

The following is reprinted in full from *Across Before Columbus?* (see NEARA publications): Evidence of Transoceanic Contact with the Americas Prior to 1492. Ed. Donald Y. Gilmore and Linda S. McElroy. The New England Antiquities Research Association NEARA Publications 1998. Edgecomb, Maine.

For an online discussion of Cultural Diffusion see [David B. Kelley's Web Page](#).

Types of Cultural Diffusion¹

by Roger Williams Wescott

The term 'diffusionist' was first used in 1893 to denote a scholar who believed that most folklore was borrowed from an Old World center of high culture, such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, or India (Oxford English Dictionary 1971). The term initially contrasted with it was 'evolutionist,' meaning, in this context, a folklorist who maintained that most traditional oral narratives originated in the area in which they were current. But, because the term evolutionist was more often employed to designate someone supporting a non-theistic theory of biological speciation, the word 'inventionist' came to replace evolutionist as the label for a believer in predominantly autonomous local cultural development.

The distinction between diffusionism and inventionism became progressively sharper as the two positions polarized. Increasingly, adherents of each school saw themselves as defensively compelled to refute the misinterpretations of the other school. In this respect, the relation between diffusionism and inventionism was much like that between evolutionism and creationism with regard to the origin of species, or that between uniformitarianism and catastrophism with regard to the history of the earth. In all three cases, polemics grew at the expense of mutual understanding.

Fortunately, however, there are usually some farsighted thinkers who find ways to bridge the widening gulfs between theoretical positions. In the case of evolutionism and creationism, two such thinkers were the French philosopher Henri Bergson and the British biologist St. George Mivart. In his book *Creative Evolution* (1911), Bergson argued that evolution is itself a continuing process of creation; while, in his book *Nature and Thought* (1871), Mivart held that God's creation, once in existence, had an inherent tendency to evolve higher forms.

In the case of uniformitarianism and catastrophism, it is not so much individual thinkers who bridge the gulf between conceptual extremes, as the schools themselves, which exhibit unexpected overlaps in the specific concepts advanced by each. Uniformitarians, who hold that the changes in our planet and its surroundings have been predominantly incremental over eons, nonetheless maintain that the universe originated in a gigantic explosion nicknamed the 'Big Bang.' In other words, they accept an initial catastrophe but deny most subsequent catastrophes. Catastrophists, on the other hand, attribute biotic extinctions, like those of the dinosaurs and the mammoths, to disasters of global scope. Yet they maintain that, between disasters, organic groups experience stasis, or complete cessation of collective change, speciation being restricted to the same brief periods of intense disruption

that produce die-offs. The seemingly paradoxical character of these mutual overlaps is well expressed both in the title and the contents of a recent anthology of evolutionary theory, *Catastrophes and Earth History: The New Uniformitarianism* (Berggren and Van Couvering 1984).

Analogously, I would argue that inventionism and diffusionism are neither monolithic theories nor mutually exclusive positions. Both viewpoints are conceptually complex. And each not only permits elements of the other but, in some cases I would say, actually requires them. To clarify this claim, however, I must distinguish among various types of cultural diffusion.

Perhaps the first step in creating a typology of diffusion is separation of individual from collective effects. Each human being is born without culture but becomes a culture bearer by the time he learns to talk. This process is referred to by anthropologists as enculturation and by sociologists as socialization. Although culture as a whole is necessarily postnatal, some of its components may be prenatal. Evidence for this suggestion comes from the fact that the three chief ingredients of speech as an acoustic system—consonants, vowels, and prosody—are not learned with equal facility by infants. Prosody, or speech rhythm (consisting of pitch, tempo, and stress), is usually mastered during the first year of life, whereas vowels and consonants are usually not mastered till the second year. The most plausible explanation of this discrepancy is that speech rhythm is audibly transmitted to fetuses through maternal body tissues that muffle more discrete speech sounds.

Transmission of culture from one community to another is known as acculturation. Acculturation differs from enculturation in the same way that second language learning differs from first language learning. Infants have no language or culture prior to what they acquire from their families and communities. But adults have both language and culture. So, when an adult community adopts new cultural (including linguistic) traits, these traits must be superimposed on traits already in place. Such superimposition is not mere addition but accommodation: what is adopted must also be adapted to what preceded it.

As commonly understood, acculturation is usually the result of either or both of two transmissive processes: migration and exchange. Migration, as permanent relocation of a community, is to be distinguished from nomadism, whereby hunting peoples follow game in a roughly circular pattern, and transhumance, whereby pastoral peoples alternate their herds between seasonal pastures. Of apparent prehistoric migrations, two of the most extensive were the overland expansion of the Indo-Europeans from Ireland to Tocharia (in Chinese Turkestan) and the transoceanic expansion of the Austronesians (or Malayo-Polynesians) from Madagascar to Hawaii.

Most archaeologists regard overland migrations as typical and transoceanic migrations as exceptional. As analogs of the Indo-European expansion, they cite Turkish expansion from Siberia to the Balkans and Bantu expansion from Nigeria to Natal, treating the Austronesian pattern as unique. Few archaeologists, however, have had extensive maritime experience or

have engaged in underwater explorations. They are consequently predisposed to regard bodies of water, especially large ones, as obstacles to travel rather than as pathways to potential new homelands (Doran 1971). But, if anything, deserts like the Sahara and mountain ranges like the Himalayas are probably greater impediments to migration than are seas and oceans. A case in point is the body of water which we call the Black Sea and the Ionian Greeks called the Euxine (eúkseinos), or the 'Hospitable One.' Most classicists, knowing this sea to be subject to sudden storms, assume that its Greek name was a euphemism, intended to placate aquatic furies. Yet, since virtually all the Euxine shores were colonized by Greeks before the mid-6th century BC, I am disposed to take its laudatory name at face value.

In an earlier article (Wescott 1993a), I referred to willing traversal of large expanses of water as thalassophilia, and, in the oral presentation on which it was based, I described the view that our species has a predominantly positive orientation toward seas as thalassicism (Wescott 1993b). While my position on this matter has not changed, my choice of terms has. I now prefer the words pontophilia and ponticism as replacements for thalassophilia and thalassicism. Although the Classical Greek nouns póntos and thálassa both meant sea, only the former was also used to mean seacoast, particularly the northeastern coast of Anatolia, fronting the Black Sea. Moreover, only póntos has cognates in related languages that suggest travel over land as well as over sea. Among these are Latin pons (genitive pontis), 'bridge,' and Old Prussian pintis, 'road.' The mutual convertibility of land and water travel is underscored by the derivation, from Latin pons, of Latin ponto, 'flat-bottomed boat,' from which comes the English verb punt, 'to propel water craft with a pole.'

The probability that human pontophilia is of long standing is enhanced, I think, by Elaine Morgan's Aquatic Ape hypothesis (1982). According to Morgan, our species' striking divergences from the hominoid norm, represented by the great apes, are best explained as the consequence of a prolonged pre-Pleistocene sojourn in the shallow waters of lakes, rivers, and estuaries. Although this hypothesis was generally dismissed when advanced by her predecessor, Sir Alister Hardy, it has gained increasing attention in the past decade, becoming the focus of scientific conferences in both Europe and North America.² In any case, a swimming-prone primate seems to me to be a far more likely candidate for a seafaring life than one which, like both the Asian and the African apes, exhibits an aversion to all bodies of water. The other major means of acculturation is exchange. Like migration, exchange may be of several kinds. Of these, the simplest is one that may itself require a kind of small-scale migration. This most basic form of exchange, according to French ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, is sister exchange between men of different families, who intend thereby to avoid the danger of incest (Lévi-Strauss 1967). The further the incest prohibition extends (as to distant cousins), the greater the distance between exchanging families is likely to be.

When commodities rather than persons are exchanged, the exchange is more commonly called trade. The simplest form of trade is probably exchange of foodstuffs, as when Congolese Pygmy hunters provide meat for local villagers who, in turn, provide garden produce for the hunters. Trade need not always involve verbal agreement. Silent trade, or

‘dumb barter,’ prevailed among many pre-industrial peoples, a representative example being foodstuff exchange between Canadian Amerinds and Eskimos. Nor need trade involve quantitative or even qualitative equivalence of goods exchanged. The celebrated kula ring of Melanesia is a system whereby sailors from island A present a boatload of body ornaments to the inhabitants of island B. The B islanders, however, do not give anything to their benefactors. Instead, they make their presentation to the inhabitants of island C—and so on until the last islanders in the ring make a delivery to island A and the circle is completed (Malinowski 1922). Overall, such exchange is more like holiday gift-giving in our society than like interstate commerce. But it is no less effective in the dissemination of artifacts.

On the other hand, exchange can be purely verbal or ideational. Such exchange was termed ‘stimulus diffusion’ by anthropological theorist Alfred Kroeber (1948:368-370). A good example of it is provided by the Cherokee syllabary, a writing system devised by a tribesman named Sequoyah (or John Guest). Sequoyah knew that whites wrote, and he had seen alphabetic letters. But he was illiterate and did not know the phonemic principle on which alphabetic writing is based. What he did was adapt letters—some borrowed and some invented—to a system whereby each Cherokee syllable was represented by a single sign. In appearance, his syllabary resembled the Latin alphabet. In principle, however, it resembled Japanese kana—to which, in all probability, he had never been exposed.

A special form of stimulus diffusion, which usually involves behavior as well as ideas, is proselytism, or the deliberate dissemination of beliefs. Some of these beliefs are religious, as in the case of Christianity; others secular, as in the case of Marxism. The earliest missionary ideology of which we have extensive knowledge is Buddhism, which may be regarded either as religious (though it initially lacked supernaturalism) or as philosophical (though it was sometimes dogmatic). Prior to Buddhism, which became a missionizing creed by the 3rd century BC, proselytic activity is harder to establish. But the existence of what appears to be a world-wide pre-urban megalithic complex strongly suggests an ideological underpinning. And missionary zeal is implied by the Quetzalcoatl cult of Mexico and the Viracocha cult of Peru, both of which center on the tradition of an alien teacher who came from across the sea and then departed, promising to return.

The reality of telepathy, or direct mind-to-mind transmission of thought, remains in dispute. Most parapsychologists accept it, while most psychologists reject it. To the extent that it is real, telepathy presumably resembles enculturation in being a primarily individual, rather than a collective, process. An interesting aspect of the telepathy debate is that the telepathic experience seems to depend not only on one’s attitude but also on one’s state of consciousness. It is hardly surprising that an attitude of acceptance, or at least of open-mindedness, facilitates direct transmission of thoughts. But it is not so generally realized that telepathic reception can apparently occur during sleep for people who never have the experience while awake. This finding has been supported by sleep laboratory experiments carried out at Maimonides Hospital in New York and described by Montague Ullman (1972).

The fact that the dream state may facilitate telepathy—imaginal as well as verbal—reminds us that, in antiquity, ‘dream incubation’ was a common practice. In the east Mediterranean area, the religiously devout periodically slept in pagan Greek or Egyptian temples in the hope and expectation that deities would visit them by night and counsel or enlighten them.

The line between such visitations, human or divine, and hypnosis is difficult to draw. The very word ‘hypnotic,’ derived as it is from the Greek word for sleep, implies that suggestion is more effective when it occurs in a mental state other than that of ordinary waking consciousness: preferably in a trance state. In the Introduction to his book *Consciousness and Reality*, Charles Muses (1972) remarks that "acculturation is slow hypnosis." By the same token, hypnosis may be thought of as rapid acculturation. Under hypnoid conditions, one can perhaps absorb more ideas and images more easily than would otherwise be possible.

As if psychic phenomena were not already controversial enough, British biochemist Rupert Sheldrake takes us a step further toward ontological dissension with his concept of ‘morphic resonance.’ In his book *The Presence of the Past*, he argues that every innovation in thought and behavior creates a pattern which, if it lasts long enough, constitutes a zone of influence affecting all within it (Sheldrake 1988). This zone, he asserts, need not be verbal or pictorial. It is, in effect, a "climate of opinion" transmitted by "winds of doctrine." If he is right, the notion of pyramid building could have diffused from the Old World to the Americas even in the absence of human travel from one hemisphere to the other.

Having seen how capacious the concept of diffusion is, we will, I think, soon find that the concept of invention is equally so. The English word ‘invention’ comes from the Latin verb *invenio*, best translated as ‘find’ or ‘discover.’ Literally, however, it means ‘come upon,’ suggesting that when we invent, we do so more by accident than by intention. This, of course, is the principle which we now know as serendipity: that happy accidents favor the prepared mind.

But, if invention is not the best example of unqualified creativity, what is? Many perceptual psychologists would say that it is hallucination—the subjective construction of an appearance based on no objective stimulus. Leonard Zusne and Warren Jones (1982:133), however, argue that even such "bodiless creations" are simply delayed or rearranged presentations of objective realities previously encountered.

The ancients saw things differently. If an individual saw a figure that others did not, it was, they often held, because that individual had been favored with a divine visitation not vouchsafed to others. And, if a poet wrote or sang more beautifully than others, it was because he was inspired in the most literal sense—that is, ‘breathed into’ by a muse or other agent of creativity. Preliterates today take much the same position: if dancers move with extraordinary beauty and passion, it is probably because they are possessed by ancestral spirits.

The very notion of inventiveness is, in fact, a relatively modern one. It has been said that the greatest invention of the 19th century was that of the profession of the inventor. Students of the history of civilization, who generally credit the Sumerians with having invented the literate urban way of life, are perennially amazed that the Sumerians themselves took no such credit. Instead, the Sumerians insisted that civilization had been brought to them by an articulate fishlike being named Oan, who emerged from the Persian Gulf. According to their various predilections, modern Westerners have so interpreted this ancient Mesopotamian tradition as to make Oan an aquanaut, an astronaut, or a ufonaut. Yet, however the tradition is reworded, its central import remains the same: the earliest civilized society of which we have knowledge did not regard itself as the creator but rather as the receiver of civilization.

When inventors and other creative people are asked where they got their ‘breakthrough’ ideas, most reply, "I don't know. It just came to me!" The question that inevitably arises then, of course, is, "Where did the idea come from?" Until recently, most of the world's peoples would unhesitatingly have replied that the inspiration to innovate comes from preternatural—or at least supraindividual—sources. Since the advent of psychoanalysis, however, most students of the creative process have assumed that the source of any major invention is the inventor's unconscious mind. In these terms, invention is usually an exclusively individual procedure: after all, inventions are rarely produced by committees—or even by research teams.

The individualism underlying this assumption is typical of the modern West. Paradoxically, however, the very independence of mind fostered by our individualistic society has led some of its members to question a psychology that hermetically seals off minds from one another. Carl Jung, the earliest and most prominent psychoanalyst to secede from orthodox Freudianism, held that an individual's ideas may stem from any one of three sources: his conscious mind, his unconscious mind, or the collective unconscious mind (Jung 1964). Of these three, it is the last that is most distinctively Jungian and most relevant to the question of the diffusion of concepts.

Discussion of diffusion may be either source-oriented or destination-oriented. Focus on invention highlights sources. But attention can just as well be focused on destinations, leading us to ask who accepts cultural innovations and why. We may also ask whether acceptance of innovation is a predominantly active process, whereby receivers solicit new ideas and products, or a predominantly passive process, whereby receivers accept such innovations only because they cannot indefinitely resist doing so.

Perhaps the most common form of diffusion within a society is imitation. In the field of mythology, one of the strongest advocates of the Diffusionist School of interpretation was folklorist Fitzroy Somerset, Lord Raglan, who argued that the transmission of traditional narratives is overwhelmingly imitative and that invention of such narratives is minimal (Somerset 1965). Furthermore, he extended this argument to other matters of cultural transmission, holding that most peoples, like most individuals, are mere imitators. In response to the implied derogation here, one is tempted to quote P. G. Wodehouse's hero

Bertie Wooster, who, when described by his aunt Agatha as "a mere popinjay (parrot)," responded, "What, may I ask, is mere about a popinjay?" Good imitation requires considerable skill, if not creativity. Ethologists are well aware of the fact that, in the animal world, imitative ability is rare and restricted to such higher animals as insects, birds, and mammals. Foraging honeybees, for example, when they have discovered a source of nectar, do a 'honey dance' in the hive which orients other workers to that source by drawing what is, in effect, a map with indications of direction and distance. Most songbirds can reproduce the vocalizations of others, particularly of conspecific adults. And all apes and monkeys observe each other's actions, mimicking many of them.

At least among vertebrates, moreover, imitativeness and inventiveness are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in fact, they appear often to be mutually reinforcing. The European songthrush *Turdus philomela*, for example, not only mimics melodies when young but improvises them when adult. And Japanese macaques have been observed both introducing new behavior patterns to their troops and imitating patterns introduced by others.

Let us return now to our initial concern: that of the relation between cultural invention and cultural diffusion. To be effective, I should say, every invention must be diffused by its inventor to others. Yet diffusion itself, even in its receptive aspect, is far from being a sheerly automatic process. When diffused, each invention has to be, to some extent, reinvented in the minds of the receivers. Furthermore, to the degree that an invention is a theme, most inventions permit—perhaps even invite—variations. And, when a theme is diffused, most of its variations are invented by those receptive to the invention.

For centuries, Western thought has been constricted by European dualisms. One of these is the Aristotelian distinction between celestial and terrestrial mechanics, which undoubtedly delayed the Newtonian synthesis. Another is the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, which similarly impeded psychosomatic thinking about questions of health. Ironically, these dualisms seem to have been imposed on an older and more unitive tradition, variously known as the Hermetic Tradition,³ or the Rule of Correspondence. In its best known formulation, this rule was: As above, so below. A variant formulation was: As without, so within. In either case, the essence of the Rule seems to have been one of ultimate connectedness—a welcome antidote to the fragmentation characteristic of our overspecialized age.

END NOTES

- 1. A written version of the first segment of an oral presentation entitled "Varieties of Diffusionism, with Special Reference to Early Eurasian Influence on North America," given at the NEARA Conference, America Before Columbus, Brown University, Providence RI, June 1992.
- 2. Conferences: "The Aquatic Ape: Fact or Fiction?" Valkenburg, Netherlands,

August 1987; and "The Aquatic Ape Theory," Sonoma CA, June 1994.

- 3. A Greek phrase, derived from the Egyptian "Law of Thoth."

REFERENCES

- Berggren, W. A. and John A. Van Couvering, eds. ~ 1984 *Catastrophes and Earth History: The New Uniformitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bergson, Henri ~ 1911 *Creative Evolution*. Arthur Mitchell, trans. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Doran, Edwin, Jr. ~ 1971 *The Sailing Raft as a Great Tradition*. In *Man Across the Sea*. C. L. Riley et al., eds. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Jung, Carl G. ~ 1964 *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell.
- Kroeber, Alfred Louis ~ 1948 *Anthropology*, 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. Esp. Section 154, Invention by Stimulus Diffusion, pp. 368-370.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude ~ 1967 *Structural Anthropology*. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, trans. Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw ~ 1922 *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York: Dutton.
- Mivart, St. George Jackson ~ 1871 *Nature and Thought*. London: Macmillan & Co.
- Morgan, Elaine ~ 1982 *The Aquatic Ape: A Theory of Human Evolution*. New York: Stein & Day.
- Muses, Charles and Arthur Young, eds. ~ 1972 Introduction. P. 3 in *Consciousness and Reality*. New York: Outerbridge/Dutton.
- Oxford English Dictionary, The ~ 1971 Compact (unabridged) Edition. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Sheldrake, Rupert ~ 1988 *The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature*. New York: Times Books. ~ Somerset, Fitzroy, Lord Raglan
- 1965 *The Hero of Tradition*. In *The Study of Folklore*. A. Dundes, ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Ullman, Montague ~ 1972 *Vigilance, dreaming, and the paranormal*. In *Consciousness and Reality*. C. Muses and A. Young, eds. New York:

Outerbridge/Dutton.

- Wescott, Roger Williams ~ 1993a Civilization in Context. P. 19 in The Comparative Civilizations Review, No. 29, Fall 1993. Rolla MO.
- 1993b The Presidential Address to The International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations. University of Scranton, Scranton PA. June 3, 1993.
- Zusne, Leonard and Warren H. Jones ~ 1982 Anomalistic Psychology: A Study of Extraordinary Phenomena of Behavior and Experience. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.