The Culture-Area and Age-Area Concepts of Clark Wissler

By A. L. Kroeber
University of California

The concepts of the culture-area and of the age-area ("age and area") method as applicable to culture have been developed by Clark Wissler in three books: The American Indian (1917); Man and Culture (1923); The Relation of Nature to Man (1926). The two concepts have this in common, that they deal with the space distribution of culture phenomena. They differ in that the culture area refers to culture traits as they occur aggregated in nature, whereas the age-area method is applicable to separate traits or isolable clusters of elements. They differ further in that the culture area, as such, is not concerned with time factors, whereas the age-area concept is a device for inferring time sequences from space distributions. Both ideas have long been in use in the biological sciences. An areally characterized fauna or flora, such as the Neo-tropical or Indo-Malaysian, obviously corresponds to the culture aggregation within a culture area. The term age-area was coined in the field of natural history, and the method of inferring areas of origin from concentration of distribution, and antiquity of dispersal from marginal survivals, has long been in use in so-called systematic biology. Perhaps because the comparable method applied to culture developed independently, the term age area has not gained currency in that field. Anthropologists have not been wholly happy in their terminology. They speak consistently of culture areas, whereas it is the content of these areas, certain culture growths or aggregations, that they are really concerned with, the areal limitation being only one aspect of such an aggregation.

Anticipation

Both concepts are not new in anthropology, although for long they were employed implicitly, or without methodological formulation. Ratzel, who spoke of marginal peoples and backward cultures as long ago as

1891, was close to thinking in age-area terms. Sophus Müller's main thesis was that prehistoric Europe is to be conceived as culturally belated, marginal to, and dependent on, the higher centers of the Orient. His notable five principles and three extensions not only embody the cardinal age-area idea, but state some of its chief qualifications as they are generally accepted today. Had Müller's prime interest been theoretic instead of concretely historical, he would no doubt have formulated his principles in terms of abstract methodology. In 1916 Sapir, in his "Time Perspective," discussed "the concept of culture area from an historical standpoint."

The germ of the culture-area idea is still older. It is implied in such concepts as Orient and Occident, vague though these be. The idea has had its most active development among Americanists. Among the reasons for this is the far greater length of the documentary historic record in much of the Old World. This tended to set a pattern of narrative approach which Americanists could not follow. Further, culture phenomena were on the whole more varied and their currents more complex in the Eastern than in the Western Hemisphere. This is a consequence of the fact that the Americas are smaller and were more sparsely populated (probably later) by what was essentially a single race, containing no extremely advanced civilizations. They were more isolated from the totality of the larger land masses of the Eastern Hemisphere than almost all parts of this were from one another. This comparatively uniform and undocumented mass of native New World culture almost necessitated a static, descriptive approach. The result was that Americanists grew more and more to think in terms of naturally given culture aggregates or types of the order of the Southwestern United States, Mexico, the North Pacific Coast, the Plains; whereas students of the Old World tended to pass more rapidly to direct historical interpretations of the mass of non-historic culture. It is probably no accident that the diffusionist historical explanations of both the Graebner-Foy-Schmidt school and the Rivers-Smith-Perry school, which make almost no use of culture areas as such but attempt to account for most of prehistoric culture, originated

3 Anthropogeographie (Stuttgart: J. Engelhorn, 1891), Vol. II.
5 Cf. Herskovits (see n. 7): "The 'culture-area' and the 'kulturkreis' are not the same thing, and must be differentiated." Cf. also the distinction drawn by the analyst on p. 260.—EDITOR.
in Europe; that they have had almost no following in America; and that they have not even been countered by rival theories here. In the same way, within the Americanistic field Europeans like Rivet and Uhle have advanced views as to the sequence of interrelations of North and South America that are both more ambitious and more specific than any which Americans have ventured to express. In Africa, Frobenius, a German, long ago formulated a Congo-West Coast culture but it was Herskovits, an American, who first attempted to lay out the whole continent in areas.

So far back as the nineties, culture areas were not only "in the air" but actually being used in American ethnology. Eskimo, North Pacific Coast, Plateau, California, Southwest, Plains or Prairies, Eastern Woodland, and Mexican areas had indeed scarcely been defined as to content or delimited on the map, but they were generally accepted as obvious empirical findings, and referred to in placing tribal cultures or culture traits. The evolutionistic display of museum materials had given way to a geographical arrangement, and in this the culture areas were implicit in the names of sections or halls. In 1900 the California Academy of Sciences exhibited a sketch map of North American Indian culture areas. In 1907 Otis Mason, in the article on "Environment" in the *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, listed twelve "ethnic environments" north of Mexico, which, although ecologically conceived, at the same time anticipated the culture areas that later became generally accepted. They were: Arctic, Yukon-Mackenzie, St. Lawrence–Great Lakes, Atlantic Slope, Gulf Coast, Mississippi Valley, Plains, North Pacific Coast, Columbia-Fraser, Interior Basin, California-Oregon, Pueblo Country. In 1912 Wissler used in the American Museum a map label of American archaeological areas; and in 1914 Holmes published an article defining a set of fairly coincident areas.

**THE CULTURE AREA**

These details are adduced here to make clear that the culture-area concept is in origin a growth, a community product of nearly the whole school of American anthropologists, although largely unconscious or implicit. In 1917 appeared Wissler's *The American Indian*, which has ac-

---

"Der Ursprung der Kultur: I, Afrika" (Berlin: Gebrüder Bornträger, 1898).


quired some repute as having originated the concept. Wissler himself never made such a claim. He says (p. 218): "A perusal of the literature of our subject shows it to be customary to divide the two continents into fifteen culture areas, each conceived to be the home of a distinct type of culture." This is an overmodest statement; custom before 1917 was still too chaotic to agree on specified areas. Yet it does justice to the essential situation. What Wissler did in his *American Indian* was to name and delimit areas for the whole hemisphere; to list the principal traits characterizing each; to discuss internal subtypes and define the one most characteristic, thereby throwing the ultimate emphasis on culture centers instead of culture areas; to examine the relations of these culture aggregates to classifications of earlier culture, of language, and of physical type, as well as to individual culture-trait distributions and to environment. In short, the culture area was both formulated concretely and examined as to its meaning. The standardization, although by no means hard and fast, appealed as so sound that it has been generally accepted by anthropologists, modified or supplemented only in details, and the theoretical findings have never been seriously attacked. At the same time it is historically significant that so important a piece of work was not issued as a contribution to theory but as part of a concrete review and an interpretation of the culture of one native race.

Wissler begins (chap. i) by setting up eight areas of characteristic food: Caribou, Bison, Salmon, Wild Seed, Eastern Maize, Intensive Agriculture, Manioc, Guanaco. These are later (chap. xiv) elaborated into fifteen culture areas, essentially though not formally through subdivision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Areas</th>
<th>Culture Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caribou</td>
<td>Eskimo, Mackenzie (and north part of Eastern Woodland)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bison</td>
<td>Plains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmon</td>
<td>North Pacific Coast, Plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Seed</td>
<td>California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Maize</td>
<td>Southeast, Eastern Woodland (except north non-agricultural portion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive Agriculture</td>
<td>Southwest, Nahua-Mexico, Chibcha, Inca-Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manioc</td>
<td>Amazon, Antilles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guanaco</td>
<td>Guanaco</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Page reference is to the second edition (1922).

The only other hemispheric map and list of areas, by Kroeber, *op. cit.*, p. 337, is based on Wissler and differs chiefly in attempting to follow natural boundaries instead of representing the areas diagrammatically."
In the Plains, for example, eleven named tribes, centrally situated, possess the typical culture of the area as defined by some twenty enumerated traits (bison, tepee, dog-traction, camp circle, round shield, sun dance, no pottery, no agriculture, etc.). To the east were fourteen tribes "having most of the positive traits" of the former group, plus some that these lacked (agriculture, pottery); to the west three or four tribes substituting new traits for certain of those possessed by the group in the heart of the area; and similarly on the northeast two or three tribes.

The rather "difficult" Eastern Woodland is treated as follows: There are four subdivisions: (1) Northern (Cree, Naskapi), non-agricultural, similar in material culture to the adjoining Mackenzie area; (2) Eastern Algonkian (Abnaki, Delaware), similar to the last but with feeble cultivation of maize; (3) Iroquoian (Huron, Iroquois), with most intensive cultivation of maize, and culture largely of southern origin; (4) Central Algonkian (Menomini, Fox, Winnebago). This last group is taken as typical of the whole area and defined by forty or fifty traits. The three less typical divisions are more briefly defined.

The summary of the chapter emphasizes intergradation between areas, but disposes of this as an obstacle to classification because the "condition arises from the existence of culture centers, from which culture influences seem to radiate." While a culture area on the map "is in the main an arbitrary division," it contains a culture center which coincides with the habitat of the most typical tribes. Hence the areas "serve to differentiate culture centers." Their mapped "boundaries, in fact, are merely diagrammatic." (The "centers," it must be remembered, are not points, but rather extensive nuclei.) "Social units" (tribes) are a different kind of phenomenon from "culture complexes" (aggregations of culture material).

Subsequent chapters (xv, xvii, xviii) give an analogous classification into twenty-four archaeological; an indefinite number of linguistic, and twelve somatic areas. Chapter xix correlates the classifications. Archaeological cultures are found to tend to coincide with recent cultures, except that in the regions of eastern and intensive maize culture the ancient areas or centers are more numerous, owing to a fundamental change having taken place with the introduction of agriculture (pp. 364, 374). Language and physical type show "a kind of agreement" with culture. The three are "independent groups of human phenomena, each of which tends toward the same geographical centers" (p. 366). Each "culture area tends to have distinctive characters in language and somatology. However, the reversal of this formula does not hold," owing to causes.
not yet perceived (p. 367). Migration has not been a normally important factor in America, else the centers would have been less stable. In general, populational “shifting was by successive small units” (p. 369); “migratory groups seem unable to resist complete cultural assimilation” (ibid.).

A number of environmental correlations are noted. The southeastern culture lies below an altitude of 500 feet; the Eastern Woodland, between 500 and 2,000; the Nahua, above 5,000; the eastern and western divisions of the Plains are separated by the 2,000-foot contour (pp. 368, 369). These altitudes are recognized as only rough indices of areas of climate, flora, and fauna. Wissler is not an environmentalist. Human phenomena, he says, manifest a strong tendency to expand to the limits of the geographical area in which they arise, and no farther. Language and blood seem to spill over the edges far more readily than culture [p. 369]. . . . [Although] the location of food areas laid down the general lines of culture grouping . . . . , yet not even all of the more material traits can be considered dependent upon the fauna and flora; for example, pottery [p. 371] . . . . While the environment does not produce the culture, it furnishes the medium in which it grows, and . . . . when once rooted in a geographical area, culture tends to hold fast [p. 373] . . . . The origin of a culture center seems due to ethnic factors more than to geographical ones. The location of these centers is largely a matter of historic accident, but once located and the adjustments made, the stability of the environment doubtless tends to hold each particular type of culture to its initial locality, even in the face of many changes in blood and language [p. 372].

In *Man and Culture* (1923) Wissler comes back to review the culture complex, type, area, and center (pp. 51–63), without adding anything new except a greater emphasis on zonal distribution as indicative of age. This inferring of time relations from culture-trait distributions had already been touched upon in *The American Indian* (p. 296). *Man and Culture* further presents time charts of New World culture and Old World prehistory suggested by Spinden and Nelson, and one of Old World culture by Wissler (pp. 216, 218, 220), in which cultural areas (roughly defined in geographical terms) are expressed as abscissae of a time scale. Farther on in this chapter on “The Genesis of Culture,” in answer to the question as to where and how the universal culture pattern (chap. v) first arose, the “fundamental lines of cleavage at the dawn of cultures” are defined as arising in a setting of partly arboreal Tundra, warm dry Mesa, and humid tropical Jungle (pp. 227–32); and in the following pages, Euro-American (map, p. 346), Oriental, and Middle
American culture are examined as to their rooting in these three type areas. With reference to the historical functioning of culture centers, an analogy is drawn (pp. 156-57) to volcanic activity, these different centers appearing as so many crater cones of varying diameter, all belching forth the molten lava of culture, their respective lava fields meeting and overlapping, but, as in true volcanoes, the lavas differ one from the other and from time to time, and each crater contributes something new to the growing terrain. Again craters become extinct and new ones break forth in between.

**AGE AREA**

The age-area concept or method of inferring at least the relative time sequences of stages of culture-trait or culture-complex developments from the more or less concentrically zonal distribution of phases of such developments is briefly approached by Wissler in *The American Indian* (pp. 296-99, with references to use of the method of Sapir, Boas, Spinden, Lowie, and Hatt); it is enlarged upon in *Man and Culture* (pp. 57-63, 110-57); and it is made the theme of a book in *The Relation of Nature to Man in Aboriginal American* (1926). In this last work, the concept is systematically developed by Wissler, analogous to its use in the biological sciences, but, as in the case of his forerunners, apparently as the result of independent empirical findings. Essentially, this concept implies that of the culture center as a locus of superior productivity. This center, normally maintaining itself for some time, tends inevitably to radiate culture content or forms to a surrounding zone, which in turn imparts the contribution to a more peripheral belt, while the center, in the interim, is likely to have advanced to subsequent phases of development which normally obliterate more or less the earlier ones. These earlier phases, however, are likely to survive, with greater or less modification, in the marginal zone which they have only recently reached. In principle, a distinction must be made between cases in which the time sequence is independently known through history, inscriptions, or cultural stratigraphy (in biology through paleontological evidence resting ultimately on stratigraphy), and is in agreement with the observed recent space distribution; and cases in which the time sequence is unknown and becomes the goal of investigation, being in that case merely deduced from the space distribution. In anthropology, at least a number of seemingly clear-cut instances of the first type were established before Wissler’s venture to set up the principle as a generally valid one and employ it for the finding of the time factor in

---

12 As by Sophus Müller, cited above, and Nelson, reproduced in Kroeber, *op. cit.*, p. 191. [Cf. analysis 19, esp. p. 280.—Editor.]
cases lacking time data. A still further logical step, though apparently an inevitable one, is the inference that the present center of culmination is also the presumptive locus of origin. In short, there are three elements involved: related phases of a culture trait or complex or culture whole; the spatial or geographical distribution of these; and the time consumed in the accomplishment of the distribution of the phases. When all three elements are known and correlate approximately, there can be no reasonable doubt as to the story of what happened. When the time factor is sought instead of given, the result is no more than an inference; and since the known factors are usually either complex or variable, and difficult of exact measurement, judgments are likely to differ as to the degree of validity of the findings.

In *The Relation of Nature to Man*, Wissler reviews seven traits of material culture (chap. i: tipi, stone collars, hoop and ball games, etc.), nine of social culture (chap. iii: age societies, sun dance, vision-seeking, etc.), and four cases of segregated distributions (chap ii: monolithic ax, feather mosaics, lip plug and the nose stick, ring-neck vase). He concludes that an approach without preconceptions justifies the principle. Segregated distributions of typologically related but differentiable traits warrant the inference of independent invention in each area on the basis of an antecedent "plateau" of continuously distributed culture from which these inventions rise like peaks. Chapter iv applies the same method to somatic traits, with similar results. These have been vigorously assailed by Boas; but as the involvements are biological and not cultural, neither set of arguments need be considered here.

In the fifth and final chapter, on "The Distribution Form and Its Meaning," Wissler first sets up a law of diffusion, "that anthropological traits tend to diffuse in all directions from their centers of origin" (p. 183). Several "dated distributions" (peyote cult, introduction of the horse, grass dance) are next examined and found to support "the assumption that when the distribution of a culture trait-complex takes the concentric zoned form, the zones can be safely interpreted as superpositions, and from these, time relations can be inferred" (p. 197). From this follows a generalized "New World chronology," or sequence of culture stages (p. 203). The concluding section on "The Ecological Basis" (pp. 211–22) inquires into the mechanism which has brought about a form of distribution that is universal, and finds it in ecological factors. However, only a few examples of partial correspondence between ecological and culture areas are suggested; no systematic review of data is attempted; and the conclusion

is the essentially reasoned one that the American Indian in an ecological area is the end result of a sequence of factors such as climate, flora, fauna, culture.

Of the three books, The American Indian presents, organizes, and interprets the largest mass of concrete data; Man and Culture is the broadest and most philosophical; Nature and Man, the most concisely diagrammatic.

CRITICISMS

The Wissler points of view as to culture area and age area have apparently been used extensively in only one other general work, Kroeber's Anthropology (1923) (esp. chaps. vii–viii, x–xiv). There are indications of some growing readiness to apply the method in special cases, as in a recent monograph by Davidson. In Europe, Wissler's works, while commended, appear to have made relatively little impression. This is the more surprising in that The American Indian, apart from everything else, provides a most useful outline organization of American data. The reasons apparently are: the current European preoccupation for or against diffusionist theories of single or few origins, and the habit of many students of dealing with actually or essentially historic data.

The first general criticism, of points of view rather than of Wissler's particular works, came from Wallis in 1925. He argues that actual historical data do not bear out the age-area principle. In 3000 B.C. mud-brick dwellings had a wider distribution than bronze; in 100 B.C. bronze extended more widely. Also, the center of distribution or intensive development of a trait shifts within the area with the passage of time. Inference of age from distribution is impossible except at given moments, and these can be determined only from historical data. Wallis' first objection is valid largely when intrinsically unrelated elements of culture are compared, much less so for traits of the same complex. As Wissler points out (Man and Culture, p. 146), side-blown trumpets used within an area of end-blown trumpets are almost certainly the later development, whereas comparison with the distribution of rubber balls means very much less. Wallis' counter-examples are of the latter class. His second objection, as to shifting centers, does not seem to strike at the root of the age-area principle, which is not committed to permanent centers, although it may tend to assume them. On his third point Wallis offers no substitute


15 "Diffusion as a Criterion of Age," American Anthropologist, N.S., XXVII (1925), 91–99.
suggestions, and his attitude seems negativistic toward a historical attitude or the recognition of diffusion except within the field of conventional history.

Kroeber, in two papers, has touched on Wissler’s ring-neck-vase and arrow-release interpretations. In the first case, additional data lead him to modify certain of Wissler’s special findings. In the second case, the same evidence is gone over with partly different construals. The age-area method is accepted in principle by Kroeber, but employed more cautiously. The different conclusions are due partly to a somewhat different rating of the relationship of the five forms or phases of release examined—a point on which agreement is obviously necessary before identical results are even possible; partly to a greater readiness of Wissler to assume probable continuities of distribution across geographical gaps in knowledge; and partly to his not hesitating to relate all the world-wide data in one grand scheme. Kroeber considers this last attempt as of possible but unproved validity.

Dixon’s The Building of Cultures (1928), which aims to balance diffusion with independent origins, migration, and environmental influences, takes issue with the age-area method on general grounds (pp. 65–75, 179–85) and specifically attacks a number of Wissler’s applications: the outrigger (pp. 75–104), the moccasin (pp. 124–28), the grass dance, and the peyote cult (pp. 176–79). Dixon concludes that specialization and modification of traits arise not only at the center of origin, but independently near the margin of diffusions (p. 74); that “the most striking specializations take place as a rule at the very end of the diffusion stream” (p. 140); and that trait complexes disintegrate as they pass into neighboring culture, incorporating as well as losing elements, until they may become quite unrecognizable (p. 180).

Dixon’s contention that specializations occur mostly at the peripheries of diffusions seems to be based on the history of the alphabet, which is in its nature an essentially closed system, like a dogma, an established religion, or an art style, which can alter, wear down, split into varieties, disintegrate, or be absorbed, but hardly develop into something else with which it stands in “organic” or intrinsic relation. Its “specializations” are essentially distortions and of a different order from the “specialization” of a three-piece or hard-soled moccasin as against a one-piece moccasin, or of the string-pull Mediterranean release or the ring-engaging

Mongolian release compared with the Primary arrow-hold which a novice with the weapon almost invariably resorts to. Dixon’s specializations are, in fact, the Ogham writing with new signs and values, the essentially syllabic Indian systems, Manchu and Korean written vertically in imitation of Chinese, Ethiopic with consonant characters altered for vocalic context. The only fundamental specialization in the alphabet comparable to most of Wissler’s cases would be the addition of vowel signs to the original pure consonantal Semitic system; and the historically earliest case of this, by the Greeks, occurred near the hearth of the invention soon after it, and did not spread nearly so far. On the other hand, a highly complex, accreted, presumably recent phenomenon like the sun dance, many of whose parts demonstrably have no intrinsic interrelation but only a secondarily historical and functional interrelation, is also different from elements like moccasins and arrow releases. When Wissler, therefore, subjects the sun dance to the same distribution treatment as moccasins and releases, even though he gets analogous results, the meaning of these results must be different. There is likely to be further argument at cross-purposes in these matters until the various kinds of culture phenomena are more sharply conceptualized.17

Dixon’s criticisms of Wissler’s specific interpretations are based on the grounds that the latter’s classification of traits or complex forms is at times arbitrary; that carefully plotted maps show a far less regular distribution than the diagrams or schematic maps used; that data are sometimes loosely employed; and that considerations favorable to the method are weighted at the expense of contrary considerations. When accuracy of scholarship is involved, Dixon’s strictures are probably true. Yet, if Wissler suggests or forces interpretations on incomplete or discordant evidence, Dixon evidently combats the age-area method in general, since he concerns himself with it only to refute it. He disinclines as consistently as Wissler inclines.

The sun dance is a case in point. Dixon reproduces Wissler’s schematic

“Even Sapir, usually extremely exact, speaks of a culture phenomenon appearing “in its most typical or [sic] historically oldest form at the cultural centre” (op. cit., p. 26) and of “the centre of distribution” (in time or space?) of American agriculture as probably assignable to the valley of Mexico (ibid.). Again, he holds that the simple plank house of the marginal Hupa, as compared with the more elaborate one of the Kwakiutl who are central in the North Pacific Coast area, “undoubtedly represents a later period of diffusion, though not necessarily a later type of house” (p. 27). To the contrary, it seems reasonable that the simple house is the earlier in the area, but there is no evidence one way or the other whether the arrival of the simple house at the margin or the development of the elaborate one at the center is the earlier. Apparently all thinking along these lines of distribution and age is so recent that the categories involved in processes like “diffusion” or phenomena like “complexes” have not yet become sharply defined.

---

17 The Culture-Area and Age-Area Concepts of Clark Wissler
arrangement of Plains tribes (on a basis both of geography and degree of participation in this dance complex) and contrasts it with precise distribution maps, which are far less regular (pp. 168-73). Actually, the case is rather weak both ways: first, because the movements of the tribes in question render a map not very much more significant than a geometric diagram, in this particular instance; second, because both authors leave out of consideration the known historic affiliations of tribes. Both maps (pp. 171, 175) show the Arapaho and Gros Ventre as the tribes possessing most primary traits of the complex. These two tribes spoke closely related languages, associated frequently, and considered each other offshoots of one stock. Next in order come the Blackfoot, with whom the Gros Ventre were in intimate alliance during most of the nineteenth century; the Cheyenne and Wind River Shoshone, who have actually been on reservations with the Arapaho; and the Crow, who were situated between Gros Ventre and Arapaho. Then follow the Teton Dakota, also more or less intermediate geographically; the Kiowa, allies of Arapaho and Cheyenne, who although now marginal on the south were originally farther north; and the Plains Cree and the Assiniboine, for whom no cogent explanation is obvious. The other Plains tribes participate less extensively. Spier’s original data on all traits in the complex show clearly the influence of the same historic associations. The Arapaho show 54 traits, Cheyenne 46, Blackfoot 37, Gros Ventre 36, Teton 30, Crow 29, Kiowa 28, all others below 25. Only the Wind River fall out here, as might be expected from what is known of their general culture as well as associations; evidently the selection of “primary” traits has happened to read them in. Both proof and disproof are, therefore, largely not pertinent, because the historic facts have been disregarded for a formal distributional approach, which in this case touches accidentals chiefly. What no doubt is significant is that all the highly participating tribes inhabited a continuous territory in the western Plains and were non-agricultural as well as in close relation of some sort with one another; and that the agricultural tribes to the east, and those west of the Rockies, possessed the complex in an attenuated form.

While the other instances examined by Dixon are not wholly parallel to this, they tend also to be technically correct refutations of essentially technical misapplications of the method in question.

**REVIEW**

If now we attempt to place and appraise the culture-area and age-area principles, it becomes clear that, first of all, they are essentially historical concepts. Wissler says expressly: "In so far, then, as anthropology deals
with culture, which is, after all, the only distinctly human phenomenon in
the objective sense, it conceives of it as historical phenomena and this
conception is in so far the soul of its method. Whether cultural an-
thropology is necessarily historical may be and has been questioned; but
there is no doubt that the development of the two principles by Wissler
is in accord with his enunciation. At the same time, cultural data are
being treated from other approaches than the historical. There is the
method of examining the functional relations of the parts of one culture
at a time, in the hope of finding more or less fixed relations—presumably
psychological—that hold good universally or prevalently. This is the
“functional” method of Radcliffe Brown and Malinowski, in a measure
and less avowedly of Lowie and Goldenweiser, to a greater or less extent
of Fraser and other earlier students, and by implication perhaps of
Bastian. Another attack recognizes the historic aspects of culture phe-
nomena so far as these aspects are actually demonstrated, but dissects the
phenomena in order to isolate their processes as such. This is the aim
of Boas and his school, which has sometimes been called, not wholly
appropriately, “historical,” but might be characterized as “dynamic.” In
the main the functional, dynamic, and actually historical methods are of
course not in conflict, but they differ in objective and weighting of inter-
est. Each is presumably equally legitimate, and its results in its own
field should be equally valid. The three approaches have however not
often been clearly differentiated and formulated; perhaps because no
student has consistently followed one alone.

The difference between Wissler and the English diffusionist and the
German Kulturkreis schools, which also aim to supply history for his-
torically undocumented periods and areas, lies in the fact that these make
their explanations in terms of a single or few origins, respectively, in
place of an indefinite number of variable centers. The limitation of factors
yields a simplified scheme, but almost inevitably involves an arbitrary or
subjective choosing of the original centers. It is characteristic that dis-
cussion of the views of these two schools has revolved not so much about
the validity of determination of the asserted centers as to whether the facts
of culture can be made to fit the schemes of derivation from them. By
comparison, Wissler is inductive. The culture areas dealt with are in
their nature empirical, and the age-area method, provided it is critically
used, is an inductive device.

Turning now specifically to the culture area, we may fairly say that it
represents normally a synthesis useful in the organization of knowledge,
tinged with a subjective element, and yet evidently resting on something

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTIONS AND TEMPORAL SEQUENCES 261

objective because empirical opinion tends to be in essential concord in specific cases. In all these points the culture area is analogous to the faunal or the floral area. In other words, it aims at determining and defining a natural area. Adjacent areas normally intergrade, and progressive dissection can therefore always analyze them out of existence. When analytic interests predominate, this dissecting away happens through the stressing of the intergradations, though even then current culture-area concepts are likely to be retained as lowly, useful tools. The core of the concept, in particular instances, is likely to be the culture center, as Wissler has recognized. This, however, is likely to be not only a “crater” of diffusing productivity, as Wissler has in the main treated it, but also a “focus” or gathering-point. The prevalence of fraying-out margins and intergradations is no warrant for merely diagrammatic representation, except in a preliminary and tentative stage of investigation. A classificatory areal study that cannot be mapped has not found its permanent basis. The same holds true of the center, whether this be conceived as a nuclear area or drawn to a point. If it is worth determining and using, it is worth delimiting. In fact, its utility value in further penetration into history is bound to depend on the accuracy with which it has been determined. Centers shift; they may be multiple for one area; or the centers for different aspects of culture within an area may be more or less distinct. All this is likely to be slurred over if there is no sharp definition. Wissler has done a broad piece of organization where chaos or indecision prevailed before, and perhaps should not be held too heavily responsible for failing to carry his pioneer work into finer detail. The danger is in stopping with his often sketchy and diagrammatic formulations, when they ought to serve as a stimulus for revision and surer knowledge.

For instance, Wissler gives a diagram map of the Plains area with “the most typical tribes” underlined. This “center” however includes a full third of the tribes in the area, and the basis for its determination is only summarily stated. However, an approximation toward a more intensive center can be made from Wissler’s own data. The tribes possessing the greatest number of traits of the sun-dance complex are (as above): Arapaho, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Teton, Crow, Kiowa. Of tepee foundations, the three-pole form is probably the most specialized, and is central in distribution. These same tribes use this, except the Blackfoot and the Crow. Age-grading, a specialization on men’s societies and also central to the distribution of these, does not occur among Cheyenne, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Teton, Crow, Kiowa. Of tepee foundations, the three-pole form is probably the most specialized, and is central in distribution. These same tribes use this, except the Blackfoot and the Crow. Age-grading, a specialization on men’s societies and also central to the distribution of these, does not occur among Cheyenne, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Teton, Crow, Kiowa. Of tepee foundations, the three-pole form is probably the most specialized, and is central in distribution. These same tribes use this, except the Blackfoot and the Crow. Age-grading, a specialization on men’s societies and also central to the distribution of these, does not occur among Cheyenne, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Teton, Crow, Kiowa. Of tepee foundations, the three-pole form is probably the most specialized, and is central in distribution. These same tribes use this, except the Blackfoot and the Crow. Age-grading, a specialization on men’s societies and also central to the distribution of these, does not occur among Cheyenne,
Teton, Crow, or Kiowa. This gives a total of participation in the most intensive forms of these three traits as follows: Arapaho, Gros Ventre, 3; Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Teton, Kiowa, Mandan, 2; other Plains tribes, 1 or 0. This result tallies well with the geographical position and historic affiliations of the tribes. Of course three traits are not enough for final judgment; but twelve or fifteen would begin to furnish a fairly representative sample of the various tribes' status. In this way there might be segregable a nucleolus as well as a nucleus, a median, a submarginal, and a truly marginal series of tribes; and significant subcenters might become apparent. The relations of these in turn to the various intensification stages of adjacent culture areas could then be examined. With enough exact data, precise findings of fairly high probability should result. Of course the point in this example is not the specific conclusion but the method of attaining greater refinement.21

Another point at which the Wissler scheme can probably be elaborated with advantage is in the recognition that the culture areas are not equivalent in culture-historical significance but are of different orders. Sapir long ago dwelt on this fact in his *Time Perspective*. In North America, Mexico is obviously unique in being of the first order of intensity of culture. Of second order are the Southwest, the Southeast, and the North Pacific Coast. Of these, the first two are about equally similar to Mexico and therefore presumably partly derived from it, though in different ways. The North Pacific Coast is much less dependent on Mexico, and represents either a largely independent intensification or considerable derivation from Asia. The remaining areas in North America would have to be rated as of the third or even of the fourth order. The Northeast, for instance, is obviously dependent on the Southeast. It differs less in sum total of its culture content from this than the Southeast differs from Mexico, and is more immediately derived. The eastern Plains or Prairies (Pawnee, etc.) are also clearly dependent at many points on the Southeast. It is very doubtful if their total culture is less rich than that of the tribes of the western or true Plains (Arapaho, etc.). The question therefore arises whether a “Plains culture area” as formulated by Wissler and accepted by American anthropologists has full historic validity. What has been considered the “Plains center” may be only a quaternary and late specialization developed on the tertiary culture of the Prairies, which

21 In an earlier paper, “Material Cultures of the North American Indians,” *American Anthropologist*, N.S., XVI (1914), 447-505, 472-73, Wissler actually uses the method suggested above, though with different traits as material to operate on, and comes to the conclusion that “we have good grounds for localizing the center of Plains culture between the Teton, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Crow, with the odds in favor of the first.” The point, however, has not been developed further by him.
in turn is a marginal form of the culture of the Southeastern center, which is secondary to the primary South Mexican growth. Views of this kind cannot be vindicated by evidence here, hardly even fairly developed, but the suggestions cited may suffice to indicate the point of view.22

In short, the culture areas codified by Wissler are unduly uniformized as to size, number of included tribes, and implied level. They remain essentially descriptive; their historical potentialities have only begun to be exploited. Wissler recognizes this, but scarcely attempts to use his culture areas for larger historical interpretations. These interpretations23 are chiefly built up on his reviews of culture traits, complexes, and aspects;24 the review of culture areas25 stands apart as a promising but largely unutilized block of organized knowledge.

As regards the environmental basis, Wissler has clearly discerned the primary relation of this to the culture area as a stabilizer and a binder, and has given some apt illustrations of ecological-cultural correlation. These relations, however, in spite of some striking cases, promise on the whole to be highly complex and to yield satisfactorily only to accurate analysis. This aspect of the subject has scarcely been opened as yet.

As to the age-area principle, the analogy to recognized biological method gives support to the essential soundness and the utility of this concept, the more so as its anthropological use was empirically and independently arrived at, not borrowed from the life-sciences. Interest in this method will vary directly with the ultimate objective of study; and when historical interest is slight, distrust of the method will be pronounced. It is in its nature merely a method of inference, supplementary to the direct evidence of documentary history and archaeological superposition; but, as such, it is warranted when it is desired to push beyond the confined limits of this sort of evidence. The age-area principle may never be applied mechanically; culture is too complexly irregular, the resultant of too many factors, to be approached without care, accuracy, and discrimination.

22 Somewhat analogously, Sapir (op. cit., p. 45), suggests three “fundamental” areas in North America: Mexican, Northwest Coast, and a large “Central” area with Pueblo and Eskimo as its “most specialized developments.” The Plains culture he is inclined to see either as a specialization of a more general Eastern Woodland (Northeast) or as a “culture blend” by tribes with original Woodland, Southeastern, Plateau, and probably Southwestern affiliations. In the latter case, the specific Plains features would be construable as “superimposed” or historically late, but as strong enough to have broken up and reassembled the older culture within the Plains area. As regards the fundamental areas, it is interesting that Ratzel (op. cit., Vol. II, map) is not so far from Sapir’s suggestion with four North American areas: Mexican, Northwest Coast, “Northeastern,” and Eskimo.

23 The American Indian, chap. xix–xxi.
24 Ibid., chaps. i–xiii.
25 Ibid., chap. xiv.
The relations of distributional facts assembled by Wissler do seem on the whole to substantiate his claim that migration was culturally a rather unimportant factor in pre-Columbian America. But it did occur; and his own Euro-American area shows that it may at times be of fundamental importance. This is true, similarly, with respect to all other factors that may cut across the operation of normal diffusion and the age-area principle. The danger lies in utilizing the latter too exclusively.

In general, Wissler is circumspect. He is constantly qualifying with terms like "seem" and "suggest," and issuing his findings as merely preliminary indications subject to revision. Their cumulative effect on the reader, however, is likely to be much stronger, and one-sided; and occasionally, in summarizing or in framing broader syntheses, Wissler slips and speaks as if his inferences were proved. Also, Wissler has attempted something rather unique. Two of his books, and much of the third, are historical in objective and yet emphasize process more than result. The historically minded, therefore, complain of looseness and inexactness of facts; those who are interested in processes take alarm at the historical reconstructions as too speculative. Basically, however, this means that Wissler's approach has been broad but lacking in intensiveness and reliably sharp edges. He has done enough with the age-area concept to show that it is not a mere instrument of speculation but a legitimate means of inferential reconstruction when other data fail. That it must be critically handled goes without saying. The age-area principle cannot be applied as between diverse and unrelated elements of culture. Wissler has made this clear. Much of the criticism leveled at the method rests on failure to understand this fact; which also holds in biology. No one would infer respective age of birds and snails from their distribution; but within the limits of a group such as an order, and especially within the genus, the method is constantly being used and apparently with fair reliability.

The culture-area and age-area concepts both rest on the idea of a normal, permanent tendency of culture to diffuse. This principle seems well established. It is accepted even by those who find satisfaction in pointing out cases where other factors have produced contrary results. The two concepts, however, have been brought into little relation so far. The one aims at a static description of large natural aggregations of culture; the other, at discovering sequential developments within isolable items or parts of culture. The concept of the culture center seems to hold the potentiality of co-ordinating these two approaches. It can give the culture area historic depth, and can synthesize discrete age-area findings so as to be interpretable in generalized areal as well as in temporal terms.
To summarize Wissler's contribution: First, he has formulated and made useful two important concepts which had previously been ill defined and hesitatingly employed; but his results have suffered at times from sketchy, loose-edged handling of data. In consequence, his work has perhaps had most sympathetic appreciation in sciences outside of anthropology, most criticism within. Second, he has laid some foundation for an understanding of the culture-center concept and of the relation of culture to environment; but these two lines remain to be developed. 26

26 [This analysis was first written in August, 1928, and received the analyst's final revision in June, 1929.—Editor.]