

UNIT THREE: CULTURAL PATTERNS AND PROCESSES

If you have ever studied the earth's surface from an airplane thousands of feet in the air, you have observed the **cultural landscape**, the modification of the natural landscape by human activities. From the air, you get a whole new perspective on mountains, deserts, and rivers, but you also notice the many dramatic ways that people alter the land. For example, flying over the Midwestern United States you see the "checkerboards" created by intersections of crops, fields, and woods. Many times roads that lead to houses and barns mark borders. Cities, too, are impressive examples of the human imprint, with their large downtown buildings connected by road systems to the sprawling suburbs that surround them. The transformation of the land and the ways that humans interact with the environment are the special interests of **cultural geography**, an important component of the human geography course. **Cultural ecology** is the field that studies the relationship between the natural environment and culture. The cultural landscape provides ready evidence that humans transform and adapt to the land, and it offers clues about the cultural practices and priorities of its inhabitants, both present and past.



Cultural Landscape in Peru. This view of the Sacred Valley near Cuzco reflects cultural adaptation to the natural environment of mountain valleys. The human imprint is apparent not only in the town that is built in the flat part of the valley, but also in the surrounding agricultural fields, which are carved both into the valley and up the mountainsides as terraces.

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Through the years, cultural geographers have developed many different perspectives on the spatial interaction between humans and the land. These perspectives may be divided into four schools of thought: environmental determinism, possibilism, environmental perception, and humans as modifiers of the earth.

- **Environmental determinism** – Geographers who adhere to environmental determinism believe that the physical environment, especially the climate and terrain, actively shapes cultures, so that human responses are almost completely molded by the environment. Logically, then, similar physical environments produce similar cultures. Mountain cultures are simple, backward, and freedom-loving, and people who live near coasts center their activities on fishing and navigating the oceans or rivers. Temperate climates produce inventive, industrious, and democratic societies that are most likely to control others. Environmental determinism was popular during the early 20th century, especially among English-speaking geographers who used their perspective to explain why Britain came to dominate the globe.
- **Possibilism** – Possibilists recognize the importance of the physical environment, but they believe that cultural heritage is at least as important as the physical environment in shaping human behavior. People, then, are the primary architects of culture, and any physical environment offers many possibilities for a culture to develop. People make choices based on the opportunities and limitations of the physical environment, but their choices are also guided by cultural heritage. Most possibilists believe that technology increases the number of possibilities a people have, so that technologically advanced cultures have more control over their physical surroundings.
- **Environmental perception** – Whereas possibilism describes humans as making choices within the setting of their physical environment, environmental perception emphasizes the importance of human perception of the environment, rather than the actual character of the land. Perception, in turn, is shaped by the teachings of culture. For example, culture shapes our views of hazards and disasters, and human reactions will vary, depending on their cultural beliefs and values. For example, if people believe that a devastating flood was caused by the displeasure of the gods, they likely respond by building an altar, or by some other action intended to placate the gods. On the other hand, if people believe that the flood was a natural disaster, they most likely react by trying to prevent future floods, perhaps by building a dam.
- **Cultural determinism** – This perspective emphasizes human culture as ultimately more important than physical environment in shaping human actions. In contrast to environmental determinism, the humans-as-modifiers approach views human culture as the molder of the physical environment. Some cultural determinists have seen humans in opposition to nature, and if nature is not controlled, humans are destined to die. Others have emphasized the negative impact that humans have had on the environment, and have urged people to take action to alter their impact. For example, modern movements to “take back the earth” encourage action to reverse global warming, air and water pollution, or the destruction of rain forests.

CONCEPTS OF CULTURE

Culture is the complex mix of values, beliefs, behaviors, and material objects that together form a people's way of life. Most social scientists are interested in the study of culture, but geographers specialize in the ways that culture affects the natural environment, as well as the spatial organization that culture stimulates. Culture may be divided into two types:

- **Non-material culture** – This type of culture consists of *abstract* concepts of values, beliefs, and behaviors. **Values** are culturally-defined standards that guide the way people assess desirability, goodness, and beauty, and that serve as guidelines for moral living. For example, one culture may consider body piercing to be an enhancement of human beauty. Other cultures may see it as a distortion of human appearance. On a broader level, one culture may emphasize the importance of abiding by the wishes of a supreme being, while another culture may extol the ability of human beings to set their own parameters. **Beliefs** are specific statements that people hold to be true, and they are almost always based on values. For example, the broad value that humans are able to guide their own lives may encourage a more specific belief in a democratic government that allows people to exercise their abilities. **Behaviors**, or actions that people take, are generally based on values and beliefs as reflected in **norms**, the rules and expectations by which a society guides the behavior of its members.
- **Material culture** – This type of culture includes a wide range of concrete human creations called **artifacts**, which reflect values, beliefs, and behaviors. You can readily see material culture as it relates to the environment from an airplane – the roads, houses, buildings, cars, farm equipment, and airport runways. But look beyond the objects themselves. Why do people build houses? Why are the houses arranged in the patterns that you see? Why are the checkerboards arranged as they are, and where do the roads lead? The answers to these questions lie in the values, beliefs, and behaviors (non-material culture) that humans use to guide the creation and maintenance of their artifacts (material culture).

CULTURE REGIONS, TRAITS, AND COMPLEXES

Separating culture into non-material and material types helps to sort out its complexities. Culture ties directly to geography's emphasis on space with the concept of a **culture region**, an area marked by culture that distinguishes it from other regions. Non-material culture, such as clothing and building style, reflect the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the people that live in the region. A single attribute of a culture is called a **culture trait**, and a culture region consists of countless numbers of traits. For example, a trait may be the practice of wearing colorful clothing with the group's own skillful weave and design. Another culture trait may be the building of roads and bridges across mountain ranges. Yet another trait may be the construction of buildings without mortar, and another the terracing of land for crop growth. Put all of these – and thousands of others – together, and you may study the culture region that survives today around the Andes Mountains in South America.

Culture traits are not necessarily confined to a single culture. For example, people in many cultures use brushes to clean their teeth and to make their hair more attractive, and they usually use different kinds of brushes for the two types of activities. However, the trait combines with others in a distinctive way,

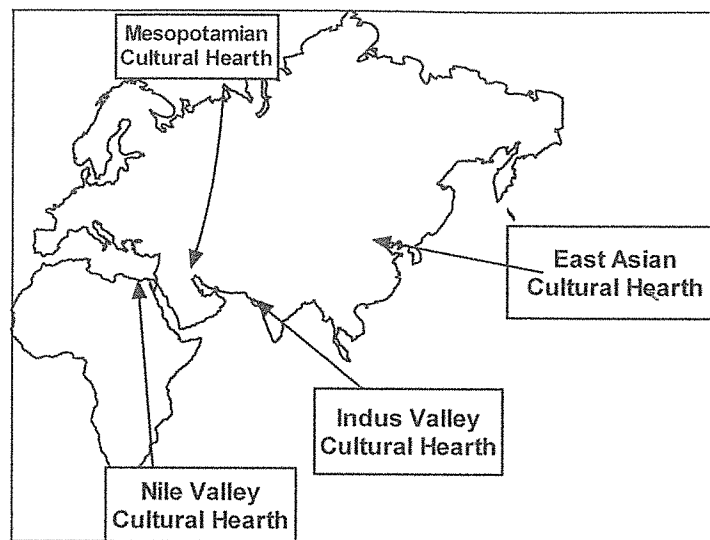


Material culture, past and present. The adaptability of human material culture is evident in this photo of a modern-day French village. The narrow streets were built in an earlier time when people traveled by foot, animal, or wagon. The motorcycle parked by its owner's door is a reflection of modern technology's adaptation to material culture (winding streets, houses without garages) from the past.

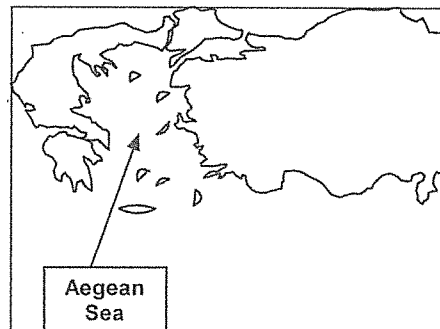
so that a **culture complex** is formed. A culture complex consists of common values, beliefs, behaviors, and artifacts that make a group in an area distinct from others. For example, a large country such as China has many culture complexes. One complex that surrounds the modern city of Xi'an combines religions and beliefs, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Confucianism, in a way that makes it identifiable as a separate culture complex. However, particular traits, such as following Confucian principles, are shared by other complexes around them. Any area with strong cultural ties that binds its people together forms a **culture system**, a group of interconnected culture complexes. On the map, a culture region can represent an entire culture system that intertwines with its locational and environmental circumstances to form a **geographic region**.

CULTURAL HEARTHES

Historians specialize in the identification of **cultural hearths**, the areas where civilizations first began that radiated the customs, innovations, and ideologies that culturally transformed the world. Early cultural hearths developed in Southwest Asia, North Africa, South Asia, and East Asia in the valleys and basin of great river systems. Cultural hearths evolved later in Central and South America, and their geography shaped cultural development not around river valleys, but around mountain ranges and central highlands. Another cultural hearth with its own culture complex developed centuries later in West Africa, very much influenced by earlier hearths along the Nile River in Northeast Africa. Another unique cultural hearth developed in the islands of the Aegean Sea, where the inhabitants were joined by easy water access among islands and mainlands.



Earliest Cultural Hearths. The earliest cultural hearths were almost completely determined by their geographical locations. All were in river valleys where the soil was the most fertile and water most available for growing crops and transportation.



Early Aegean Cultural Hearth. This cultural hearth differed from earlier hearths in that it centered on the Aegean Sea, not on a river valley. The sea is calm and the islands numerous, allowing for easy transportation for Ancient Greeks to trade for goods that their natural environment did not provide.

From their centers, the hearths grew until they came into contact with one another, although their inhabitants' ability to travel to and contact other cultural hearths was limited by their levels of technology and by distance. Cultural hearths have shifted greatly over time. For example, the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th century shifted cultural hearths to Europe and North America, with modern shifts in the 21st century continuing to occur.

CULTURAL DIFFUSION

The early cultural hearths were centers for innovation and invention, and their non-material and material culture spread to areas around them through a process called **cultural diffusion**. Over time, as cultural hearths have shifted, cultural diffusion has spread cultural traits to most parts of the globe. This long and complicated spread of culture often makes it difficult to trace the origin, spread, and timing of a particular trait. Whenever it is possible, developments that can be traced to a specific civilization are known as **independent inventions**. For example, the democratic process of gathering assemblies to discuss and vote on issues is often seen as an independent invention of the Ancient Greeks.

Diffusion occurs through the movement of people, goods, and ideas. **Carl Sauer** focused on this process in *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals*, written in 1952. Another famous geographer that wrote about

cultural diffusion about the same time was **Torsten Hagerstrand**. Since the time of these pioneers, geographers have classified diffusion processes into two broad categories:

- **Expansion diffusion** – This type of diffusion is said to occur when an innovation or idea develops in a source area and remains strong there while also spreading outward. One form of expansion diffusion is **contagious diffusion**, when almost all individuals and areas outward from the source region are affected. The term implies the importance of direct contact between those in the source region and those in outlying areas, much as a contagious disease requires contact between those that have the disease and those that don't. The rate of diffusion is influenced by **time-distance decay**, so that the influence of the cultural traits weakens as time and distance increase. Another type of expansion diffusion is **hierarchical diffusion**, where ideas and artifacts spread first between larger places or prominent people and only later to smaller places or less prominent people. For example, as Islam spread to Sub-Saharan Africa by the 9th century C.E., its first converts were the elites, so that for centuries the kings and nobility were Muslim, but their subjects usually retained native religions, and only later converted to Islam. A third form of expansion diffusion is **stimulus diffusion** in which a basic idea, though not the specific trait itself, stimulates imitative behavior within a population. The idea may be too vague, different, or unattainable to be readily adopted by the new area. However, this does not mean that the idea has no impact at all. For example, as Buddhism spread from the main continent of Asia to Japan, the Japanese imitated designs for Buddhist temples, but interpretations of colors were often transmitted by verbal or written descriptions, not by someone who had actually seen a temple on the mainland. As a result, even today many Japanese temples are trimmed in bright orange, not the more traditional red seen in China.
- **Relocation diffusion** – In this process of diffusion, individuals or populations migrating from the source areas physically carry the innovation or idea to new areas. For example, Christian Europeans carried their faith to the Americas, where they often actively set about converting natives to Christianity, especially in Latin America. As a result, Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Western Hemisphere, ensuring its status as a major world religion. On a smaller scale, later immigrants to the United States carried their customs along to contained areas of settlement. A particular form of relocation diffusion is **migrant diffusion**, where the spread of cultural traits is slow enough that they weaken in the area of origin by the time they reach other areas. Examples are the contagious diseases that spread rapidly through the Native American populations that came into contact with Europeans in the New World during the 15th and 16th centuries. Immunities were built up so that the diseases faded in Europe at the same time they were raging in the Americas.

ACCULTURATION

When cultures come into contact, one culture often dominates the other. In the process called **acculturation**, the less dominant culture adopts some of the traits of the more influential one. Acculturation typically takes place when immigrants take on the values, attitudes, customs, and language of their new country. The dominant country is usually changed by this process as well. For example, in the United States today, years of migration from Latin America have led to the custom of adding Spanish

to signs, phone recordings, and even government forms that had previously only appeared in English. If over time, the immigrants lose their native customs, including religion and language, **assimilation** occurs, meaning that the dominant culture completely absorbs the less dominant one. Assimilation sometimes occurs over the course of several generations, so that those that immigrate do not become fully assimilated, but their children or grandchildren do.

Sometimes two-way flows of culture reflect a more equal exchange of cultural traits, a process called **transculturation**. For example, as Buddhism spread from its origins in India throughout Asia, many of those that came in contact with the new religion already were steeped in the philosophical beliefs of Confucianism. Both forces were strong, and they clashed fiercely, but eventually transculturation occurred, and both Buddhism and Confucianism remained in place to influence large populations throughout the broad expanse of East Asia.

ETHNOCENTRISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Because culture interacts with the physical environment to shape human values and actions, almost all people exhibit **ethnocentrism**, the practice of judging another culture by the standards of one's own culture. Some ethnocentrism is necessary for people to be emotionally attached to their way of life, but ethnocentrism also generates misunderstanding and sometimes conflict. If one culture considers itself to be superior to others, the basis is laid for taking over other lands or for killing people or destroying property. Ethnocentrism takes many less harmful forms, and it is reflected even in our language. For example, people in Europe and North America have often referred to China as the "Far East" (a term that is unknown to the Chinese) because China is far east of Europeans and North Americans. On the other hand, the Chinese historically have referred to their land as the "Middle Kingdom" because it is in the center of the world.

In contrast to ethnocentrism, **cultural relativism** is the practice of evaluating a culture by its own standards. To practice cultural relativism, a person would have to put aside his or her own cultural preferences and consider another culture based on its own people's needs and values. Cultural relativists argue that in the modern world where people come into increased contact with one another, the importance of understanding other cultures becomes ever greater. Critics of cultural relativism point out problems that come with accepting all actions and values as equal, leading an individual to ignore or dismiss those that are clearly harmful or unjust.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

When cultural traits diffuse from society to society, they commonly go through various alterations. Rarely do they arrive completely intact, largely because the new group will adapt them to meet their needs, or interpret them according to their beliefs and values. The process of the fusion of old and new is called **syncretism**, a major explanation for how and why cultural changes occur. These changes inevitably lead to wide cultural differences in many areas, including languages and religions. Broad cultural differences between culture complexes and regions lead to varying ethnic identities, as well as to contrasting expectations for the roles that men and women play in society.