



THEORIES OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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BANC 108 THEORIES OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Course Introduction

Theories of Culture and Society takes into account the theoretical perspectives that have helped in the study of society and culture. The course looks into the classical theories and delineates the contributions of the thinkers that had dealt with the evolution of society and culture and how it might have moved on to other spaces through diffusion. It reflects on historical particularism as an approach that underlines the importance of studying a society or a culture for its own self rather than comparing with others and moves on to the contemporary anthropological theories of cultural evolution and relativity. Within the ambit of contemporary theories; interpretive anthropology, post-modernism, post-feminism and post-colonialism has been taken up. Theoretical paradigms and debates; forms of anthropological explanation; the role of theory in the practice of anthropology is the essence of this course.

Learning Outcome

After reading this course, you should be able to:

- discuss and explain the classical theories;
- deliberate on the theory of historical particularism and cultural relativism;
- debate on the contemporary theories; and
- analyse the role of theories in the study of social and cultural anthropology.

Course Presentation

The course content comprises of four blocks and a practical manual. Each block has thematically arranged units. In total there are thirteen units and a practical manual. Now let us see what we have discussed in each block.

Block 1: Emergence of Anthropology

Block one has three units that deals with the emergence of anthropological thoughts. This block takes into account how development of theory in anthropology is linked to the historical development of the subject. In the first unit, **Evolutionism**, we acquaint the learners with how the early thinkers in anthropology looked at the question of development and change in society and culture through their perspectives on evolution. The emphasis is on how initially, the questions were related to explaining the diversity and evolution of humans, both biologically and culturally once the paradigm of divine creation changed to one of natural creation and evolution. The key concepts and the basic premises for evolution like unilinear evolution, universal evolution, psychic unity of humankind, culture survivals, culture parallels, single line of evolution, simplicity to complexity, that were being postulated by the anthropologists has been discussed herein. The criticisms levied on evolutionism by the later anthropologists along with the rise of Neo-Evolutionism is also a part of this unit. The second unit **Diffusionism** deals with the concept of diffusion how it has been studied by anthropologists to explain spread of cultural traits from one region to another. The unit also outlines the essential features of diffusion and distinguish between diffusion and acculturation. The schools of thoughts that

examined diffusionism: the British, German and American has also been critically looked at in this unit. The third unit on **Culture Area theories** explores the historical, theoretical and methodological significance of the culture area concept and explains the contributions of the various scholars whose works influenced the concept, building up to the culture area theories. The unit also critically assess why the culture area concept lost its significance.

Block 2: Emergence of Fieldwork tradition

The section deals with an important paradigm shift in the anthropological theories and thoughts. This phase deals with the anthropological thoughts that were based on the concept of collecting first hand data. The anthropologists have moved out of the realm of collecting data from second hand sources and had given away their tag of being 'arm chair anthropologists'. We begin this block with the fourth unit of our course on **Historical Particularism and Critique of Comparative Method**. The aim here is to understand why Franz Boas critiques the comparative method. We look into the various concepts proposed by him to understand culture of specific communities in holistic terms. We delineate the concept of cultural relativism and why Boas insisted on fieldwork to collect the data. Finally, we explore the reasons Boasian thoughts were critiqued by other scholars. In the next unit on **American Cultural Traditions**, we try to understand the growth and development along with the key concepts in the Culture and Personality school. This school basically focused on the inter-relationships between culture and personality and how a culture can shape the personality of a group, leading to the formation of national character. **Cultural Materialism**, our next unit in this block looks at the works of the neo-evolutionists who revisited the evolutionism theory. Herein, we see the shift of the primary focus from the ideational basis of culture to emphasise how material and environmental conditions are primary in determining human behaviour. Studies in cultural ecology emerged as a very relevant area of study within this approach.

Block 3: Theories of Social Structure and Function

The paradigm shift in anthropological studies that had begun with the anthropologists venturing out to the field saw it being institutionalised as a hallmark in anthropology. Malinowski set the trend for long extended fieldwork. He spent almost thirty-nine months among the Trobriand islanders, learning the local language and focusing on understanding culture from an emic perspective. This phase saw the attention of the anthropologists draw towards the structure and functions of the various aspects within a culture. Unit-7 **Social Integration** in this section looks at the concept of social integration; the beginning of the theory of social contract. Tracing the earlier works of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer it moves on to the Durkheimian thoughts on social integration and its influence in social anthropology. The unit also tries to delineate the concepts of social disintegration and anomie. The next unit, explores the origin of **Functionalism and Structural-functionalism**, their emergence and development. Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functional theory has been analysed herein to understand how it differs from Malinowski's functionalism. In **Structuralism** unit 9, the origin of this theory has been dealt with. The emphasis of this theory lies in the fact that it moved beyond the understanding of culture rather delved into the deeper meanings of structures within a society and how one aspect is linked to the other. Claude Lévi-Strauss's contribution to this theory has been discussed in this unit along with Edmund Leach's work on the concept

of neo-structuralism. The last unit in this block Unit 10 on '**conflict theories**' presents the ideas of the Manchester School and the use of Marxian theory in the understanding of conflicts in social anthropology. The emerging concepts and ideas regarding social conflicts and social change associated with Gluckman's and a few other works would be a part of this unit.

BLOCK 4: Contemporary Theories

Contemporary theories is the last block in the theory section of this course. There are three units in this block that looks at the new paradigms that developed with regards to the new theoretical perspectives in the study of society and culture. Unit 11 deals with the origin and evolution of symbolic behaviour in human culture. It takes into account the works of the anthropologists like Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Sherry Ortner and Clifford Geertz's who have established the symbolic and interpretive perspective in anthropological thoughts. Anthropology as a White man's domain of study since its inception had looked at the worldviews from a male perspective. It was only with the works of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Cora Dubois, Annette Weiner, Rubin Gayle, Sherry Ortner etc. that the female voices were recorded in the field. Thus, the feminist approach in anthropological studies had a very late entry. Unit 12 **Feminism** looks at the influence of feminist perspectives in the anthropological thoughts and writings. The last unit i.e., Unit 13 in this section takes a look at the new paradigms and the contemporary changes that has come up with new ethnography. This unit focuses on the new type of ethnographies that are coming up and how they differ from the old traditional ethnographic style.

Practical Manual

The manual presents the understanding of theory and delineates the relevance of theory and how it is situated within ethnographic study. The manual shall act as a guide to the learners to select their topics and choose a theory to justify the topic. The theoretical part has been explained in detail and the choice is left open for the learner to reflect and justify the theory he/she may choose for her/his topic.

Let us now take you through the units. If you understand how to approach the units and read the course material in a systematic manner you would benefit as a learner. As we have already stated the blocks are divided thematically, thus, a learner is advised to read the units in a sequence in terms of the themes so that they are able to connect and comprehend the link between two units. If you read randomly, you might find it difficult to comprehend concepts and definitions, and lose the thread of the unit. For an easy reading and better comprehension, the units have been divided into sections and sub-sections. Each section is indicated clearly by BOLD CAPITALS and each sub-section by bold and small letters. The significant divisions within a sub section are still in smaller bold letters so as to make it easier for you to see their place within the sub-sections. The items which need to be highlighted are numbered as a., b., c., etc. For the sake of uniformity, we have employed the same scheme in every unit throughout the course. Each unit begins with the 'Objectives' which explains to a learner:

- a) what we will be presenting in the unit, and
- b) what we expect from the student once he/she completes working on the unit.

After every section we have given **Check Your Progress** that would help the learner to self check whether they have been able to comprehend the subject matter in the section. The purpose of the Check Your Progress is to enable the learner to compare their answers with the answers given at the end of each unit. Please do not look at the answers before you write your own answers in the given space. The learner may write the answers with pencil, so that it can be rubbed and rewritten again as a practice component. For the long answers the hints have been provided, the answers have not been given so that the learner develops the skill of writing in their own words, without directly copying word by word from the course material.

In the last section of each unit, under the heading ‘Summary’ we summarise the entire unit for purpose of revision and ready reference.

After summary the next section of the unit comprises of either ‘References or Suggested Reading’. If the author has quoted directly from a text or texts, we have provided the references. If there are no text cited, we have provided a list of readings that the learner may want to read in order to enhance the understanding of the subject.

At the end let’s see how the learner may use the wide margin provided in the units. The learner may write down important points after reading each section in the margins. This will help you in your study and also when you attempt the Check Your Progress.

All the best, happy reading. Wish you success. Hope the course material act as a guide for you to achieve your goals.

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BLOCK 1
EMERGENCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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UNIT 1
Evolutionism

UNIT 2
Diffusionism

UNIT 3
Culture Area Theories



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UNIT 1 EVOLUTIONISM*

Contents

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 - 1.2.4 J.J. Bachofen
- 1.3 Basic Premises of the Evolutionary School
- 1.4 Criticisms of Evolutionist theory
- 1.5 Neo-Evolutionism
- 1.6 Summary
- 1.7 References
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, the learners should be able to:

- explain the context of evolutionism in social and cultural anthropology;
- delineate the contributions of the proponents of the evolutionary thoughts; and
- discuss the limitations of the classical evolutionary theory.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The term 'evolutionism' is derived from the Latin word *evolu'tio*, from *e-*, 'out of', and *volu'tus*, 'rolled'. The literal meaning of the term is 'unrolling'. In earlier times Roman books were written on lengths of parchments and rolled onto wooden rods, so as to read they had to be unrolled or 'evolved' (McCabe 1921:2). Around the seventeenth century the term evolution was used in English to refer to an orderly sequence of events, particularly one in which the outcome was somewhat contained within it from the start (Carneiro 2003:1). In this unit we shall discuss how the early thinkers in anthropology looked at the question of development and change in society and culture through their perspectives on evolution. The evolutionary perspective emerged in the late nineteenth century and gained popularity in the late twentieth century in anthropology.

1.1 THE BEGINNINGS OF EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHTS

By the sixteenth century there was a realisation among scholars that, human beings were a part of the natural schema and not a divine creation. This was the

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time when the scientific world was moving away from the Church towards a rational perspective. This was a significant paradigm shift from a religious perspective to a scientific perspective in understanding phenomenon. Let us now look at some of the early works before anthropology was established as a discipline.

Adam Ferguson, John Miller, and Adam Smith were Scottish thinkers, in the early 1700 who had reflected on social evolution. They contended that all societies pass through four stages: (i) hunting and gathering, (ii) pastoralism and nomadism, (iii) agricultural, and finally (iv) commerce. For these thinkers the theoretical base was their own national experience of being united with England in 1707 and the effect it had on the development of trade in what came to be known as the United Kingdom (Zaman 2011:6) Among the early thinkers Montesquieu (1689-1755) had proposed an evolutionary scheme consisting of three stages: hunting or savagery, herding or barbarism, and civilization. In his work *De l' esprit des loix* (The Spirit of Laws), he made a cross-cultural comparative study of legislative systems. He looked at the legal system as closely intertwined with other facets of the society like politics, economy, kinship, family and religion. Montesquieu's work was based on first hand data which he gathered on a small sample size and supplemented with secondary sources. He gave the classification of the different stages of the society as- Savagery, Barbarism and Civilization. This arrangement was accepted and used by the nineteenth century social theorists such as Tylor and Morgan in their works (Seymour-Smith 1986:105). Morgan in his work had further subdivided both savagery and barbarism into three stages- lower- middle and upper. In the next section we would examine the works of some of the scholars who contributed to the rise of anthropological thoughts that was based on the concept of evolution.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you understand by the term evolution?

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- 2) Name the Scottish thinkers, in the early 1700, who had contended that all societies pass through four stages.

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- 3) Describe the four stages that society passes through, as proposed by the early Scottish thinkers.

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1.2 EARLY THINKERS

The rise of anthropology as a discipline has its roots in the Western world. The industrialisation of the European nations and their need for resources to feed their industries and markets, led to the exploration of new spaces, non-western regions, that were different from the Western world in their way of life. Based on the stories brought back by the travelers, the missionaries, the administrators etc., the scholars indulged in speculative thinking based on the comparative method of study used in Biology. The comparisons were based on the premises that these societies and their cultures were not at par with their existing Western cultures (civilization) but were at different levels of maturing or evolving into ‘civilized’, and those believed to be the farthest away from European civilization were placed at the bottom of the scale and labelled ‘Primitive’. This comparative approach of judging a culture based on one’s own culture was criticized by the later anthropologists and labelled as ‘ethnocentrism’. Voluminous works were published during these times by scholars who later came to be known as ‘arm chair anthropologist’ as they were gathering information on hearsay and building up their theories of social and cultural growth of the non-western societies without collecting first hand data. Sir James Frazer’s work “*The Golden Bough*” is worth mentioning here, till date a legendary work, that ran into twelve volumes.

1.2.1 Herbert Spencer

For long in the academic world the term evolution has been linked with the work of Charles Darwin. This supposition however, needs introspection. In his work the *Origin of Species*, the term evolution appears in the sixth edition, 1872. By this time the term ‘evolution’ was already in vogue in the social sciences owing to Herbert Spencer’s work. In the year 1851, Spencer had used the term in his work *Social Statics* to explain ‘progress’ (pg. 63 cf. Carneiro 2003:3). The term evolution was explicitly defined by Spencer in his initial volume “Synthetic Philosophy” in ‘First Principle’ stating ‘Evolution as a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity, to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; through continuous differentiations and integrations’ (Spencer 1863:216 cf. Carneiro 2003:5). His major work constitutes an understanding of the process of change from the simple to complex and from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, i.e., how one part is different from the other. The detailed explanation of how evolution had occurred in Human societies can be found in *The Principles of Sociology* (3 vols, 1876-1896). The learners might find it noteworthy that the term “Survival of the Fittest” was coined by Spencer to explain the concept of struggle among the different members in a society wherein the ones with merit rise, leading to the elimination of the weaker ones, thus, highlighting the process of social selection.

1.2.2 Edward Burnett Tylor

Edward B Tylor is reckoned not only for assuming the first chair of anthropology at the Oxford University, thereby establishing anthropology as a discipline, but also for providing one of the most classic definitions of 'Culture' in his work '*Primitive Culture*' (1871) that is still being used. In defining culture, Tylor emphasised that there was a single Culture that was possessed by humans and different societies possessed culture in different stages of development. This explained why, even though all humans were alike as a single species, they displayed such variations in their culture. Tylor provided us with the sequence of the evolution of religion as an institution of human societies, as he did not understand society in wholistic terms but as co-existence of different institutions existing parallel to each other.

Tylor defined the earliest form of religion as Animism; a belief in the soul or the belief in a dual body of spirit and material body. The speculation over the phenomenon of death and of dreams provided the base for emergence of the belief in soul. He speculated that primitive men must have thought that in dream the soul was able to leave the body temporarily and wander around, while in death it leaves the body permanently. The real source of life or *anima* thus, is the soul and the body thrives on its existence. According to Tylor, evolution of religion started from Animism and stage by stage evolved into other systems of beliefs-like in ancestors, in sacrifice and other rituals. Animism was followed by Naturism, Totemism, Polytheism till finally the ultimate stage of religion, namely Monotheism and the belief in a Supreme God comes about. Thus, Christianity-the religion of the Europeans of that time was seen as the highest form of religious belief, while the other societies were speculated to be at the different levels in the evolutionary stages.

Tylor used the concept of 'psychic unity of (hu)mankind' to explain that all humans have the same capacity to think alike and that there is a "general likeness in human nature". Thus, Tylor gave the examples of culture parallels stating that the earliest humans must also have thought in synchronic ways to produce similar cultural traits. Taking the example of tool making techniques and the pottery of the prehistoric period, Tylor demonstrated that the stone tools were similar in different parts of the world that had no direct contact like in Europe and India. These tools and pottery types also went through various stages of development and more progressive types were seen with the passage of time.

While exploring the evolution of culture Tylor put forward the doctrine of 'survivals' as the remnants of those traits that have now lost their function, but remain by force of habit or inertia of customs for change. Among the many examples that Tylor provided, one was of the unused button behind the waist of a jacket, that now has lost its functional value or the clay pottery that we no longer use but keep as decoration pieces and as a link to the past. The survivals in terms of religion were shown with examples of persistence of ancient rituals and beliefs, the meaning of which is long forgotten, yet still continue to be a part of the religious performances. Thus, survivals are those traits that either in their original form or in modified forms are carried over from the past, as a force of habit or as a way of showing respect to the traditions or as a kind of identity marker. They no longer have any real function but are of symbolic and decorative value only. But survivals provide a real clue to tracing what had existed in the past of a culture and were seen as a method of reconstructing evolutionary sequences.

1.2.3 L.H. Morgan

Lewis Henry Morgan an American anthropologist was a trained lawyer by profession. His interest in the native way of life of the Iroquois was triggered by the law suit based on the loss of land rights, he was handling for them. Morgan spent a long time among the Iroquois as it is said that the Iroquois were practically living in his backyard, and thus, was involved in first hand collection of data, making his work different from the other the arm chair anthropologist of his time like Tylor.

L.H. Morgan's major contribution to the world of anthropology was the study of kinship terminologies and kinship systems. Among the Iroquois, Morgan studied the kin relations and the way the kinsmen address each other. One of the major observations of Morgan was that among the Iroquois a child addresses mother and mother's sister by the same term and father and father's brother by the same term. While the father's sister's children and mother's brother's children were called cousins. Morgan identified the Iroquois kinship as *classificatory kinship system* as it clubbed together two different persons with the same kin term. He called the English system of naming kin as *descriptive kinship system*, because in it, the kin terms used for primary kin are not used for anyone else. While studying the Ojibway tribe, he realised that their kinship terms were similar to that of the Iroquois, thus confirming to the classificatory system.

Based on his observations, Morgan, presumed that all Native Americans have a classificatory system which later evolved into descriptive system like the English system after passing through the different stages of evolution namely: savagery, barbarism and civilization. The first two stages are marked by classificatory kinship they evolve into the descriptive kinship system, as societies become civilized. Morgan linked types of subsistence activities with the types of kinship systems. When the resources are held collectively as at the tribal level, classificatory system prevails as the clan is the collective owner of property and one clan member is substitutable by others. When property is held by the patrilineage for example, father and father's brother are equal owners of property and hence one can be substituted for the other. With the rise of private property rights and it's passing down through the lines of inheritance "descriptive kin systems evolve, and the nuclear family eventually develops" (Moore 2009:24). This meant that groups that followed the classificatory kinship system were survivals of the 'savage' and 'barbaric' stages. Morgan's finding were published in his two works, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1870) and his master piece *Ancient Society* (1877).

Morgan in his work had stated: "With the production of inventions and discoveries, and with the growth of institutions, the human brain necessarily grew and expanded; and we are led to recognize a gradual enlargement of the brain itself, particularly of the cerebral portion" (Morgan 1887: 37). Morgan presented this concept with the example of the subsistence patterns among societies and how it improved as the societies progressed. Morgan's evolutionary scheme remained a question of debate among anthropologists, yet he influenced other thinkers, as his work brought forth the materialistic factors highlighting the aspect that economic and technological know-how go a long way in shaping the fate of humanity. Fredrik Engels's work was influenced by Morgan's thoughts in *Ancient Society*. Morgan's opinions are reflected in Engle's book, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

1.2.4 J.J. Bachofen

Inspired by Greek and Roman literatures Johann Jakob Bachofen, had theorized the concept of ‘mother-right’ or prehistoric matriarchy. In *Das Mutterrecht* (or Mother Right), published in 1861 Bachofen had looked into the religious and judicial character of matriarchy in the ancient world. He studied grave paintings and their symbolism and interpreted the gender relations as depicted on them as patriarchal, where the woman is symbolized as an object. He equated civilization with the West and with patriarchy, and the matriarchy with a lower state of evolution where society is not advanced enough to think in abstract concepts such as fatherhood and are only aware of biological motherhood. He gave a complex of traits that constituted the mother-right societies and a complex of traits that comprised the father right societies. Thus, for him mother right or father right were not stand-alone concepts but wholistic ones that integrated various material and symbolic dimensions. He imagined a mother right society and described it like a book. The women being the sole parent of the child, through whom descent could be traced, assumed a position of high respect and honour in society. With this assumption Bachofen, laid the foundation for the rule of women in the ‘primitive’ world which he termed as **gynaecocracy**. Though it gave a higher status to women yet Bachofen decried this stage as the primeval stage of anarchy till the reign was taken over by men which led to the progress of the society. The progression from matriarchy to patriarchy saw a decline in the role of women and the increase power in the hands of the males, making them more assertive. The gradual transition from promiscuity to monogamy was also noted. Mother-right existed within the context of primeval, matriarchal religion or Ur-religion.

Sir Henry Maine had based his work on the ancient legal systems of Rome, Islamic Law and the Brahmanical Laws and had opposed the placing of mother right before father right. Maine, in his work *Ancient Law*, (1861) had argued and advocated father right, he established the laws of the people that integrated the social heritage to a particular society, while negating the concept of universalism that was the primary focus of study during that time. McLennan on the other hand based his work on the premises of mother right in *Primitive Marriage*, (1865), where he assumed that since primitive people were only aware of biological motherhood, it was only logical to think that matriliney would be recognized first. He traced the origin of marriage or the regulation of sexuality to the regulation of warfare between groups.

Check Your Progress 2

4) Who coined the term ‘survival of the fittest’? What is its significance?

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5) What are cultural survivals? How do they explain evolution?

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6) What is 'psychic unity of humankind'? How did Tylor use this concept to explain the origin of religion?

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7) Who elaborately studied Classificatory and Descriptive Kinship and established kinship studies within the ambit of anthropological studies?

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8) Define gynaecocracy. How was it used to rank societies in the evolutionary schema?

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1.3 BASIC PREMISES OF THE EVOLUTIONARY SCHOOL

In the earlier section we had discussed some of the works of the anthropologists who had used the evolutionary schema to understand the emergence of society and culture. We had seen that within the context of evolution most believed in the single line of progression from simple to complex, postulating the concept of 'psychic unity' of humankind. i.e., human beings everywhere in the world think in much the same way. Now, let us discuss the basic premises of the evolutionary school.

- 1) **Unilinear Evolutionism:**The evolutionists believed in the development of societies from simple to complex in a precise line of evolution or in a single line of order, moving from a lower to a higher stage or in a line of progression. Thus, classical evolutionary theory is a theory that believes that there is only *one line* for cultural progress.
- 2) **Universal Evolutionism:** The emphasis was on an evolution pattern that was happening across the globe and this was based on the concept of ‘psychic unity of mankind’. Giving rise to questions of the brain capacity of human beings that is also developing as the societies develop from simple to complex. The argument was that all societies would go through the same process as the human brains develop from simple to complex.
- 3) **Single Culture:** As described by Ingold (1986) in his work, the propagators of the evolutionary theory believed that there is only one Culture, with a capital C. The difference that we see in societies across the world is not because they have different cultures, but because they are at different stages of the *same* Culture. Citing examples of ‘Culture parallels’ this phenomenon of a single ‘Culture’ moving from simple to complex was explained by the evolutionists.
- 4) **Sequential Progress:**The evolutionist theorists stated that once the sequence of progress has been established, it will step up from one stage to the other and continue in this sequence in which the society will progress. Each society goes through the same stages but at their own pace.
- 5) **Comparative Method:**The evolutionist basically derived at the concept of evolution of society and culture using the comparative method. The white Europeans also known as the ‘arm chair anthropologists’ used their own societies to set the comparison table, where they placed their own society at the helm of ‘civilization’ and compared all other societies based on this scale.

Check Your Progress 3

- 9) Define universal evolutionism.

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- 10) Explain the comparative method.

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1.4 CRITICISMS OF EVOLUTIONIST THEORY

- a) **Colonisation amplified:** The evolutionary theory in a way on moral grounds justified colonisation. The Europeans ‘white men’, having been put on the highest scale of civilization by the intellectuals of their own breed, justified their plunder of the colonies in the name of ‘civilizing’ them.
- b) **Cultural ethnocentrism:** The white Europeans presenting their own culture as a bench mark for civilization put all other societies on an evolutionary scale. They justified each society as being at different levels of evolution based on their technological knowledge. Thus, giving rise to ‘cultural ethnocentrism’. This concept devalued the comparative method, as it was used mainly to accentuate the scholars own society as ‘superior’ than the societies of the people under study.
- c) **Devoid of Cultural Relativism:** The cultural elements and social institutions are relevant in their own context in each society. The evolutionist while categorising some cultures as simple and others as more complex, did away with the value that was associated with each culture. The evolutionists had treated social institutions such as religion, economy and political systems as forming separate strands, comparing them individually across cultures. Owing to this premises, the value of customs and practices that had its own cultural meaning within the context of that society was lost.
- d) **Lack of empirical data:** The later anthropologists had pointed to the fact that most of the data was conjured as there was no first-hand data collection. The data collected was based on the stories and accounts that came from the travelers, the sailors, the missionaries and the administrative personals. Thus, such works were based on second hand data and the scholars came to be known as arm-chair anthropologists. However, it has also to be noted that a few of them had attempted to collect first hand data during their times like Morgan. Yet there was a lack of a precise methodology and thus, lost out on scientific vigour.
- e) **Missing links:** The later scholars like Franz Boas, Margaret Meads, and others from the American Culture School questioned universal evolution based on the concept of ‘psychic unity of humankind’ as it could not explain cultural variations. Moreover, later studies showed that Morgan’s concept of evolution based on technological progress could not explain Polynesian chiefdoms that were based on complex political systems, yet technologically they were far behind, as even the use of pottery was not known in their culture.

Check Your Progress 4

- 11) List the criticisms levied against evolutionism.

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1.5 NEO-EVOLUTIONISM

The revival of the evolutionary approach may be attributed to Leslie A. White (1900-1975), Julian H. Steward (1902-1972), Elman R Service (1915-1996) and Marshall D. Sahlins (1930-2021) the doyens of cultural neo-evolutionism. The early twentiethth century anthropologists attempted to relook at the work of the classical evolutionary theorists by incorporating the methodology of empiricism and also trying to develop rational criteria of measuring evolution.

Leslie White attributed a special status to culture as it is based on the unique capability of human beings and opined that culture can be represented in symbols. For e.g., a pen is a material, a product of human creation and has a pointed end which is used by human beings to record and communicate meaning through written words therefore, the pen is a symbol for writing, and the national flag of India is a symbol of our country. This ability to create symbols is a unique attribute of human beings. In search of the mechanisms for cultural developments he attempted to establish laws. Culture, according to White, is enabled by communication and it develops based on its own principles and laws. Human culture is ever changing; its dynamism comes from consuming energy. White's ideas were written in two books *The Science of Culture* (1949) and *The Evolution of Culture* (1959). The core of White's evolutionary approach centred upon the consumption of energy. The greater the amount of energy tapped per capita per year, the greater will be the scale of cultural development. The tapping of the animal energy by attaching the plough to these animals has improved agricultural production. A surplus in food has resulted in increasing population and the harnessing of fossil fuels for combustion has led to the industrial revolution. His conception is expressed in a formula $E \times T = C$. Where E is amount of energy used, T is the quality or efficient tools that result in C that is culture. White links the expansion of culture to the energy consumed. However, "a close correlation had been established between the consumption of energy and the development of culture, but establishing a correlation is not enough to provide an explanation. Moreover, White did not explain why complexity emerged in some places and not in others" (Claessen 2002). Hence, establishing a causal connection that growth of culture is caused by consumption of energy is difficult to demonstrate (Claessen 2000).

Julian Steward, a neo-evolutionary anthropologist is regarded as a pioneer of modern cultural ecology. Steward divided evolutionary thought into three divisions, i.e., unilinear, universal and multilinear. Julian Steward's theory was based on his concept of culture in which he describes culture as having a core and a periphery, in his book, *Theory of Culture Change*. This two-layered definition of culture enabled him to identify culture and environment interaction as a driving force for culture change. According to him the core of culture is formed by the interaction between the cultural and environmental variables and comprise the socio-economic aspects of culture. This relationship is dialectical, in that as the culture acts upon the environment, the environment transforms and to adapt to the changed environment, the culture has to transform. Here, Steward's concept of culture shows the influence of the dialectical process of Marxism. The peripheral aspects of culture are those that are not connected directly to the environment and gives to each culture its distinctive character. Since most human societies show only a few modes of adaptation to the environment, the culture cores of various cultures can be fitted into a typology of a few known modes of

adaptation; namely hunting-food gathering, pastoralism, horticulture, agriculture and industrial society. The simpler the mode of subsistence, the more direct the relationship between culture and environment. According to Steward, it is theoretically possible to construct different lines of evolution depending upon the direction taken by the dialectical relationship between culture and environment. But it requires a large amount of data collected over a historical period of time. Steward was able to construct only one line of possible evolution. Since there are several ecological zones in the world, it is possible that evolution could take in multiple directions; therefore, this theory is called the theory of multilinear evolution. After Steward, no one else was motivated to construct any more lines of evolution. The criticism of this theory was that there can be multiple ways in which evolution can take place and it is not possible to determine what variable can be put in the core and which ones in the periphery. However, this model of culture helped to construct models of various modes of adaptation, identifying the core cultural elements that constitute each subsistence type.

Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service were colleagues at the University of Michigan and students of White and Steward and they worked to combine the works of White and Steward. They identified two types of evolution, i.e., ‘general’ and ‘specific’ by making a distinction between them. Specific evolution is the adaptation of a particular society to an environment, and it often remains specific to that habitat, like the adaptation of the Eskimos to the Arctic or the bushmen to the Kalahari. General evolution is a general progress of society in which higher forms emerge from lower forms and out do lower forms. Specific represents Steward’s multilinear evolution and General evolution resembles White’s universal evolution. Diagrammatically, they can both be represented by a tree, with the trunk growing upwards, symbolizing General Evolution and the branches growing in all directions. Specific evolutions. If one has to search for variety in historical developments one has to search for specific evolution of the culture, look for the changes in social institutions of the particular society in a historic perspective. If one looks back at the overall picture of evolution of humankind from the level of hunting -food gathering to industrial society, then one is talking about General Evolution. Service and Sahlins described these two types by using the concepts of Adaptation and Adaptability. The former refers to the ability to survive in a specific niche only and the latter to the capacity to spread over a much larger geographical area. Sahlins gives the example of gun powder used by the Europeans to colonize many regions as an example of adaptability. This spread of a dominant culture was described as adaptive radiation.

Sahlins and Service did not rank the two kinds of evolution and considered the mode of adaptive radiation as often detrimental to the loves of the ones getting over run or colonized. The neo-evolutionists departed from the early classical evolutionist by demonstrating the evolution of particular cultures by the process of adaptation to particular environments.

Check Your Progress 5

12) What is neo-evolutionism?

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13) How are the neo-evolutionists different from the earlier classical evolutionists?

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1.6 SUMMARY

Anthropology has its roots in Europe’s history of colonization and plunder, but also in the desire to understand the cultures they had to rule. An interest in the past of their own culture led to an interest in the history of cultural evolution the result of which was the theory of evolutionism that came up as a ‘speculative history’. Evolutionism, was basically, the white European’s way of classifying the non-Europeans encountered in their journeys, into categories that could explain the differences between them, by a theory of development from lower to higher stages. This led to the invention of the concept of ‘primitive’ societies, labelled as still in a state of infancy, as compared to the matured European civilizations that set the bench mark for the highest point of evolution, thus, bringing in the concept of ‘ethnocentrism’. The white Europeans, judged the non-Europeans on a scale where they put themselves on the highest scale of civilization, justified their plunder of the colonies in the name of ‘civilising’ them. This intellectual approach was not based upon ‘rationality’ or ‘evidence’; nor did it follow any empirical methodology. Thus, the views of such anthropologists based on secondary sources were referred to as “arm-chair approach” devoid of physically observed evidence but only deductive reasoning.

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Refer to section 1.0
- 2) Refer to section 1.1
- 3) Refer to section 1.1
- 4) Herbert Spencer
- 5) Refer to section 1.2.2
- 6) Refer to section 1.2.2
- 7) L.H. Morgan
- 8) Refer to section 1.2.4
- 9) Refer to section 1.3
- 10) Refer to section 1.3
- 11) Refer to section 1.4
- 12) Refer to section 1.5
- 13) Refer to section 1.5

UNIT 2 DIFFUSIONISM*

Contents

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Essential Features of Diffusion
- 2.2 Schools of Diffusionism
 - 2.2.1 British School of Diffusion
 - 2.2.2 German-Austrian School of Diffusion
 - 2.2.3 American School of Diffusion
- 2.3 Summary
- 2.4 References
- 2.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain how cultural traits spread from one region to another;
- outline the essential features of diffusion;
- distinguish between diffusion and acculturation; and
- critically examine British, German and American schools of diffusion.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Many of you would be aware of what happens when a drop of ink is placed on the surface of water in a cup or when a tea bag is immersed in a cup of water. We notice that as the drop of ink or tea bag comes in contact with water in the cup, colour spread from a region of its high concentration to the region of low concentration (i.e., from the drop of ink/tea bag towards the margins of the cup filled with water). Just as colour in our example, objects and ideas belonging to one culture spread over to other cultures. In our day-to-day lives we use objects that belong to people living far away from us. In fact, we tend to adopt and use a few of them so routinely that we tend to forget that they have come from elsewhere. You could think of noodles (which originally belongs to China but prepared in different ways and consumed in different parts of India). Two other examples of interest and relevance are: paper (first invented in China from where it spread to the West via the silk route and to other parts of the world); and fax machine (first developed in Germany and now used worldwide). The transmission of objects, customs, beliefs, ideas, and values from one culture to another or more cultures is referred to as diffusion.

Two questions arise, (i.) How does diffusion actually take place? (ii.) Is diffusion the only way through which cultural traits travels from one culture to another? Diffusionism assumes that there has been direct transmission of cultural elements from one stable population to another or through migration of people from one culture to another. The transmission is one way i.e., let us say from population A to population B or from population B to population A, or to population C and so

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on. Diffusion, however, is not the only process through which transmission of cultural traits takes place. The other process that comes close to diffusion is that of acculturation. According to Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936:149-50), 'Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result 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'. While diffusion refers to the spread of cultural traits from one culture to another and is in this sense it is a one-way transaction, acculturation refers to exchange of cultural traits between cultures through direct contact in a way that both cultures undergo change. The situation of contact between two cultures could arise due to immigration of groups of people, conquest of one population by another or any other means. What is important to note is that diffusion does not call for exchange of cultural elements while exchange of cultural elements is an essential feature of acculturation.

Expectedly, diffusion does not lead to change in both the cultures. In acculturation, however, both cultures adopt elements from each other and in this way exhibit change. Herskovits (1955:742) distinguishes between diffusion and acculturation in following words, 'diffusion is study of *achieved cultural transmission* while acculturation is the study of *cultural transmission in process*'. This means, that diffusion assumes that contact between culture did take place some time in the course of which elements got transferred from one culture to the other. Acculturation, on the other hand, obtains from contact between cultures that can be demonstrated.

Silk Route: It is also known as silk road and refers to a series of routes through which both trade and transmission of culture took place between Asia and the West chiefly through soldiers, monks, pilgrims and traders.

2.1 ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF DIFFUSION

According to Linton (1936), diffusion takes place through three processes: a.) presentation of new cultural elements or traits; b.) acceptance of these cultural traits by society; and c.) integration of accepted cultural traits into the accepting culture. The following are important features of diffusion.

- i) Diffusion of any cultural trait depends upon contact between the populations. The likelihood of diffusion between populations in close physical proximity of each other is greater than that between populations located far away from each other.
- ii) The traits spread irregularly and at different speeds from their centres of origin. The nature and extent of diffusion of a cultural trait depends on the ease with which it can be transferred. Ease of transfer depends on the level of complexity and the ease with which it can be comprehended. Compare two cultural traits: an alphabet and a complex theory. You will agree that the alphabet will diffuse faster than a complex theory, because the former is easier to communicate and understand than the latter.
- iii) The acceptance of a cultural trait by the receiving group depends on its utility for and compatibility with traits of the culture in which it is getting diffused. Those cultural traits that are of no use or are in conflict with the beliefs and values prevalent in the receiving culture are likely to be rejected.

Linton (1936) explains this with an example of the Apache's reaction to peyote. The Apache rejected the offer of peyote by certain tribes. The reason was that the Apache believed that consumption of peyote would generate visions and those people who had vision would be bestowed with enviable power. This power could be stolen by other medicine men. The Apache did not promote the regular pattern of peyote consumption in a group for the fear of the power that accrues from it getting stolen by others. Another example is that of diffusion of refrigerator or say television set. Diffusion of such items (here referring to those that raise the consumption of electricity) depends on the availability of electricity connection at people's houses, and among others, per capita income of the family (that determines their affordability).

- iv) Changes or innovations in a cultural trait that has undergone diffusion lags behind the original cultural trait. Consider the example of plough that developed in region A and has reached regions B, C and D through the process of diffusion. Now, people in region A improve certain features of the plough. The new features will not spread as fast as the original version of the plough did. The advanced plough will take a long time to reach and replace the older one at all the places.
- v) Diffusion of single cultural trait does take place, however, those cultural traits that are functionally related get diffused together. Diffusions of tea, for example, gets linked with various methods of brewing it. Surely, in the course of diffusion, new methods of brewing tea developed in places of its spread and these got diffused too.
- vi) Extent of distribution of a cultural trait is not deterministic of its age. It is not correct to assume that a trait which is more widely distributed is older in its origin, that the one which is scarcely distributed because certain traits or set of traits tend to get diffused faster than other. This is determined by the nature of trait.

Apache: The term Apache is used to collectively refer to the American Indians in the United States.

Peyote: It is a small cactus known for its psychoactive properties when consumed

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain the concept of diffusion.
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- 2) What is the difference between diffusion and acculturation?
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3) What are the processes through which diffusion takes place?

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2.2 SCHOOLS OF DIFFUSIONISM

The fundamental premise of diffusion is often contrasted with that of the evolutionary theory. While the evolutionary theory assumes that human beings are creative and that innovations will be developed independently in different societies (which is why all societies are expected to develop innovations characterising the evolutionary stage they are in), diffusion assumes that human beings are, largely, conservative and uninventive and they tend to borrow cultural traits that have originated at one or more but specific places(s). Diffusionism challenged the basic proposition that all societies pass through the same stages of evolution. Instead, diffusionists argued that there is/are distinct centre(s). It is from this/these centre(s) of culture(s) that cultural traits spread to different regions through the process of diffusion. While agreeing on the basic postulate of spread of cultural traits from specific center(s), diffusionists differed on other counts. The following are three prominent schools of diffusionists.

2.2.1 British School of Diffusion

The founder of the British School of diffusion was Graffon Elliot Smith. Both Smith and his disciple William James Perry insisted that cultures originated in Egypt. They argued that it was from Egypt that cultures spread to different parts of the world. You might want to know why Smith identified Egypt as the centre of all cultures. Smith was a well-known anatomist and surgeon who went to Egypt to study the anatomy of mummies. He was so impressed with the Egyptians' procedure of mummification, their pyramids and large monuments of stone that he postulated (i) the stone monuments in Egypt were the forerunners of megalithic structures much like the Stonehenge in England; and (ii) Egypt was the only place on earth where ancient culture originated and spread to other parts of the world.

According to him, sun worship and stone monuments were of critical value in Egyptian culture. Other traits were: irrigation and agriculture, mummification, pyramids and other megalithic structures, ear piercing and circumcision practices. He began looking for these in other cultures as well.

Smith maintained that the soil along the banks of the river Nile that flows in Egypt was very fertile. Here, wild barley grew in abundance which was later cultivated by Egyptians. In order to cultivate barley, Egyptians developed hydraulic system of irrigation. The rich harvest of barley had to be stored. So, Egyptians invented pottery and constructed granaries. Later, granaries developed into dwellings. When people did not have to worry about food and house, they had leisure. They used this leisure to develop different skills such as those of

basketry, matting and weaving. Additionally, they invented the wheel and plough, domesticated cattle, and developed metallurgy. Thereafter, they set up towns, and cities. Large monuments for law and governance came up. River Nile continued to be the most important resource for the people. The king could predict the course that the river would take and since the river was very important for them, the people came to believe that their king was an embodiment of sun and that he was immortal. This made them to preserve his body as a mummy after he died.

As one would expect, (i) religion based on sun-worship developed; and (ii) rituals, dance, drama and music developed to protect the body of the king from getting corrupted in any way. These were the beginnings of religion. According to Smith, around 4000 BC Egyptians travelled to different parts of the world in search of precious metals and raw materials. This enabled them to master the skill of navigation. In the course of travel to different places, they passed on the traits of culture to people in distant lands. The position of Graffon Elliot Smith and Perry postulating that Egypt was the cradle of all cultures is referred to as an extreme diffusionism. Perry was far too impressed with sun temples at Cairo. He asserted that the process of diffusion of art and craft from Egypt to different cultures was inevitably accompanied with their degradation. But Smith and Perry were not the only two diffusionists within the British school of diffusion.

There were other diffusionists as well who did not assert the importance of Egypt but maintained that similarities and differences among cultures could be explained in terms of contact with other cultural groups not just with those in Egypt. This approach is referred to as moderate diffusionism. The chief proponent of moderate diffusionism was, among others, W H R Rivers. Rivers studied people from different parts of the world. He studied the Torres Strait Islanders, Todas (tribal community in the Nilgiri hills of South India) and the Melanesians and Polynesians. Rivers explained that similarities and differences, particularly among islands comprising Melanesia were due to the process of diffusion which took place through a series of migrations between them. Rivers suggested that cultural complexes spread by way of successive migration. He stated that migration leads to spread of cultural traits as also loss of some of them. When he did not find canoes on some islands, for example, Rivers explained that in the past canoes would have been used by the people but disappeared later due to dying out of the island's canoe making guild. He studied the Oceanian culture as well in terms of cultural complexes. Interestingly, he accorded the presence of five different burial rituals in Australia to a series of migrations.

According to Rivers, small groups of men equipped with superior technology migrated to Australia, settled down there and married the local women. The following were the consequences: (i) since the migrants were few in number, their racial strain could not find expression in physical features of the native population which implies that the children lost the racial features of their forefathers; and (ii) the original language of the migrants was lost because they had to adopt the local dialects for communication with the natives. The migrant men, in effect, lost their own way of life. They, however, retained their own burial rites due to strong emotional attachment with them. What remains unexplained is/are the reason(s) for local people abandoning their own burial practices and adopting the rituals of the migrants.

The British school of diffusion suffered from several weaknesses. The following are a few of them: (i.) its basic assumption that other than those in Egypt, people are largely uninventive has been challenged vehemently; (ii.) both extreme diffusionists and moderate diffusionists assumed that culture complexes spread. The difference between them was that the former argued that Egypt was the only centre point while latter argued that there were other center points as well. It is difficult to accept this proposition because certain cultural traits could have been independently invented by the people; (iii) it does not account for the possibility of multiple diffusions; and (iv) it does not give cognizance to the meaning and significance attached with a cultural trait.

2.2.2 German-Austrian School of Diffusion

The German-Austrian School of diffusion was founded by Fredrick Ratzel. Some of the other proponents were Leo Frobenius, Fritz Graebner and Father Wilhelm Schmidt. German-Austrian diffusionists differed from British diffusionists chiefly on following counts: unlike the latter, they maintained that (i) there were not one but many centers of culture; (ii) culture complexes diffused in totality rather than in bits-and-pieces as through singular traits. Interestingly, they assumed that similarity between cultures was due to contact between them some time in history. Even cultures situated far apart from each other were assumed to have come in contact sometime if similarity existed between them. Thus, similarity between cultures was accounted for by diffusion. They identified two kinds of similarities. The first was based on functional reasons for example sharpness of spears. Now, spears would have sharp points everywhere because if it were not so, they would be useless. The other kinds of similarity were based on historical contact, for example presence of matrilineal descent in two cultures.

Ratzel proposed 'criterion of form' which could be stated as: 'similarity 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). In fact, Ratzel examined similarities in bow-shaft, mechanism of fastening of bow strings, material they are made from and the way on which features are attached to the arrows in Africa and in Australia. He maintained that since these features had nothing to do with how the bow and arrow would function, it was safe to conclude that the similarities were due to historical contact leading to diffusion between Africa and Australia. In other words, he explained that the similarity is not due to functional reasons (i.e., not because the design was the one that was best suited for hunting). Rather, the similarity was due to (i) historical connection between them; and (ii) similarity in psychological makeup of people in the two regions. Ratzel's 'criterion of form' was called 'criterion of quality' by Schmidt.

Ratzel maintained that while cultural traits diffuse singularly, culture complexes spread through migration. He insisted that regions and routes of migration and diffusion across the world should be mapped. He added that cultural traits, could get simplified or complicated when they get diffused.

Just as Ratzel proposed 'criterion of form', one of his pupils named Leo Frobenius proposed 'criterion of quantity'. Frobenius saw that certain cultural traits diffuse together. We can conclude that diffusion has taken between two culture when many similar traits are found together. The 'criterion of quantity' establishes that

diffusion has taken place between two or more cultures when we see many similar traits in them. Let us refer to the example of the bow and arrow in West Africa and Australia once again. The similarity in bow and arrow in the two cultures was accompanied with similarity in house types, shields masks, clothing and drums. With increase in number of similar traits between cultures, the possibility that diffusion has taken place between them increases.

German-Australian diffusionists came up with the theory of *kulturkreis* ('culture circle' or 'culture center') to explain how diffusion actually takes place. It accepted that all cultures originated in specific cultural centers. From here they spread through larger circles in a way that additional cultural areas were encompassed. The original cultural centers were believed to be identified by discrete characteristics referred to as 'cultural complex'. Diffusionists were to trace the spread of cultural traits from their specific centers of origin. The initiative of Ratzel and Frobenius, the notion of *kulturkreis* was carried forward by Graebner and Schmidt. Graebner was a museologist who was mainly interested in similarities in material culture first across Oceania and later in different parts of the world. What he did was to bring together Ratzel's 'criterion of form' and Frobenius's 'criterion of quantity' and proposed that both form and quantity were critical in assessing the likelihood that any two cultures were historically related. He maintained that Asia was the region that was occupied by human beings in earliest time. It was here that they invented language, tools and other elements of culture. Later, they organised themselves into bands and moved independently to different parts of the world (first through land routes and later through the seas). In course of travel and settling down in different parts of the world, they developed their own cultures. There were now different *kreise* (i.e., distinct culture of each band). According to Graebner, all dimensions of a culture did not develop at the same pace. This explained why a culture that was characterized by simple kinship system could exhibit complex technology.

Schmidt compared *kulturkreis* or 'culture circle' with a living organism. Just as a living organism is made up of different parts that are interrelated with each other, *kulturkreis* comprises of economy, material culture, social life, customs and religion all of which are related with each other. A culture circle is complete in itself, however, if one of its needs was not met internally, it borrows a substitute to meet this need from another culture. A culture circle ceases to exist when the number of substitutes grows to be fairly large. Evidently, a culture complex tends to diffuse in totality and as a whole. It adopts elements to meet specific needs of cultures it comes into contact with.

Following were major criticism against German-Australian diffusionists: (i) undue emphasis on trait complex. This ruled out the possibility that some traits could originate and spread independently; (ii) the maze of traits is complex, not easy to sort out and understand; (iii) the proposition that all cultures of the world are derived from a few basic cultures is too far-fetched and difficult to accept; and (iv) the association of certain elements with each culture seems to be arbitrary and subjective.

Check Your Progress 2

- 4) What is the difference between 'criterion of form' and 'criterion of quantity'?

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 5) What do you understand by *kulturkreis*?

2.2.3 American School of Diffusion

The foundation of American school of diffusion was laid by Franz Boas who was born and educated in Germany. Expectedly, his ideas were influenced by the German school of diffusion. According to Boas, each cultural group had its own history comprising its own development and influences of others on it. Boas believed that culture developed independently. Hence, there are many cultures and each culture is a consequence of its own geography, climate, environment, resources and borrowings. The task before anthropologists was to record and document the history, compare groups of cultural traits in specific geographical areas and then plot the distribution of these cultural traits. Plots of different sets of cultural traits in a geographical area are indicative of cultural borrowings and enable reconstruction of histories of specific cultures. Understandably, Boas regards culture as an assemblage of traits and since trait has a complex past, he projected that cultures have their own unique histories.

American diffusionists believed that people tend to learn and borrow elements of cultures they come in contact with. The likelihood of learning and borrowing increases when the duration and frequency of contact increases. They proposed the concept of 'culture area' which referred to geographical space in which similar cultures were found. The basic proposition was that mapping of distribution of cultural traits in culture areas would provide an explanation of similarities and differences between cultures, particularly Native American Cultures.

According to Clark Wissler, subsistence was an important means of identifying culture areas. The reason was simple: subsistence was the basis of existence itself and influences other aspects of culture. On the basis of following subsistence: Caribou; Bison; Salmon; Wild Seed; Eastern Maize; Intensive agriculture; Manioc; and Guanaco he identified eight culture areas-Eskimo, Mackenzie (and north part of Eastern Woodland); Plains; North Pacific Coast; Plateau; California; South east, Eastern Woodland (except north non-agricultural portion); South west, Nahua-Mexico, Chibcha, Inca Peru; Amazon, Antilles; and Guanaco respectively. Each culture area had a culture centre which governed its social, economic, political, and religious activities. Wissler also proposed the age-area hypothesis by which he meant that a trait which is more widely distributed around a culture centre is older than the one that is less widely distributed. Edward Sapir, however,

cautioned that (i) the spread of cultural traits may be faster in one direction than in another (ii) the oldest cultural trait could undergo large-scale transformation at the centre (i.e., at its place of origin) to the extent that the real point of origin could be mistaken; and (iii) migration within the area of distribution of a cultural trait may lead to erroneous conclusion regarding culture distribution.

Alfred Louis Kroeber suggested that culture area should be looked at in the broad framework of its cultural contact. He identified six culture areas of native America based on geographical and ecological considerations and several other factors. These culture areas were: Arctic zone, North-West Coast, South-West Coast, Intermediate and Inter-mountain Area, East and North Area, and Mexico-Central American Area. In fact, he argued in favour of using the term 'culture climax' instead of culture area. He defines culture climax as, 'the point from which the greatest radiation of cultural material has taken place' (1952:39). The level of organization of cultures increases as they become richer and more differentiated in the sense of developing religious hierarchies, detailed norms and customs etc. As cultures become richer, they are able to assimilate and incorporate new material or traits that could be borrowed or developed internally.

The American school of diffusion has been criticized for its culture area concept: (i) It is argued that cultural trait which constitutes the very core of culture area concept is itself not a clearly understood one. Critics have expressed concern over what constitutes cultural trait. Consider the example of a ship. Should ship be considered as a simple unit or as a combination of traits such as nature and design of the seating space, decorations in it etc. (ii) Equal importance was assigned to each cultural trait. The number of oars in a ship, the number of wives a man had or the number of husbands a woman had, for example, hold equal value so far as diagnosis or determination whether diffusion had taken place was concerned. What comes out of the example is the fact that only the trait as such was taken into account while the function it performed in a culture was ignored. (iii) In order to determine culture areas, large number of criteria were identified. Based on these criteria several culture areas were noted. There was, however no agreement among the diffusionists about the culture areas. (iv) Symbiotic interaction between culture areas was largely ignored. (v) Geographical conditions harbouring different cultures in different periods of time were not taken into account. (vi) Free diffusion within culture areas is assumed ignoring forces of resistance and difficulties of acceptance of cultural traits in different culture areas.

Another set of criticism of American school of diffusion relates with the age-area hypothesis: (i) it is not appropriate to correlate age of a trait with its distribution. This is meaningless because traits do not spread continuously; and (ii) it ignores the fact that spread of a trait depends on its receptivity in the other culture.

Cultural Trait: It is the basic unit of a culture. Diffusionists regard cultural trait as a unit of cultural transmission. There are both empirical units (i.e., things that can be touched and held e.g., a jar) and ideational units (i.e., descriptions, ideas, beliefs etc. that characterize a thing or they may be theoretical or analytical in nature).

Cultural Complex: It is a combination of different cultural traits.

Check Your Progress 3

6) What is the age-area hypothesis? Outline its demerits.

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7) What are the major tenets of the American school of diffusion?

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2.3 SUMMARY

In this unit we obtained an explanation of how and why similarities among cultures are found. We familiarised ourselves with three schools of diffusionism. None of them however, could explain how and why certain traits originate and how do we account for similarities in culture which have not come into contact with each other? Notwithstanding its limitation, diffusionist school captured the attention of anthropologists for a long time. The question it answered and those that it generated provided a feeder for new paradigms and theories in anthropology.

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2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Diffusion refers to the transmission of cultural traits.
- 2) For detailed explanation of the concept of diffusion and for difference between diffusion and acculturation refer to section 2.1
- 3) According to Linton, diffusion takes place through the following practices: presentation of new cultural elements or traits; acceptance of these cultural traits by society; and integration of accepted cultural traits into the accepting culture.
- 4) 'Criterion of form' establishes that similarity between two culture elements that are not due to the nature, material, or purpose of the traits or objects should be interpreted as resulting from diffusion. This is irrespective of the distance which separates them. The 'criterion of quantity', on the other hand establishes that diffusion can be said to have taken place between two or more cultures when many similar traits are found in them.
- 5) For the concept of *kulturkreis* refer to section 2.2.2.
- 6) Age-area hypothesis was proposed by Wissler to ascertain the relative age of a culture trait. The age-area hypothesis suggests that a trait which is more widely distributed can be considered to be older than the one which is of limited distribution. The main demerits of the age-area hypothesis are first, since traits do not spread continuously it is not appropriate to correlate age of a trait with its distribution; second, it does not account for the fact that spread of a trait depends of its receptivity in the other culture.
- 7) For major tenets of the American school of diffusion refer to section 4.3.3

UNIT 3 CULTURE AREA THEORIES*

Contents

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Historical Trajectory of Thought
 - 3.1.1 A Critique of Unilinear Evolution
 - 3.1.2 Influence of Biological Sciences and Museology
- 3.2 Theoretical Context
 - 3.2.1 British School of thought
 - 3.2.2 German School
 - 3.2.3 American School and Culture Area Theories
- 3.3 Why did 'Culture Area Concept' Lose its Steam?
- 3.4 Summary
- 3.5 References
- 3.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this unit, the learners will be able to:

- explore the historical, theoretical and methodological significance of the culture area concept;
- understand the contributions of various scholars whose works influenced the concept, building up to the culture area theories; and
- critically assess why the culture area concept lost its significance.

3.0 INTRODUCTION

It has often been found that neighbouring cultures share common cultural traits which might include food, dressing pattern, festivals, rituals and ceremonies. This commonality of traits often results in the definition of geographical areas based on the cultural inclination (the more obvious or prominent cultural display/manifestation). For example, one often hears of the term Punjabi culture or that north of India is represented by Punjabi culture, why is this the case? Is the north of India or the geographical region of Punjab indeed a homogenous culture? If not, then why is it that they are termed as such, and how and why is it that they have shared cultural traits? One of the possible answers to why cultures find association with geography (at a large scale) is that even a casual sorting of cultural information like language, social institutions, material culture and even social behavioural patterns can throw up certain commonalities between specific areas.

The culture area concept attempted to provide a method to such casual observations to make it acceptable as an anthropological theory. The culture area concept was developed in the early 1900s, along with the theories of diffusion and historicism. It was based in the western context in a time period when the European powers were still colonising the rest of the world. Anthropology as a

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discipline was already establishing itself as the study of the 'other' culture (usually termed as 'primitive' at that point of time). However, there was realisation within the discipline that while western exploration had led to the discovery of a number of 'other' cultures, the very process of colonisation was also leading to the diminishing and disappearance of a number of these cultures. In this, anthropologists recognised an urgent need to document information from these 'disappearing' cultures. American anthropologists, namely Franz Boas and his students, did pioneering work in this area by conducting extensive fieldwork to collect enormous amounts of data about the 'disappearing' native cultures of North America. There was however, no framework for organising this data. It is in the sorting of the empirical data by spatially tracing (cultural) traits that the culture area concept was born.

The concept of culture area was first applied by ethnologist Clark Wissler in order to provide a theoretical framework for the information being generated. A culture area was defined as a geographical/cultural region whose population and groups share important common identifiable cultural traits, such as language, tools and material culture, kinship, social organisation, and cultural history. Therefore, groups sharing similar traits in a geographical region would be classed in a single culture area. Culture area highlighted the historical relationships between different cultures over geographical spaces and recognised the areas governed by the same or a dominant culture. This cultural relationship was understood in terms of cultural phases taking into consideration the dimension of time to understand historical relationships. Russell Gordon Smith (1929) in his paper 'The Concept of the Culture-area' explains that, "the culture-area is an empirical grouping of cultural data cultures in which the unit of investigation and the principle of classification have been derived from direct observation of the facts and of their temporal and spatial distributions" (Smith 1929: 421).

George W. Hill (1941) in his paper 'The use of Culture Area Concept in Social Research' points out that "A technique of classification is a cornerstone of scientific research. Prior to the development of such a system, a discipline remains speculative and has little objectivity. Following the evolutionary system, the culture area provides the much-needed classification in Anthropology" (Hill 1941: 39). This statement brings to light the fact that anthropology was still positioning itself as a scientific discipline in the 'positivists' era, and in that the culture area concept provided it with the much-needed framework to prove its credibility, while it disengaged itself from the theory of unilinear evolution of humankind.

Let us, in the next subsection, understand how the critiques to the classical evolutionary school of thought lead to a shift in anthropological thought towards culture area concept.

3.1 HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF THOUGHT

The concept of culture area developed as an alternate explanation to unilinear evolution. It also borrowed from other disciplines like natural science and museology, in developing a theoretical framework to understand cultural data. This section provides a background on how the critique of evolutionism and a multidisciplinary influence helped in the development of the concept.

3.1.1 A Critique of Unilinear Evolution

The classical evolutionary theory came into being in the late 1800s and has been criticised as an ethnocentric theory putting the western civilization at the pinnacle of development. The evolutionists proposed that humans share a set of characteristics and modes of thinking that transcend individual cultures (psychic unity of mankind) and attributed similarity of cultural traits between geographically separated areas to similar evolutionary pattern. As more and more anthropological information started getting collected, it led to the ideation of two alternate possibilities:

- a) independent local innovation (local inventions one place after another) and
- b) diffusion (innovation are created in a few localities from where they spread over a wide area)

Evolutionary theory was a grand or nomothetic theory. In contrast we have the development of Historical Particularism in America focused on the historical trajectory of unique cultures. Diffusionism was the first approach devised to accomplish this type of historical approach to cultural investigation. As the term suggests diffusionism studied the dispersal of culture traits from its place of origin to other places. Both Historicism and Diffusionism contributed to the concept of culture area, however before dwelling into these thoughts in details and how they contributed to the culture area concept let us look at how natural sciences contributed to the idea of culture area concept.

3.1.2 Influence of Biological Sciences and Museology

Culture area concept finds its influence from the systematised presentation and classification of biological data in terms of typology and taxonomy which can be traced back to Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus, French biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and others who used morphology or physical structures of organisms (like flowers, shells, and bones) to illustrate the relatedness between groups of living beings.

This idea was furthered in museology by the Danish archaeologist, Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, curator of the National Museum of Denmark (1816–65) who in his study of the *bracteate*, a type of ancient pendant found in northern Europe, charted a variety of morphological categories, such as insignia and size. By combining the typologies thus created, he showed that these Nordic ornaments had developed from earlier Roman coins. This depicted the diffusion of a cultural item through geographical space, resulting in subsequent changes in the item through its travel.



Vadstena Bracteate

Courtesy of Kungl. History of Witness and the Academy of Antiquities, Stockholm. Vadstena bracteate - Wikipedia

This supported the idea of diffusion (a theoretical perspective that influenced the idea of culture area). The political implications of the innovation-diffusion debate were profound. It resulted in the methodological problem of how one might scientifically determine the primacy of either process. Otis T. Mason, curator of ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution (1884–1908), suggested one such method in a report of his program for organizing the museum exhibits for the United States National Museum, Mason (1886). He was among the first to use the term ‘culture area’, however his focus was on presentation of cultural material. He believed that if a biologist could study variations in the wing form of birds, ultimately creating a sequence from the wing’s most basal to its most advanced form, an ethnologist could apply the same methods to see if a cultural trait (such as basketry) had been independently developed or has spread through. According to Mason, a series of such studies, analysing a multitude of traits, would eventually result in a preponderance of evidence supporting either innovation or diffusion, thus resolving the question of causation in cultural evolution.

Mason was however criticised by Franz Boas that, in ranking cultures as higher or lower according to their traits, the comparative method Mason adopted was intrinsically biased and, therefore, not scientific. Boas writes that “there is one fundamental difference between biological and cultural data which makes it impossible to transfer the methods of the one science to the other. Animal forms develop in divergent directions, and an intermingling of species that have once become distinct is negligible in the whole developmental history..... Human thoughts, institutions, activities may spread from one social unit to another..... Before morphological comparison can be attempted the extraneous elements due to cultural diffusion must be eliminated.” (Boas 1932: 609)

Boas’s assistant, Clark Wissler, succeeded him as the curator of the American Museum of Natural History. Culture area concept was developed in earnest by Clark Wissler, and given a theoretical perspective that could produce scientific laws while preserving the cross-cultural perspective essential to anthropology.

Before we dwell further into the culture area concept as proposed by Clark Wissler, let us first look at scholarly discussions that contributed to the culture area concept. As mentioned earlier, the culture area concept came into being as a methodological response to the innovation-diffusion debate, it is thus important to understand the thoughts around diffusion and its influence in the culture area concept.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Why did anthropological thought preference shift from classical socio-cultural evolution to historicism and diffusionism?

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- 2) How did biological sciences and museology contribute to the culture area concept?

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- 3) Who was Christian Jürgensen Thomsen?

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3.2 THEORETICAL CONTEXT

It is important for us to remember that the ideas of innovation and diffusion developed as a critique to the classical evolutionary theory. However, it was in continuation with the evolutionary theory itself, where social evolution took a more regional perspective and the ideas of cultural contact and diffusion were provided academic recognition. At this conjecture of anthropological history (late 1800s and early 1900s) extensive anthropological data was being collected. This data showed a commonality of traits among different tribes in a region. Further, as anthropologist acknowledged the need to study disappearing/vanishing tribes and there was a realisation that this disappearance is due to the colonising process, or cultural contact. Regional commonality of cultural traits and the reality of culture contact brought forth the idea of innovation and diffusion within the space of understanding social evolution and development of cultures. This shift in anthropological thought is usually studied under the ambit of Diffusionism. Diffusionism was represented by three distinct schools of thought: the British school, the German school and the American school as you have already read in Unit 2. Here in this section, we are giving a gist of the same for you to recapitulate.

3.2.1 British School of Thought

The **British school of diffusionism** was led by G. E. Smith and W. J. Perry. These scholars were known as Egyptologists. According to them all of culture and civilization was developed only once in ancient Egypt and diffused throughout the rest of the world through migration, colonisation and diffusion. Therefore, all cultures were tied together by a common origin (or psychic unity of humankind) and, as a result, worldwide cultural development could be viewed as a reaction of native cultures to this diffusion of culture from Egypt.

G. Elliot Smith was a great admirer of Egyptian civilization. According to him there were many English monuments which were secondary copy of the structure of pyramid. Smith travelled to Egypt, Japan, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia to

study the architecture, where he found similarity among Egypt pyramids and Japanese pagoda, Cambodians temples, temples of Indonesia. From all of his studies he concluded that around 400 B.C culture traits of Egyptian monuments started spreading from Egypt to the other parts of the world. In his book “The Origin of Civilization” (1928), he emphasised that Egypt was the only centre of the culture, and that agriculture and subsequently the first civilisation emerged at the fertile bank of river Nile. Egyptian developed scientific methods like hydraulic system for controlling water, invented pottery, weaving, wheel, and script to write and began to live in cities. Government was formed, laws were formulated and religion prospered. The Egyptians developed systems of navigation and travelled far and wide to the different corner of the world in search of precious stone and metal. In this course of travel they spread the benefit of their civilization to the other part of the world. Thus, according to Smith there were two kinds of men, the civilized men of Egypt and natural men outside Egypt. Smith believed that a revolution came in natural men when they came in contact with civilized traits. Underlying smith idea is “uninventiveness of humankind” i.e., human is basically uninventive in nature, and invention, discovery began in Egypt.

W. J. Perry (1877-1949): W. J. Perry was a strong supporter of Smith, and agreed that cultural similarities were due to diffusion and not invention, and that Egypt was the citadel of civilization.

The Egyptologists were criticized for their narrow vision and the fact that they thought that man was uninventive, and though their thought of diffusion held certain interest, there was weakness in the evidence on the basis of which they formulated their theory.

3.2.2 German School

The German School of Diffusionism proposed the culture circle or *Kulterkreis* concept that conceptualised widening circles of culture trait complexes diffusing outwards from their point of origin. F. Ratzel (1884-1904) in his book “Anthropogeography” (1892) carried forward the idea of culture circles. He argued that there is a strong relationship between territory and culture. He said that environment and climate played a major role in determining the culture circle. People living on mountains, near rivers and in deserts have different culture complex. Individuals continuously create innovations within these cultures circle and innovations migrate or diffuse to the neighbouring areas. “Anthropogeography” conveyed that different culture circles could come up in different geographical terrains making it amenable for migration and diffusion. Frobenius, a student of Ratzel, tried to utilise statistics to map the distribution of cultural traits thereby suggesting the idea of geographical statistics.

The German concept of culture circles was criticised for a number of reasons. Anthropologists realised that cultural phenomena is much too complex to be explained by the interaction of a small number of *Kulturkreise*. It spoke of contacts over unlikely distances and did not make allowances for independent invention. The proponents of the theory often mistook analogous features (those that appear similar but have differing origins) for homologous ones (those that appear similar because they share an origin) and thus compared phenomena that were not really comparable.

3.2.3 American School and Culture Area Theories

American school of thought saw the development of the concept of culture area into theory and practice under two key thinkers Clark Wissler and A L Kroeber, who had both enjoyed the mentorship of Franz Boas.

In the United States, Franz Boas was the first to formally propound the understanding of culture areas (Buckley 1989). He said that these areas were historical as well as geographical units: the spatial coefficients of processes of cultural growth through time. He identified the physical environment of culture areas, the “psychology” of the peoples inhabiting them, and the spread of technologies and other ideas as three independent variables governing cultural growth, or development, within culture areas over time (Boas 1896). He reflected on diffusion as a viable mechanism for culture exchanges among geographically adjacent areas. Boas argued that, one had to carry out detailed regional studies of individual cultures to discover the distribution of culture traits and to understand the individual processes of culture change at work. He stressed on the need for meticulous collection and organisation of ethnographic data on all aspects of (different) human societies. He maintained that only after information on the particulars of many different cultures had been gathered could generalisations about cultural development be made with any expectation of accuracy. Thus, while Boas recognised the relevance of culture area, he also felt that the need of the time was for anthropologists to study specific cultures in-depth. To this end, he sought to reconstruct the histories of specific cultures and focused on particularism of a society in terms of both its history and culture. He argued that many cultures developed independently, each based on its own unique set of circumstances such as geography, climate, resources and particular cultural borrowing. Based on this argument, reconstructing the history of individual cultures requires an in-depth investigation that compares groups of culture traits in specific geographical areas. Then the distribution of these culture traits must be plotted. Once the distribution of many sets of culture traits is plotted for a general geographic area, patterns of cultural borrowing may be determined. This allows the reconstruction of individual histories of specific cultures by investigating which of the cultural elements were borrowed and which were developed individually (Bock 1996:299).

The concept of culture area was however carried forward by Clark Wissler (1870-1947). He developed a view of culture that focused on its continuity over wide geographical areas. Since cross-cultural nomothetic studies require that the items to be compared be defined as rigorously as possible, Wissler became the first anthropologist after Tylor and the first American anthropologist to offer a definition of culture. He developed the concept of culture-area and age-area in his books *The American Indian* (1917), *Man and Culture* (1923) and *The Relation of Nature to Man* (1926).

In Wissler’s hands culture area became a significant theory of culture change. It created a shift in the analytical focus from the culture and history of the specific social unit (as prescribed by Boas) to a concern with the trait-complex viewed in cross-cultural perspective (Freed. S. A and R. S. Freed, 1883). Unlike Boas, Wissler was looking to understand world history. He followed agriculture, the textile arts, architecture, and so on to create his picture of the western hemispheric history.

Culture area was chiefly determined by material traits and the economic base, but ceremonial and social trait-complexes were also used to distinguish them. Each culture area was perceived to have a culture center “from which culture influences seem to radiate” (Wissler 1917: 242). Thus, diffusion was seen as the basic process in the formation of a culture area. Wissler perceived the significance of focal points of growth, resulting in culminations definable in spatial (culture centres) and presumably temporal (cultural climaxes) terms. The traits radiated outwards from the focal points and the traits that reached the furthers were understood to be the oldest. Culture areas thus contained both:

- a) a group of typical tribes that share most of the defining trait-complexes, and
- b) marginal tribes that have fewer of the typical traits (Freed. S. A and R. S. Freed 1883).

Wissler tried to explain the relation of culture areas to environment. He said that environment does not produce a culture, but stabilises it. As (at many points) the culture must be adapted to the environment, the latter tends to hold it fast. Cultures therefore incline to change slowly once they have fitted themselves to a setting, and to enter a new environment with more difficulty than to spread over the whole of the natural area in which their form was worked out. If they do enter a new type of territory, they are subject to change. Once fitted to an environment, they are likely to alter radically only through some factor profoundly affecting subsistence. Wissler divided North America into ten culture areas where (according to Kroeber) subsistence areas seem to refer primarily to the basis of culture, and environment and ecological aspects also played a critical role. A. L. Kroeber recognised the significance of culture area theory, developed on it, as well as put the theory into practice by defining various culture areas among the North American tribes.

Alfred Louis Kroeber (1876-1960)- Kroeber referred to ‘culture area’ as an unfortunate designation in that it puts emphasis on the area, whereas it is usually the cultural content that is being primarily considered. Being from the Boasian school of thought, Kroeber believed in cultural relativism. He said that cultures occur in nature as wholes; and these wholes can never be entirely formulated through consideration of their elements, in this he critiqued Clark Wissler. He justified this with the example of the Navaho and Pueblos (or North Pacific Coast Indians) tribes. He pointed out that Navaho altar paintings may be the most developed in the Southwest, but Navaho culture is still close to that of the Pueblos and in many ways obviously dependent on it. So, he showed that at times a single trait can be very distinct in a culture and thus misleading if cultural traits are being followed, while holistic comparisons can provide a stronger association between cultures. The culture-area concept he thus believed should attempt to deal with such culture wholes.

Kroeber looked at geographic-ethnic culture-whole in its historical course, with the ultimate aim of searching for culture-historical laws. Kroeber applied the culture area approach to the ever-growing body of ethnographic and archaeological data worldwide. One of Kroeber’s greatest works was the ‘Handbook of the Indians of California’ published in 1925. It brings forth culture areas and subareas, and their historic implications. Kroeber’s enlarged interests in cultural areas and cultural continuities led to another of his major works, ‘Cultural and Natural Areas in Native North America’ (1939). Cultural and Natural Areas not only delineated cultural areas, but also related them to natural areas

and, more important, introduced the concept of cultural climax. Earlier element distribution studies had employed the concept of culture centers within areas, which were more complex and therefore presumed to be more inventive, and of margins, which were the simple, uninventive peripheral recipients of cultural achievements. Kroeber's concept of cultural climax avoided the implication that greatest complexity meant the locus of inventiveness, and called attention instead to cultural intensification or accumulation. He described this as 'hearth' or 'climax area'. He wrote that "when part of a cultural substratum fluoresces into a level of achievement higher than the surrounding groups, mainly on the strength of its own initiative, it can be called a climax area. These areas almost inevitably serve as important centers of dispersal" (Kroeber 1939: 222-9). He went on to develop this context in sociological terms looking at golden and dark ages of great civilisations, including the Egyptian civilisation by referring to these periods as peaks and troughs of civilizational growth.

In his specific anthropological quest of visualising culture area, he plotted a real maps of California and North America on the basis of their culture area. Kroeber explained that the weakest feature of any mapping of culture wholes is also the most conspicuous: the boundaries. Where the influences from two culture climaxes or foci meet in equal strength is where a line must be drawn, if boundaries are to be indicated at all. Yet it is just there those differences often are slight. Two people classed as in separate areas yet adjoining each other along the inter-area boundary almost inevitably have much in common. It is probable that they normally have more traits in common with each other than with the people at the focal points of their respective areas. This is almost certain to be so where the distance from the foci is great and the boundary is not accentuated by any strong physical barrier or abrupt natural change. Kroeber provided an arial distribution of culture area, dividing North America into 84 areas and sub areas and all of these areas were clubbed under 7 grand areas. These 7 grand areas are Desert, Artic, Great Plains, Mountains, River Valleys, Coastal Plains and Terrains of rugged topography which do not constitute part of the remaining 6 other areas.

The concept of culture area held great significance in the trajectory of Anthropology. Julian Steward, another student of Boas developed six culture areas in South America, he connected to the prevalent environmental conditions. Steward traced different patterns of culture growth and diffusion within these cultural areas eventually leading to the 'School of Culture Ecology', within anthropology.

The culture area concept can be located in a time period when the western anthropologists were coming in touch with geographical areas consisting of native/tribal/indigenous communities that had relatively less exposure with the colonising world. These communities had a social relation among each other and the anthropologists found that they often shared similarities in cultural practices, especially among contiguous tribes. It was believed that this similarity or continuity of cultural practices was due to diffusion among neighbouring tribes over a period of time. However, there was no documented record of this diffusion. Anthropologists, tried to construct this cultural history of where the cultural practices had originated as well as tribal commonality and continuity by mapping cultural spaces within geographical areas. Different anthropologist used the culture area concept for different purposes. The main proponents of the concept were from the American school of thought and looked at the concept from different

positions. Franz Boas utilised the concept to propagate an insight into creating a historical and cultural particularistic focus of studying a tribe holistically. Clark Wissler and A. L. Kroeber however, theorised culture area in a cross-cultural perspective cross-sectioned with time. Clark Wissler used culture area to trace world history (especially of the western hemisphere), while Kroeber sought to uncover regionally individualised type or specific growth of culture while looking at cultures in more holistic terms.

The contemporary relevance of this concept can be seen in the persistence of the notion of area specialisation in anthropology where schools as well as scholars are divided into specialists in China studies, or South Asian studies or Middle Eastern studies. Somewhere down the line the association of culture with geography remains and defines sub-disciplines within anthropology.

Check Your Progress 2

4) Name two Egyptologists.

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5) Who suggested the idea of geographical statistics?

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6) Which were the key books in which Clark Wissler developed the concept of culture-area and age-area?

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7) How did Franz Boas understand ‘culture area’?

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8) Name some salient works of A. L. Kroeber?

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9) Why did A. L. Kroeber refer to ‘culture area’ as an unfortunate designation?

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3.3 WHY DID ‘CULTURE AREA CONCEPT’ LOSE ITS STEAM?

Culture area theories were criticised for the tendency to portray people in a static and environmentally deterministic way. It was also pointed out that the theorists were selective about which and how many traits were focused on. In case of Kroeber (and through his own admission) the criteria for cultural comparison are found to be descriptive and subjective in nature.

The culture area concept lost its steam because it did not necessarily account for sudden culture contact and influence such as the colonial forces. The so-called vanishing cultures either perished or acculturated and changed due to exposure with the western world. The cultures had too many stimuli and influence to be understood in their so called pristine or original form. This is not to say that cultures changed overnight, or that the cultural association (with neighbouring cultures) and practices suddenly changed, but the heterogeneity among them became prominent and pronounced. Further, over time the tribes being considered within cultural area gained a voice of their own, and spoke up about their representation/mis-representation. As culture area often created a geo-political identity of the tribe as well. In today’s times culture still finds geographical (as was given in the introduction with the reference of Punjabi culture) references. However, one realised that cultural identity itself has many social forces at play. In that a geographic-historical perspective and association with neighbouring communities might play a significant role in understanding a culture, however a superimposed categorisation of researcher’s perspective (of cultural distribution), devoid of communities’ inputs, cannot remain free of critique.

Check Your Progress 3

10) What was the main critique against the culture area concept?

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3.4 SUMMARY

In the present unit we trace the journey of Culture Area Concept through its development. We looked at how its foundation was based in museology, and how it came to be conceived in the need for logical arrangement of ethnographic material. We looked at how the concept took from the idea of socio-cultural evolution; however, it was more concerned with the idea of innovation and diffusion in understanding cultural history. The unit also looked at how different schools of thought namely the British and the German school contributed towards the concept which was effusively developed by the American school of thought.

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3.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Refer to section 3.1.1
- 2) Refer to section 3.1.2
- 3) Refer to section 3.1

- 4) Refer to section 3.2
- 5) Frobenius
- 6) *The American Indian* (1917), *Man and Culture* (1923) and *The Relation of Nature to Man* (1926).
- 7) Refer to section 3.2.
- 8) Refer to section 3.2
- 9) Refer to section 3.2
- 10) Refer to section 3.3



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