitants such as common language, rituals, food habits, etc.
- They **could not explain the methods by which culture area boundary could be established with certainty.**

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