



THE SCHOOL OF AMERICAN DIFFUSIONISM WITH A PARTICULAR EMPHASIS TO CLARK WISSLER

Kumilachew Siferaw

*Bahir Dar, Ethiopia
December, 2018*

ABSTRACT

The school of diffusionism was emerged around the turn of 20th century against the theory of evolution of culture. Diffusionists attempt to understand the nature of culture in terms of the origin of culture traits and their spread from one society to another (Jha 1983: 52). There are three versions of diffusionist thought. The first school is the British school of diffusionism. The supporters of this school believe that all cultures originated from one culture center, and that culture center is Egypt. This school of diffusionism is often termed as 'heliocentric'. The second school of diffusionism is the German diffusionism, which is the more reasonable view that cultures originated from a limited number of culture centers (culture circles); and finally the American diffusionists (which is the main focus of this Article) who have the notion that each society is influenced by others but that the process of diffusion is both contingent and arbitrary (ibid.: 52-69). This article tries to describe about the school of American Diffusion with a particular reference to the works of Clark Wissler. It attempts to give a brief explanation of the theoretical ideas of Wissler on the concept of culture, culture area, and culture pattern as well as the age-area hypothesis.

Table of Contents

Topic	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. Wissler on the concept of culture	3
3. Wissler on the concept of How Culture Traits Are Acquired?	4
4. Wissler on the concept of culture area	6
5. Wissler on the concept of culture pattern and age-area hypothesis	7
6. Wissler on the concept of Universal Pattern of Culture	8
7. Criticism of Clark Wissler	8
Bibliography	10

© GSJ

1. Introduction

The similarity of cultural elements in diverse groups of people that are widely separated from each other may cause a great emotion to someone. Similarity between cultures could be resulted by the transmission of cultural elements from one society to another. There are three major views which explain about how a culture similarity occurred and how a culture trait is acquired, but there is no common understanding among the supporters of these views. The first one is independent invention. In this case, two or more groups who are widely separated may invent a certain trait independently. For instance, pottery graze was invented in the old world, but also appears in the new world in an isolated locality (Wissler 1923: 99-100). The second one is diffusion. The culture of one group may borrow or imitate a certain traits from another culture through the process of diffusion. The theory of diffusion is a reaction against the theory of independent invention. The third one is convergence in that two different culture traits may be invented independently in different locality, and through gradual process or development these traits may become similar (ibid.: 100).

In anthropological sense, diffusion refers the transmission of either material or non-material cultural element from one society to another. Diffusionists argue that human being by its nature is un inventive so that culture traits are diffused from its origin to the other through the process of diffusion (Wissler 1923 100-3). The school of diffusionism was emerged around the turn of 20th century against the theory of evolution of culture. Diffusionists attempt to understand the nature of culture in terms of the origin of culture traits and their spread from one society to another (Jha 1983: 52). There are three versions of diffusionist thought. The first school is the British school of diffusionism. The supporters of this school believe that all cultures originated from one culture center, and that culture center is Egypt. This school of diffusionism is often termed as 'heliocentric'. The second school of diffusionism is the German diffusionism, which is the more reasonable view that cultures originated from a limited number of culture centers (culture circles); and finally the American diffusionists (which is the main focus of this article) who have the notion that each society is influenced by others but that the process of diffusion is both contingent and arbitrary (ibid.: 52-69).

Diffusion emerged as a significant paradigm in American anthropology sometime in the first part of the twentieth century. It was triggered by Franz Boas's insistence on the significance of cultural elements in terms of chronology and space. Franz Boas (1858-1942) —widely known as the Father of American Ethnology was born and educated in Germany. It is understandable, therefore, that his ideas that laid the foundation of the American school of diffusion were influenced by the German school (Jha 1983: 69). From those American diffusionists who were interested in Boas's approach, Clark Wissler was the one.

Clark Wissler was an American anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. He lacks university department to train students so that he was less influential compared to his contemporaries (Barnard and Spencer 2010: 752). However, he had a great contribution in the development of the concept of culture-area approach. He was interested in Franz Boas's approach of "natural history" concept. On his early stand, Clark Wissler assumes that the history of society has a greater importance than the philosophical and social laws of the society. Later he argues that a society can be arranged in to different social groups depending on their dominant traits and geographical locations. Since it is not possible to show the detail of Clark Wissler's work in a single term paper, I, the writer of this article, only attempt to give a brief explanation of the theoretical ideas of Wissler on the concept of culture, culture area, and culture pattern as well as the age-area hypothesis.

2. Wissler on the Concept of Culture

Wissler was concerned with the problem of culture and its characteristics. He was the first anthropologist after Tylor and the first American anthropologist to offer the definition of culture (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 152). Wissler provides the theoretical ideas for the development of ethnological data in cultural anthropology. He assumes that the term culture is misused. In the one hand, it is defined as an evaluation for one's knowledge. On the other hand, it is defined as the way of social life (Wissler 1923:1). Wissler rejected the first idea and he tries to make a comparison between the cultures of the Eskimo and Hottentots with that of English and French. He states that "the culture of Eskimo and Hottentots may lack a culture of their own compared to that of the French or England. This does not mean that the Eskimo and Hottentots have no culture; rather they have far greater claims of originality than the French and English. Because when we compare the French culture with that of English, it is not common to see more differences, whereas the Hottentots and Eskimo culture have many differences and each have their own peculiar traits that makes them unique from others" (ibid.: 1). According to Wissler, a culture can be defined by its dominant or peculiar traits, and the study of such traits helps to compare the culture of one society to the other. For instance, he assumes that the Eskimo have a culture since they do have some dominant traits, such as, a unique type of greeting, clothing style, belief system and other cultural traits that makes their culture different from others (ibid.: 2).

Wissler applied to the term culture trait to any kind of cultural elements. For instance, if a certain society practices marriage in which a man marries his wife's sister, we can consider such type of marriage as a culture trait (ibid: 50). The tribal culture is characterized by different traits and these traits help to make a comparison between different cultures. It is the task of anthropologists to discover the various traits of a certain culture, and without a complete investigation of its traits to understand the culture of the society as a whole. He assumes that in every culture there is the complexity of activities which are existed in a culture trait. Wissler argues that a culture trait is not an independent units rather they are a collection of units. According to Wissler, the major culture trait complexes which exist in most societies are head hunting, totemism, couvades, tobacco, maize, wheat, dog traction, the horse, use of milk, the wheel, exogamy, worship, and blood scarifies (ibid: 50-52).

Wissler was interested in the comparative method to explain the concept of culture. He states that “in order to understand that a certain society is living and moving in a culture, it is important to compare that culture with other cultures” (Wissler 1923: 12). Similarly, in order to understand our personality, we have to compare ourselves with other individual so that we can able to come of individual differences. This will help someone to understand himself/herself as a part of culture. An individual may pass through different stages in his/her life time. That means he may pass from one culture to another without changing his/her fundamental human trait. For instance, a man who was lived as Indian in his previous life will be changed into a man in English in his current life. In this case, we can say that the man has a probability to know more than one culture i.e. Indian culture and English culture. In other words a man may live part of his life as an Indian and part as colonialist. An individual who have the knowledge of two cultures can be regarded as truly wise (ibid: 12-13). In this case it is problematic to determine the political boundaries of individuals, and they only way to avoid it is to make a comparative point of view (ibid: 15).

Wissler was against the view of functionalists, who were only focused on a single social unit and assume that each traits of a culture has peculiar relation to the complex practices of the group as a whole. This idea was criticized by Wissler by arguing that “a certain trait may spread over large parts so that it is useless to give special emphasis to the single social units since it is difficult to get a true account unless its entire phenomenon is searched” (Wissler 1917: 204). Wissler assumes that a study on the single trait of culture could not be a representative of the whole culture in a society, because a culture is constitute by the combination of various trait rather than a single trait. It is also difficult to have access to detail record on the characteristics of such traits in order to know the whole culture of a society. The best way to avoid this problem is to put our focus on the distinctive features of the whole culture. Every culture has its unique ideas and beliefs and these ideas and beliefs play a great role to unify the various complexes of culture traits (Wissler 1923: 2-3).

3. Wissler on the concept of how Culture Traits Are Acquired?

As we try to see in the introductory part of this paper, there are different views on how a culture trait is acquired. From these views the concept of independent invention and diffusion are the major ones. Wissler was more interested on diffusion than independent invention. Wissler argues against the idea of independent invention. He argues that “there is no evidence of actions which

shows that many traits of tribal peoples were independently invented, the only thing that the supporters of independent invention could say that traits are geographically distributed into several parts of society, and the only way for their origin is independent invention” (Ibid: 100). Wissler states that “there is abundant information which shows that many culture traits are borrowed and diffused over large areas. In order to prove such information, it is vital to take, the study of culture trait in a certain society, one instance. He states that the theory of diffusion did not ignore the first appearance of trait invention, what Wissler termed as “original invention”. Wissler assumes that a trait is diffused outward in all directions, and it is difficult to know whether such traits are voluntarily diffused or not. But it is possible to say that any trait of culture will not be spread in to another culture unless it is function in the culture of its origin group (ibid: 103).

In order to explain whether culture traits are independently invented or borrowed from a single origin, Wissler used *the horse culture of the American Indians* as an example. He states that “horse was first introduced by Europeans at an early date and spread a head of interior exploration. However, before their discovery by Europeans, many tribes in the west of Mississippi river had horsemen. A horse culture is come into Indians by the British colonists. The horse culture of Indian was similar to that of southern Europe and Asia during the period of American colonization. In general, the horse complex of North American Indian was borrowed first by the tribes in contact with the Spanish settlements and then diffused as far as the plains of Canada without essential modification of details. However, there is a variation in the horse culture of Indians. The Indians mount horse in its left side, where as the American and Europeans mount horse in its right side. This variation is come due to difference in historical factors because the Europeans borrow this method of mounting horse from the Vespasian”. Wissler conclude this idea “even though the spread of horse culture in the Old World was most likely analogous to its diffusion in America, it is difficult to make sure about its first origin because the horse culture may brought to American from a non historical people. This result the invoking of independent invention, to be more than a plea of ignorance, must rest upon specific data (Wissler 1915: 254-6). From this we can understand that Wissler was more inclined to the idea of diffusionism than independent invention.

4. Wissler on the Concept of Culture Area

The best known of Wissler's concept was the culture area. He uses the culture area to explain the geographical groupings of social units with similar cultures. For instance Wissler classifies the Euro-American culture depending on their geographical extent. He identifies five major culture areas of the Euro-American culture viz. the great part of Europe, North America, a part of South America, and the colonies of European nations of Africa and the Islands of the Pacific (Wissler 1923: 26). According to him, culture traits are more likely to transfer between two or more groups, who are residing in the same culture area. For instance, there is a similarity of traits between the culture areas of Euro-Americans than between those groups who are distant in their culture areas (ibid: 26). Wissler mentions transportation, electric light and gasoline power as the inventive traits of the Euro-American culture.

The culture area of Wissler was mainly developed on his work in *The America Indians* (1917). He takes a single trait in order to identify areas, and he takes all traits of social or tribal units to form a definite group. The combination of these definite groups and areas constitute the culture area (Wissler 1917: 204-6). He assumes that the different cultures of the society can be divided into culture area based on their economic, ceremonial and social trait-complexes. In each culture area there are culture centers from which culture influences seem to be spread out (ibid: 242). Thus, diffusion is a basic process in the formulation of a culture area.

Wissler assumes that "the culture center is located mainly based to ethnic and historical factors than to environmental factors" (ibid: 339). However, Wissler later changed his idea and argues that "culture center is determined by the environment" (1926: 218-21). That means the presence of more favorable environmental area results to have many culture centers. This does not mean that the culture center is the product of the environment; rather it is to mean that the environment rather it is to mean that "the environment is a medium of culture growth". And the "cultural-environmental equilibrium could be distressed by migration, environmental depletion and population growth (Wissler 1917: 338-9).

Wissler provided a systematic treatment of the concept of culture area in classifying Native American tribal cultures by correlating dominant cultural traits with geographical areas. Wissler (1938:220) explained this clearly, "If we take all traits into simultaneous consideration and shift

our point of view to the social or tribal units, we are able to form fairly definite groups. This will give us culture areas, or a classification, of social groups according to their culture traits". He proposed that subsistence could be a relevant basis for identifying culture areas. This was because being the basis of existence itself, subsistence influences other aspects of culture.

5. Wissler on the Concept of Culture Pattern and Age-area Hypothesis

Wissler assumes that trait complexes which are diffused into a certain culture area are modified by the receiving societies. In order to explain this concept Wissler proposes the pattern phenomenon, which refers to the dominant concepts used by the receiving societies to modify their borrowed trait complexes (Wissler 1916a: 866-868). There is a pattern of traits in the social units and the receiving society tries to make conformity of the borrowed traits with that pattern (Wissler 1917: 344). The pattern phenomenon is more applied to the original traits of a tribe than to the borrowed traits, and it is also applicable in the ceremonial diffused traits than material diffused traits (ibid: 345). For instance the maize complex (material culture) which is diffused over the eastern region and to the English colonists was unmodified by the different culture patterns of the receiving societies. If we see the Grass Dance, it took one form on the plains and another (the Dream Dance) among the central Algonkians. Wissler concluded that the analysis of the two ceremonies shows that each is adapted to the prevailing pattern of its area. He argues that in order to take over certain ceremonial trait-complex from any area is mainly based on its recognition by the culture pattern (ibid: 348).

In addition to his explanation of culture pattern, Wissler also proposed the age-area hypothesis to explain the relative age of a cultural trait. The age-area hypothesis rests on the assumption that a trait which is more widely distributed around the culture center is older in age than the one which is of limited distribution (Jha 1983: 74). Wissler referred to the relation of time and space as "age and area" it is often called the age-area concept. It holds good only for related traits, for example, parts of the same ceremonial complex, styles of pottery decoration, or patterns of moccasin construction (Wissler 1926: 197-198). Wissler first proposed the concept in detail and provided supporting evidence in *Man and Culture* (1923:55-63).

6. Wissler on the Concept of Universal Pattern of Culture

This concept was formulated by Wissler in 1923 on his book *Man and Culture*. Wissler applies the universal pattern of culture in order to make a comparison between historically unrelated traits. He begins his description of the universal pattern of culture by distinguishing culture content and culture pattern. Content consists of trait-complexes. Cultures differ concerning their inventories of trait-complexes, but viewed as wholes, they are all seen to conform to a basic general plan or pattern. This plan, or outline, features nine principal subdivisions, called culture complexes, namely, speech, material traits, art, mythology and scientific knowledge, religious practices, family and social systems, property, government, and war. Each culture complex can be subdivided to the extent one wishes: for example, Wissler divides “material traits” into seven subdivisions, such as shelter and dress. Wissler claims that this scheme will fit all cultures known to history (1923.: 76). Moreover, not only are the grand categories (culture complexes) common to all cultures but also many trait-complexes are known to all cultures for which we have adequate information, for example, fire, the principle of the knife, and the belief in a soul.

Wissler draws several assumptions by the universal culture pattern. First, it is the essence of humanity. He assumes that “the pattern we have sketched in the universal pattern of culture is the human pattern, the justification for that term resting upon usage, for by man is usually meant a mammal that possesses a culture conforming to this pattern” (ibid.:78). Second, the universal culture pattern makes it “practically impossible to draw satisfactory distinctions between primitive and higher cultures, other than they differ in complexity or richness of content” (ibid.). Third, cultural evolution must proceed along the lines of the universal pattern of culture. Each culture complex can be enriched or made more complex but cannot be transcended. Thus, all cultures are predestined to keep within the bounds of the universal pattern. Yet Wissler is not a pessimist. He writes, “Still, the outlook is not as forbidding as it seems, for within the bounds of the pattern are spaces for tremendous expansion. It is in fact the wonderful flexibility of the culture pattern that makes it nature’s masterpiece” (ibid: 79).

7. Criticism of Wissler

Clark Wissler, who was the proponent of the culture area concept, assumes that free diffusion occurred within cultural areas giving no attention to the forces that resist easy acceptance to

culture traits. The notion of free diffusion was a hypothetical one which was far removed from reality in which there is no efficient, free-flow distribution of culture traits. It is difficult to establish that traits diffuse evenly and follow the pattern laid down by in the cultural area concept. According to Steward (1955 cited here from Harris 1968: 377) the culture – area concept has three problems: “(1) center and boundary change with passage of time; (2) culture within the area may change so that it resembles cultures in different areas at different times; (3) portions of the area may be regarded as containing radically different cultures despite sharing of many features.”

Wissler’s idea of culture center was also criticized by Kroeber. Kroeber was not unanimous with Wissler on the idea of culture center. Kroeber attempted to refine Wissler’s idea of “culture centers” by means of the concept of “culture intensity” and “climax” (Harris 1968: 340). Kroeber argues that since the concept of culture center is an attempt to explain traits in terms of geographical centers, it is vital to replace it by the concept of “culture climax” (cited in Jha 1983: 72). He assumes that the culture center is not the end stage in a culture area; rather the center of a culture area will reach at its highest stage. As a result it must be termed as “culture climax” (ibid: 72-73).

8. Conclusion

Wissler contributes to the American anthropology and his concepts were influential. For instance, the culture area concept was used in American anthropology as a descriptive device for explaining culture. Despite this, his ideas on the relationship between culture and environment as well as his concept of culture have become standard. However, Wissler’s influence was not largely perceived due to his lack of university department to train students. This result to the ignorance of Wissler’s influence and much of the American anthropologists of the time were more inclined to the Bosian School. “Even though Wissler was contributed many theoretical ideas for the discipline anthropology and he produce basic ethnographic monographs directed research projects of impressive scope and was the principal organizational figure in American anthropology during much of his career, he has received little recognition as compared to the attention lavished on Boas. Wissler’s *Man and Culture*, one of the most important anthropological books of the early decades of the 20th century, was apparently never reviewed; no review is recorded in the bibliography compiled by Mary Wissler in 1969” (Freed and Freed 1983: 16-17).

Bibliography

- Barnard, A and Spencer, J. (eds.). 2010. *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*: New York: Rutledge.
- Freed, A, and Freed, S. 1983. *Clark Wissler and the Development of Anthropology*: American Museum of Natural History. Vol 85: 800-825.
- Harris, M. 1968. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*: New York: Thomas Crowell Company.
- Jha, M. 1983. *An Introduction to Anthropological Thought*: New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.
- Kroeber, A. L and Clyde, Kluckhohn. 1952. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Harvard University, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology. Vol., 47, No.1.
- Wissler, C. 1916a. *General Discussion on Shamanistic and Dancing Societies*: American Museum of Natural History, Anthropological Papers 11: 359-460
- Wissler, C. 1917. *The American Indians*: New York: Douglas C. McMurtrie.
- Wissler, C. 1923. *Man and Culture*: New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Press.
- Wissler, C. 1926. *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America*: New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wissler, C. 1938. *The American Indian: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the New World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wissler, C. 1915. *The Diffusion of Horse Culture among the North American Indians*: New York: American Museum of Natural History.