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Friedrich Ratzel, Clark Wissler, and Carl Sauer: Culture Area Research and Mapping

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Innovation

A culture area is a region of the world in which people share similar cultural traits. Researchers may define a culture area by plotting the distribution of a single cultural trait, such as maize agriculture, and uniting all the communities that share this trait into a single cultural area. Alternatively, researchers sometimes choose to group communities into a culture area because the communities share

several distinctive cultural traits, known as having a common cultural complex. Culture area analysis has been used widely in both anthropology and cultural geography because it facilitates comparisons between regions, assists in the historical reconstruction of cultural development, and lends itself to questions about the impact of the natural environment on the form of human cultures.

Although distinctions between regions based on culture are as old as mankind, the roots of the culture area concept can be traced to Europe, where the work of the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844–1904) inspired the development of the *Kulturkreise* (cultural circles) school. *Kulturkreise*, which attempted to reconstruct the diffusion, or spread, of cultural traits from a few dominant cultural clusters, was associated with the German anthropologists Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) and Fritz Graebner (1877–1934). In the early 19th century, French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918) developed a related concept, *genre de vie* (way of life), which he defined as the pattern of living characteristic of certain cultures or livelihoods.



It was not in Europe, however, but in the United States that the concept of culture area gained real social scientific cohesion. One impetus for this development was the need to make sense of the growing body of ethnographic data produced by early anthropological expeditions in the American West. In 1917 Clark Wissler (1870–1947), an anthropologist with the American Museum of Natural History, used the culture area concept to integrate what was known about Native American communities. Wissler gathered together ethnographic data from a variety of sources and used these data to group Native American tribes based on similarities and differences in their subsistence systems, modes of transport, textiles, artwork and religious practice. As a result of this effort, he discerned a distinct geographic pattern, with groups living in proximity, or in similar natural environments, sharing many cultural traits. Wissler eventually defined nine distinct Native American culture areas, grouping tribes that shared significant traits. He authored several maps [see illustration] showing the geographic dispersal of particular Native American cultural traits. His work laid the foundation for subsequent research on Native American cultural ecology.

In the mid-20th century, geographer Carl Sauer (1889–1975) reinvigorated the culture area concept within the field of geography by synthesizing the ideas of the European *Kulturkreise* school with the anthropological approaches to culture area introduced to him by his colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie. Sauer argued that the diffusion of ideas from a few "cultural hearths," or cultural centers, had been the driving force in human history (Sauer 1952). His work inspired further research on the origin and spread of cultures within human geography (Meinig 1965).

The classification of human groups into culture areas has been critiqued on the grounds that the basis for these classifications, such as similar farming systems or pottery styles, are always arbitrary. Despite this limitation, the organization of human communities into cultural areas remains a common practice throughout the social sciences. Today, the definition of culture areas is enjoying a resurgence of practical and theoretical interest as social scientists conduct research on processes of cultural globalization (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

Image: Tlingit House with Painting and Totem Pole, Deserted Cape Fox Village, Alaska, (1899) by Curtis S. Edwards. Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries.



A portion of Clark Wissler's map of the culture areas of the Native American United States.

The map, which is designed to highlight similarities in food gathering techniques, lists seven culture areas: the woodsmen of the eastern forests, the hunters of the plains, the Navaho shepherds, the Pueblo farmers, the desert dwellers, the seed gatherers and the northern fishermen. A detail from the map is shown at right.



Map Source: "Three Maps of Indian Country," United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, Lawrence, Kansas: Haskell Institute (1948).

Related Works

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson. *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

Kroeber, Alfred L. The Cultural Area and Age Area Concepts of Clark Wissler. In *Methods in Social Science*, pp. 248–265. Stuart A. Rice, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931.

Meinig, D.W. The Mormon Cultural Region: Strategies and Patterns in the Geography of the American West, 1847–1964. *Annals of the Association of*

American Geographers 55 (2): 191–221, 1965.

Sauer, Carl O. *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals*. New York: American Geographical Society, 1952.

Links

<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/diffusion.htm>

<http://www.indiana.edu/~intell/wissler.html>

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