

4 Diffusionist and culture-area theories

Diffusionism stresses the transmission of things (material or otherwise) from one culture to another, one people to another, or one place to another. An implicit presupposition of extreme diffusionism is that humankind is uninventive: things are invented only once, and then are transmitted from people to people, sometimes across the globe. This can be effected either by direct transmission between stable populations or through migrations by culture-rich peoples. In contrast, classical evolutionism assumes that humankind is inventive: each population has the propensity to invent the same things as the next, though they will do so at different rates.

By the time diffusionism was dwindling in importance, around the 1930s, it had left behind ideas which were picked up within other traditions: the idea of ‘culture areas’ is the most prominent example. This had already become an important facet of the ethnographic tradition of Franz Boas and his followers (see chapter 7). It also appeared within the evolutionism of Julian Steward (chapter 3) and within the functionalist and structuralist traditions which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century (chapters 5 and 8). Culture-area and regional approaches are a logical outgrowth of an emphasis on diffusion, and this chapter will cover these approaches with this point in the background.

Antecedents of diffusionism: philology, Müller, and Bastian

Diffusionism originated in the eighteenth-century philological tradition which posited historical connections between all the languages of the Indo-European language family.

The philological tradition: diffusionism before the diffusionists?

The breakthrough came in 1787, when Sir William Jones, an English Orientalist and barrister serving as a judge in India, discovered similarities

between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin. In the early nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Prussian diplomat and brother of the explorer Alexander, Baron von Humboldt, concentrated his interest on Basque – a European but non-Indo-European language. Echoing earlier ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt put the case for a close interrelation between language and culture. About the same time, Jacob Grimm, famous along with his brother Wilhelm for collecting European fairy tales (the ‘brothers Grimm’), established the sound shifts which distinguish Germanic from other Indo-European languages, and Franz Bopp took up the comparative study of Indo-European grammar. All these writers touched on ideas which later came into anthropology as diffusionism.

The development of theoretical ideas in linguistics has throughout the history of that discipline foreshadowed the development of related ideas in social and cultural anthropology, though in this case their ideas were very slow to catch on. The thread that links early philological or historical linguistic theories to anthropology was of greater influence in evolutionist Britain than in Germany, where diffusionism was to take hold late in the nineteenth century.

The connection to British evolutionism runs through the work of several scholars, but none as obviously as that of the German-British orientalist, Friedrich Max Müller. Dissuaded by his godfather Felix Mendelssohn from studying music, the young Max Müller turned to Sanskrit, first at Leipzig and then, under Bopp, at Berlin. In 1846 further studies took him to Oxford, where he settled and eventually took up chairs in modern languages and comparative philology. Like Lubbock, Müller was active in Liberal politics and knew many in positions of power. Apparently through his friendship with the Royal Family, he was granted the very rare honour of being made a Privy Councillor.

Müller spent much of his life editing a fifty-one-volume series of sacred texts of the East. He also helped to propagate both the essentially evolutionist idea of psychic unity or psychical identity (i.e., that all human-kind shares the same mentality) and the diffusionist idea that the religions as well as the languages of ancient Greece and Rome were related to those of India. He explored the latter through both anthropological comparisons of funeral customs and philological comparisons of the names of Greek and Hindu deities (see, e.g., Müller 1977 [1892]: 235–80). It is noteworthy that Müller (1977: 403–10) argued against the notion that there is one kind of ‘totemism’, and strongly criticized those who believed that all societies pass through the same stages of religious belief. Through both positive contributions in diffusionist thinking and negative comments on the extremes of unilinear evolutionism, Müller helped temper the tendencies of his British evolutionist contemporaries.

Like Müller, Adolph Bastian was an ambiguous figure. His broad approach was evolutionist rather than diffusionist, but he was a staunch opponent of Darwinism. In the late 1860s he helped establish both museum ethnography and theoretical ethnology in Germany. Thus he influenced the rise of diffusionism by providing the institutional base for it to develop from, even though his immediate successors became critical of his own theoretical contributions.

Bastian spent much of his working life as a ship's surgeon, travelling the world and writing on the exotic cultures he encountered. Unfortunately, his writings were absurdly metaphorical and virtually untranslatable, and have hardly ever been rendered into English. Let me quote one sentence, as translated by Robert Lowie, to give the flavour. The topic under discussion is the avoidance of premature generalization:

Thereby would be tailored for us a beggar's cloak of mottled shreds and patches, whereas if we wait calmly for the facts to be gleaned for a definite survey, a magnificent peplos will be woven, as though spread by Zeus over a sacred oak, as a radiantly reflected image of reality. (Bastian [1881], quoted in Lowie 1937: 33)

But for all that, Bastian did give the world a theoretical contrast which was well ahead of its time: his distinction between *Elementargedanken* ('elementary thoughts') and *Völkergedanken* ('folk thoughts', or more literally 'folks' thoughts'). The former consist of what were later called 'cultural universals' and which, taken together, formed the psychic unity of humankind. Bastian noted the many similarities between cultures in different parts of the world, and he attributed such similarities to evolutionary convergence along lines pre-determined by these 'elementary thoughts'. His notion of 'folk thoughts', in contrast, represents the aspects of culture which differ from place to place. He attributed such differences to the influence of the physical environment and the chance events of history. The eventual focus of German-Austrian anthropology on 'folk thoughts', in turn, paved the way for diffusionism.

Diffusionism proper

Diffusionism came to prominence in the work of German and Austrian geographer-anthropologists in the late nineteenth century. As we shall see, it then fell into obscurity and absurdity (albeit interesting absurdity) in Britain, in the hands of two early twentieth-century Egyptologists.

German-Austrian diffusionism

The first great diffusionist was Friedrich Ratzel. He trained as a zoologist, but soon turned to geography and saw his theory in terms of a discipline

which came to be called ‘anthropogeography’ (*Anthropogeographie*). Ratzel advocated the mapping of regions and the search for routes of migration and diffusion across the globe. He argued against Bastian’s assumption of psychic unity and, wherever possible, sought evidence of culture contact as the cause of cultural similarity. This, together with the fact that he regarded humankind as uninventive, made him a true ‘diffusionist’ though he did not use the label himself.

Ratzel argued that single items of culture tended to diffuse, whereas whole ‘culture complexes’ (clusters of related cultural features) were spread by migration. His most famous example was the similarity between hunting bows found in Africa and New Guinea (Ratzel 1891). He postulated a historical connection between them and related this to what he regarded as the similar psychological makeup of peoples in the two areas. He argued further that culture *developed* mainly through massive migrations and conquests of weaker peoples by stronger, and more culturally advanced, ones. Thus, just as evolutionists like Morgan and Tylor (without necessarily knowing it) incorporated elements of diffusionism in their theories, Ratzel, the first great diffusionist, retained a strong element of evolution in his theoretical stance. Where they differed was in the mechanism they chose to emphasize: progress itself or the transmission of culture.

From his base at Leipzig, Ratzel taught a great number of scholars. He influenced not only immediate followers in Germany and later proponents of culture-area theory in North America, but also Tylor in England. Specifically, Tylor praised Ratzel’s important three-volume masterpiece *Völkerkunde* – which appeared in English translation as *The History of Mankind* (1896–8 [1885–8]). From this time, evolutionism and diffusionism came to be recognized as two logically opposed but nevertheless complementary perspectives, which depended on each other for a full explanation of human culture history.

Ratzel was probably the first to divide the world into what we now call ‘culture areas’, but Leo Frobenius greatly extended his method and theory. Frobenius, a self-trained African explorer and museum ethnologist, enjoyed looking for parallels in cultural development worldwide. He came up with the idea of ‘culture circles’ (*Kulturkreise*), conceived as great culture areas which in some cases spread across the globe and overlapped those which had existed before: for example, bow-and-arrow culture over spear culture. The definition of these culture circles was to dominate German and Austrian anthropology from the 1890s to the 1930s.

However, in his later work Frobenius turned his attention to what he called the *Paideuma*. The term is Greek for ‘education’ (roughly translated), but in Frobenius’ usage it took on a meaning akin to the classic

romantic idea of the *Volksgeist*. This is the 'soul' of a culture, a basic psychic principle which determined any given configuration of culture traits. Furthermore, through his search for African culture configurations, he helped develop the notion of 'worldview' (German, *Weltanschauung*) which was to dominate American anthropology in its relativist period. For Africa, Frobenius (e.g., 1933) postulated two basic worldviews: 'Ethiopian' (characterized by cattle and cultivation, patrilineality, ancestor cults, cults of the earth, etc.) and 'Hamitic' (characterized by cattle and hunting, matrilineality, avoidance of the dead, sorcery, etc.). The former he located in Egypt and most of East, West, and Central Africa. The latter was supposedly the worldview of the Horn of Africa, much of North Africa and South Africa.

Playing upon these basic worldviews were a set of more specific culture configurations which, Frobenius believed, had spread either within Africa, or in other cases, from Asia or Europe to Africa. These overlay earlier cultural elements, such as hunting and gathering, which either were subsumed under, or remained encapsulated within, the culture areas which formed through successive waves of cultural diffusion. Thus Frobenius' vision of African culture was of a complex of layers whose historical relations could be determined by comparative study. Ethnology in his eyes was akin to archaeology, but with contemporary ethnographic work as its methodological basis.

After Ratzel and Frobenius, Fritz Graebner and Wilhelm Schmidt took the lead in *Kulturkreis* studies. Graebner, a museologist, concentrated on similarities in material culture, first across Oceania and later throughout the world. Ratzel had emphasized the qualities of cultures, and Frobenius had favoured a quantitative dimension. Graebner put these together in stressing both form and quantity as separate criteria for gauging the likelihood of any two cultures being historically related. By this method he defined culture circles such as the 'Tasmanian' (reputedly the earliest and most primitive), 'Australian boomerang', 'Melanesian bow', and 'Polynesian patrilineal', which he believed represented increasingly advanced cultural waves, surging across the Pacific. Graebner's career was hampered by internment in Australia during the First World War (allegedly for smuggling documents), and by mental illness which afflicted him from around 1926 until his death in 1934. Nevertheless, his attempts to place on a scientific basis the search for geographical culture circles and overlapping culture strata marked a high point in diffusionist thinking. His book *Die Methode der Ethnologie* (Graebner 1911) became a classic.

Schmidt, a Catholic priest with a special interest in African religions, argued that 'African Pygmy culture' was more 'primitive' than Graebner's 'Tasmanian culture'. He distinguished four basic culture circles

(Schmidt 1939 [1937]). After the Primitive Culture Circle of hunters and gatherers came the Primary Circle of horticulturists. At this stage, patrilineal and matrilineal descent first appeared. Schmidt argued that the greater confidence people felt in their own technological abilities led to a reduction in the importance of worship and to a dependence on magic. The Secondary Circle consisted in the mixing of Primitive and Primary traits. These led to intensive agriculture, sacred kingship, and ultimately polytheism. His Tertiary Circle consisted of a complex blending of traits from different cultures of the Secondary Circle, creating the ancient civilizations of Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

One of Schmidt's goals was establishing the history of world religion, a subject on which he wrote more than a dozen volumes. He hypothesized that religion began with a primitive monotheism, derived from early humanity's knowledge of his own, one true God. He believed that each succeeding culture circle developed better technology and more complex social organization, while at the same time it moved away from the primal monotheistic religion. Thus Schmidt's stance had elements of both primitivism and evolutionism, a fact which highlights the contradictions of diffusionism as a unitary perspective.

British diffusionism

While diffusionism reigned in Germany and Austria, elsewhere it infiltrated anthropological thinking mainly as a restraint on the simplicity of unilinear evolutionism. In archaeology, Swedish writer Oscar Montelius, in the 1880s and 1890s, refined the typology of the European Neolithic and Bronze Ages. He argued that regional variations and specific small developments across Europe could be accounted for by diffusion, rather than by evolution (see Trigger 1989: 155–61). In ethnology, things were more subtle, but it is important to recall that Morgan's thinking about kinship terminologies depended heavily on both migration and diffusion, and Tylor often spoke of diffusion and described cultures as having 'adhesions', or elements of culture usually found together. German and American anthropologists called these 'culture complexes'.

However, the co-existence of evolutionism and diffusionism was soon to be challenged in Britain, perhaps spurred on by a growing pessimism after Queen Victoria's death in 1901 and the political manoeuvring of European states which foreshadowed the First World War. Nineteenth-century Britons had firmly believed that Victorian values and the scientific inventions and discoveries personified by Prince Albert's sponsorship were pinnacles of human endeavour. In the pessimism of the first decades of the twentieth century, though, these achievements came to be deni-

grated. The new symbol of human cultural achievement was ancient Egypt, and degeneration rather than evolution marked the British diffusionists' trajectory from Egyptian to Victorian society.

Sir Grafton Elliot Smith (an eminent Australian-born anatomist) and his disciple William James Perry (a geographer) devised the fanciful theory that all great things had come from the Egypt of pharaohs, mummies, pyramids, and sun worship, and that all the cultures of their own times were but pale remnants of that once grand place. Based at Manchester and later at University College London, they propagated their theory both in academic journals and in public discussions. Elliot Smith's inspiration was his studies of Egyptian mummies (he had worked in Egypt between 1900 and 1909), but the stance of both men is perhaps best exemplified by Perry's *The Children of the Sun* (1923). In this widely read book, Perry argues that Egypt, and only Egypt, was the source of agriculture, the domestication of animals, the calendar, pottery, basketry, permanent dwellings, and towns. The extremist position of Elliot Smith and Perry became known as 'heliocentrism' diffusionism, that is, centred on the sun (with reference to sun worship among Egyptian and other ancient cultures). It met with few adherents among professional anthropologists, though it did prove popular among the Edwardian public.

Together with the great pre-Malinowskian fieldworker W. H. R. Rivers (who had been with Elliot Smith in Egypt and announced his own conversion from evolutionism to diffusionism in 1911), Elliot Smith and Perry fought a rearguard action, first against evolutionism. After Rivers' death in 1922 they continued their battle, but now against the growing tide of functionalism, institutionally established in that year through the appointment of both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown to chairs of social anthropology.

The heliocentrists had neither the base of a university anthropology department nor the methodological skills to sustain interest among the new breed of functionalist scholars, whose influence rose rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s (see chapter 5). The functionalist concerns were with modern Asia, the Americas, or sub-Saharan Africa, rather than Ancient Egypt; and with fieldwork and comparison, rather than speculation. Ultimately, the scientific advances in archaeology in the 1940s proved beyond doubt that the Egypt of 4000 BC could not have been the source of all human culture, and gave the *coup de grâce* to British diffusionism: Elliot Smith in 1937, and Perry in 1949. Of anthropological writers in the late twentieth century, only Thor Heyerdahl, an eccentric Norwegian adventurer with a penchant for testing diffusionist theories, maintained a belief in historical connections between Egypt and the Americas. British anthropology went in other directions entirely, whereas American

anthropology developed from the foundations of German-Austrian rather than British diffusionist methods.

Diffusionism today?

Of all theories, diffusionism is probably the least popular in present-day social anthropology. However, it is not dead. There is today a great debate in archaeology and biological anthropology between those who favour the 'Out of Africa' or 'Replacement Model' and those who favour the 'Regional-Continuity Model' of human expansion (see, e.g., Gamble 1993). This debate bears close relation to an age-old problem within diffusionism: whether similarities stem more from the transmission of genes or culture between stable populations or more from migration of peoples from one place to another. A number of 'diffusionists', including Ratzel, actually favoured the latter, and the nuances of debate within the diffusionist school foreshadow those of modern studies of world prehistory.

In yet another sense, diffusionism lives on through ideas such as that of the 'culture area', now a part of standard anthropological thinking within all schools of thought. World-systems or globalization theory is another indicator that diffusionism lives (see chapters 6 and 10), though practitioners of it would no doubt repudiate a connection between their school of thought and that of Ratzel and his followers, much less Elliot Smith and his. The irony is that if a connection exists between classic diffusionism and such recent trends, it is precisely at a level of high theory or analogy. It is not one of the diffusion of the idea of diffusion itself.

Culture-area and regional approaches

Each and every anthropologist specializes in the study of some culture area – that where he or she does fieldwork. Yet the importance of the culture area varies according to the theoretical interest of the ethnographer. Broadly, it is useful to distinguish two kinds of culture-area approach. The first is that of American anthropology as it developed from German-Austrian diffusionism. The other, a much more diffuse approach, and in no sense a single school of thought or national tradition, is that of 'regional comparison'. This perspective characterizes quests for cause and regularity. Adherents have variously espoused multilineal evolutionism, functionalism, and structuralism, while maintaining an implicit belief in the historical relation between cultures of their respective regions.

The culture-area approach in American anthropology

Anthropology in Germany and Austria was largely destroyed in the 1930s and 1940s. Those who had opposed the Nazis were persecuted during the Third Reich, and those who sympathized with the Nazis found their theories discredited after the Second World War, when new German traditions (Marxism in the East; and an eclectic, foreign-influenced anthropology in the West) emerged. However, already in the 1920s an interest in historical relations between cultures and notions of 'culture area' and 'culture complex' had become commonplace in American anthropology. It is worth remembering that, although North America may have been colonized by the English in the seventeenth century, American anthropology began with the migration of Franz Boas, a German, and became established across the North American continent through the work of people like Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, A. L. Kroeber, Clyde Kluckhohn, and Abram Kardiner – all of whom either spoke German in the home or studied in Germany or Austria.

Of these, Boas, Lowie, Sapir, and especially Kroeber (e.g., 1939) helped to develop the notion of the culture area. They directed their efforts towards the definition of specific areas and the recording of 'culture traits', the minimal units of culture, within each. From Boas onwards, American anthropologists of the early twentieth century tended to emphasize the particular over the general (see, e.g., Stocking 1974). In the 1930s and 1940s, more-and-more-detailed studies of cultural comparison within culture areas generated longer lists of culture traits to search for. These ran to the many thousands, with any given activity, for example, hunting or fishing, accounting for several dozen. Boas' rejection of evolutionism, his downplaying of diffusion, and above all his insistence on the meticulous gathering of ethnographic data, all contributed towards changing the agenda of anthropology as a whole, from historical questions to other ones (see chapter 7). Yet, as we shall see, some in his school did turn to history and to conjecture, and with some success.

The best-known example of a 'culture complex' or 'trait complex' was one proposed by the famous American anthropologist of Africa and African-America, Melville Herskovits (1926). He called it the 'cattle complex of East Africa'. Where cattle are found, so too are nomadism, patrilineal descent, age sets, bridewealth, the association of livestock with the ancestors, and a host of other interrelated culture traits. Both Herskovits and the German writers spoke of distributions of traits existing in relation to each other, that is, not distributed randomly. The difference is that Herskovits resisted attempts to put their ideas into either diffusionist or evolutionist schemes (see also Herskovits 1930).

In retrospect, the leading theorist of the school and one who did tackle historical questions, was a museum curator called Clark Wissler. However, Wissler was underrated in his own time. His lack of a university job meant that he trained no students to propagate his theories. His originality lay not so much in his specific new ideas (though he did have many), but in his ability to synthesize the mood of his time and present clear and coherent theoretical statements about what others were thinking. While others were content to record the distribution of prehistoric stone ornaments in eastern North America or of decorative pots in the Rio Grande Valley, Wissler (e.g., 1923: 58–61; 1927) explained such distributions in relation to the development, expansion, and contact of culture areas.

Wissler's greatest contribution was the age-area hypothesis, which both developed from and contributed to the interplay between archaeological and ethnological research (see Kroeber 1931). In the days before radiocarbon dating, archaeologists lacked a means to tell the real age of material they dug up. Relative age could be inferred from stratigraphy within a site, but not easily between sites. Moreover, ethnologists were collecting data on living cultures, but cultures known to have changed through the centuries. Wissler's hypothesis was that culture traits tended to spread from the centre to the periphery of any culture area. Therefore those traits found at the periphery were older, and those found at the centre were newer. When put to the test, the hypothesis seemed to work, and it gave a dynamic aspect to culture-area research which had been lacking. Implicitly, it also brought together diffusion and evolution within a framework of culture-area studies: evolution took place at the centre of a given culture area, and diffusion was from centre to periphery.

The interplay between evolution and diffusion became yet more apparent when American anthropology left behind the extreme relativism of Boas to take up evolutionism again. Thus it took on special meaning in Steward's work. We met him in chapter 3 as the architect of multilineal evolutionism, but his theories also had a diffusionist basis. Crucial here is his distinction between the 'cultural core' (which is determined by environment and evolution) and the 'total culture' (which contains elements of culture susceptible to diffusion). Steward developed the culture-area idea within a framework which emphasized natural environment as the limiting factor for culture, and technology as its enabling component (see, e.g., 1955: 78–97).

Wissler had defined fifteen culture areas for all the Americas (including the Caribbean): Plains, Plateau, California, North Pacific Coast, and so on. Kroeber first altered the names and boundaries of the culture areas, but not their number. Later, in his most important culture-area work, Kroeber (1939) mapped eighty-four 'areas' and 'sub-areas' which he

grouped into seven 'grand areas' of North America only. He left South America to Steward, who edited a six-volume study of the culture areas of that continent (Steward 1946–50). Frequently culture areas turned out to be correlated with ecological zones: in North America, the Arctic, the Great Plains, the Eastern Woodlands, and others; and in South America, the Andes, Amazonia, and so on. If the environment is a limiting or determining force upon culture, then its influence should be apparent regionally. Steward and his followers both demonstrated this general principle and tested the limits of environmental determinism by comparative studies both within and between culture areas. All this left the problem of what constitutes 'a culture', but it did help both to fill in the ethnographic map and to increase interest in cross-cultural comparison as a goal of anthropological research.

Regional comparison, national traditions, and regional traditions

It is useful to distinguish three types of comparison in anthropology (see Sarana 1975): illustrative, global, and controlled (which includes regional comparison).

Illustrative comparison involves choosing examples to make some point about cultural difference or similarity. This is the basis of much introductory teaching in anthropology. We might choose Nuer as an example of a patrilineal society, and compare Nuer to Trobrianders, as an example of a matrilineal society. We might choose an element of one society which is unfamiliar to our audience, say gift-giving in Bushman society, and compare it to a similar practice in a more familiar case, say gift-giving in American society. Such comparisons may show similarities (e.g., the practice of gift-giving itself), but usually the illustrations are designed to show differences which reveal aspects of the less-familiar society.

Global comparison, or more accurately, *global-sample comparison*, involves comparing a sample of the world's societies to find statistical correlations among cultural features, or (in ecological anthropology) between environmental and cultural features. George Peter Murdock's approach, discussed in chapter 3, is the best-known example.

Controlled comparison lies in-between in scope. It involves limiting the range of variables, usually (though not always) by confining comparisons to those within a region. Regional comparison has been prevalent in the work of a number of anthropologists of a variety of schools. Among the diffusionists, Frobenius (in his studies of African culture areas) followed a mainly regional approach. Among the evolutionists, Steward employed a form of regional comparison. Among the functionalists, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (writing on Australia) and Fred Eggan (writing on Native North

America) sought an understanding of specific cultures through a wider understanding of their place within regional structures. At a deeper level, structuralist anthropologists have sought to comprehend such regional structures and define generative principles peculiar to a given region, common structures which set the limits of variation, or culture traits which stand in relation to one another in interesting ways – often capable of transformations when they move between cultures.

The Dutch scholars who studied the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) in the 1920s and 1930s originated a structuralist form of regional comparison. Their regions are known within Dutch anthropology as ‘fields of ethnological study’ (*ethnologisch studievelden*), each defined by a set of features known as its ‘structural core’ (*structurele kern*). In the case of the former Dutch East Indies, the structural core includes, for example, a system of marriage in which a wife’s lineage is of higher status than her husband’s. Within a given society, each lineage is linked to every other by a circle of intermarrying units. The most articulate statement of the theory of this school is J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong’s (1977 [1935]) inaugural lecture at the University of Leiden. Although in recent decades anthropology in The Netherlands has moved on towards Marxist theory, the understanding of indigenous knowledge, and the anthropology of Third World development, nevertheless ‘regional structural comparison’ (as it is now called) remains strong in the folk perception of the Dutch tradition.

One of the best-known proponents of regional structural comparison is Adam Kuper, a South African-British anthropologist who once taught at the University of Leiden. Indeed, his 1977 inaugural lecture at Leiden echoed that of J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong more than forty years before (Kuper 1979a [1977]), but with Africa as his area of concern. In a number of articles and books, most notably *Wives for Cattle* (1982), Kuper has sought to explain the regional-structural basis of Southern Bantu kinship, traditional politics, household economics, and symbolism. Any given culture trait can best be interpreted, he argues, in relation to corresponding traits in related cultures. What at first may appear to be random traits are intelligible within a framework which takes account of the Southern Bantu region as a whole. Take three examples where close kin marriage is common: Tswana men tend to marry women of lower status, and bridewealth in Tswana society is relatively low; Southern Sotho men tend to marry higher status women, and bridewealth in their society is relatively high; Swazi men may marry either way, but those who marry ‘down’ (like the Tswana) pay less bridewealth than those who marry ‘up’ (like the Southern Sotho). By comparing these societies, each set-up can be seen as a transformation of another, and the entire regional system can be

analysed in terms of the ability of powerful individuals to perpetuate their power through bridewealth transactions. Interestingly, where close kin marriage is forbidden (e.g., among Tsonga and Chopi), marriage between commoners lends itself much less to such manipulation, and egalitarian marriage structures occur.

Kuper's method shows promise in other ethnographic areas too, both in Africa and elsewhere. As anthropologists become more regionally focused, both because of the plethora of recent ethnographic data and because of the ease of comparison between closely related and well-studied societies, the trend towards regional studies is likely to continue (see Barnard 1996).

Furthermore, as Richard Fardon and his colleagues have pointed out (Fardon 1990), there is an additional twist: 'regional traditions' in ethnographic writing. These work to ensure that regional understanding is a strong determinant of anthropological theory in general. If one does fieldwork in India, for example, one cannot help but develop theoretical insights specifically relevant to the Indianist literature. A Melanesianist cannot help but comment on Melanesianist debates, an Amazonianist on Amazonianist debates. Thus both the cultural characteristics of regions themselves and the interests of those anthropologists who have worked in them, help determine the agenda of new scholars setting off for fieldwork. Theoretical emphases differ accordingly.

Concluding summary

Diffusionism at the end of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, offered anthropologists one of many points of departure from the pervasive dominance of evolutionism. The extreme ideas of the British school, with its emphasis on Ancient Egypt as the source of high culture the world over, proved of little merit. The more moderate notions of the German-Austrian school filtered into American anthropology and emerged transformed as 'the culture-area approach'. Ultimately, a number of culture-area approaches came into being, including evolutionist, functionalist, and structuralist varieties.

Diffusionist and culture-area approaches constitute one of the most interesting sets of ideas anthropology has produced. Yet unlike evolutionist ideas, diffusionist ones today (e.g., globalization theory) have lost continuity with the past. The primary legacy of diffusionism in its classic form is in the study of culture areas – both historical relations between such areas and, more importantly, the intensive study of regions.

FURTHER READING

Zwernemann's *Culture History and African Anthropology* (1983) gives a good overview of German-Austrian diffusionism. Classic studies of that school and of the American culture-area approach include respectively the essays by Kluckhohn (1936) and Wissler (1927). The relations between them are touched on in some of the essays in Stocking's *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic* (1996b). For a contemporary overview of German-Austrian, American, and British traditions, see Lowie's *History of Ethnological Theory* (1937: 128–95, 279–91). For an anti-culture-area approach, see Herzfeld's essay on the Mediterranean (1984).

On British diffusionism, see Langham's *The Building of British Social Anthropology* (1981: 118–99). For an overview of comparative methods, see Sarana's *The Methodology of Anthropological Comparisons* (1975).

Dutch anthropology is well documented as a national tradition. For further discussion of Dutch structuralism, see chapter 8. See also P. E. de Josselin de Jong's *Structural Anthropology in the Netherlands* (1977). Kloos and Claessen have edited three collections on contemporary Dutch anthropology, most recently *Contemporary Anthropology in the Netherlands* (Kloos and Claessen 1991).