

Cultural Interactions:

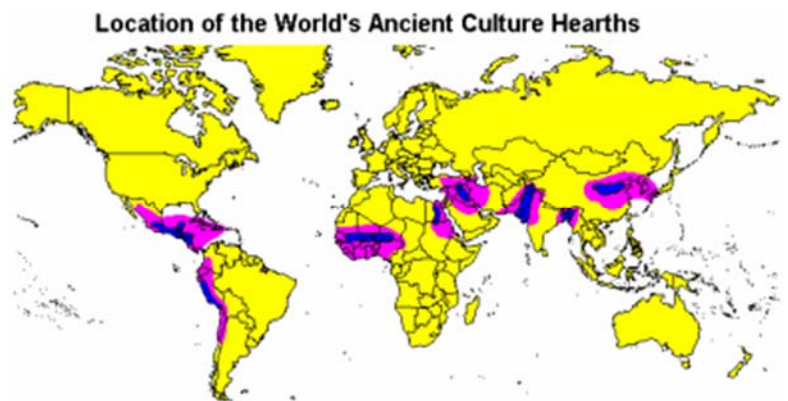
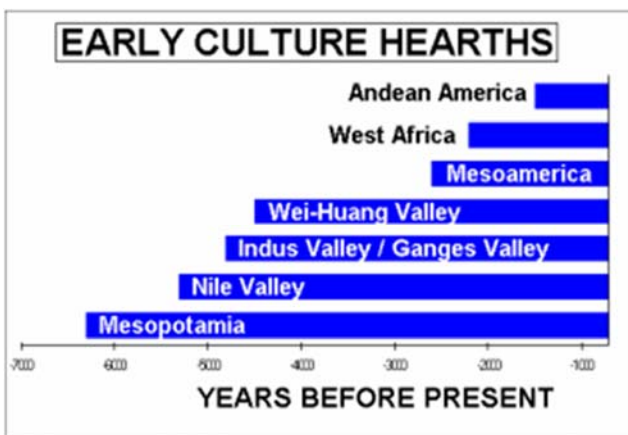
Diffusion, Convergence, Divergence & Globalization

Culture is often referred to as a “blueprint for living” because it includes everything that contributes to society’s development, including values, religious practices, beliefs, art, customs, food, language and social interaction. Essentially, culture reflects how a group of people live their lives.

A **cultural region** is an area that is defined by the common characteristics of the people who live there, and a **cultural boundary** will separate these regions based off of ethnicities, languages, religions, et cetera. People of the same group have a tendency to cluster together, especially when they share common customs and languages. For example, Canada was founded by the French, but it is now a British Commonwealth. Quebec is a city (and the region surrounding it) where French is the official language.



Thousands of years ago, separate cultural regions thrived in different parts of the world. These **cultural hearths**, cultures that have origins in one of a few areas, often had very little or no contact with each other. After the development of trade networks made communication between the cultural hearths possible, developments in one region often spread quickly to other areas of the world. Today, the original cultural hearths are the main locations from which the most dominant cultural ideas like religion, use of tools, and development of agriculture have spread.



Today, interaction among the people, companies, and governments of different nations has created a common global culture. Through **globalization**, every society is able to adopt or borrow what it finds best about other societies, a phenomenon aided by information technology. Global transportation and **trade**, especially through internationally available products like Coca-Cola and Nike, also makes it easier to exchange products with other cultures. **Isolation**, when a country does not understand or interact with others, can cause slow development or changes, like in Papua New Guinea and North Korea.



Cultural Convergence



The contact between two cultures can lead to **cultural convergence**, in which two cultures become similar to each other or even come together to create a new, blended culture. For example, anime is rooted in Japanese culture, but it's accessible to people around the world. A number of Americans love Japanese anime, just as many people in England love American Western films, and other people across Europe enjoy British-style tea. Basically, the more that cultures interact, the more that their values, ideologies, behaviors, arts, and customs will start to reflect each other.

Cultural convergence can be observed in the present day through the spread of democratic ideas, new technologies, and even global sports. After the end of WWII up to the 1980s, many countries were under the control of communist regimes and military dictatorships, and citizens were not allowed to participate in their government. After the end of the Cold War, **democratic ideas** and forms of government began spreading to new regions of the world, including the Philippines, Argentina, and Haiti. Dictators in Somalia, Liberia, and Ethiopia were removed from power, and the communist-controlled Soviet Union split apart. The transition from political oppression to free elections and governments has not been without flaws, but there is strong support for democracy as the best form of government among most of the citizens.

The spread of **new technologies** is also contributing to cultural convergence. At one time in history, different parts of the world did not even know about each other's existence. There were very few forms of communication; traveling over land by horse could take weeks or months, and it could take a year to reach some places by ship. Today, people in every cultural region are familiar with phones, televisions, computers, and the Internet. These technologies have linked us closer together in a shorter amount of time than at any other point in history.

Even **competitive team sports** have gone global. With cable television, space satellites and the Internet, people can follow sports taking place in every part of the world. When teams from different countries come together to compete, like in the World Cup or the Olympics, cultural convergence becomes even more evident. These sporting events appeal to a wide range of audiences. The rules of the game often take precedence over individual differences- sports can provide a universal language that can bridge cultural gaps, resolve conflicts, and bring greater understanding between people of different backgrounds and nationalities.

Cultural Divergence



When two cultures come into contact with each other, the interaction can sometimes result in groups developing differently from each other. **Cultural divergence** is when societies, or groups within a society, become increasingly dissimilar with the passage of time. Physical barriers, like mountains and deserts, can play a role in cultural divergence by separating people in different regions. Isolated from one another, they gradually develop completely different cultures.

For example, the **Sahara Desert** on the continent of Africa presented a huge physical barrier that limited contact between tribes, who developed their own culture, language, and traditions. North Africa was colonized at different points in history by various empires, kingdoms, and modern nations who found its coastal location on the Mediterranean Sea within reach. Today, the people of North Africa are mostly of Arab descent and the dominant religion is Islam, traits that are consistent with the neighboring cultural region of the Middle East. Conversely, Sub-Saharan Africa has different climates and geographic features that have contributed to the continued separation of ethnic groups, or tribes. While many Sub-Saharan African groups have been subject to foreign influences through the Slave Trade and colonization, there is still evidence of their tribal traditions being practiced to this day.

Cultural divergence can also occur when a group within a society rejects certain cultural influences. The **Amish** in Pennsylvania are a traditionalist Christian group who immigrated to North America in the early 18th century. Despite all the changes that have evolved in society, they still live, dress, and work much like their forefathers did. They speak a form of German (Pennsylvania Dutch) distinct to their region, wear homemade clothing, and follow a strict interpretation of their religious beliefs. A common misconception about the Amish is that they reject all technology, which is untrue. Many Amish communities have running water and electricity to serve health and sanitation needs, but their use of modern technology, especially for recreation, is limited. A major belief is that hard work brings you closer to God, so the majority of the Amish engage in manual labor to provide a living, such as farming, construction, or woodworking. They believe that the outside world can introduce destructive influences, so they live in enclosed communities where non-believers are not allowed.

At one point in history, the **Roman Empire** encompassed most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Beginning with its decline around 120 CE, waves of Germanic tribes, also called Barbarians, attacked the Western part of the empire. These invaders introduced new cultural elements to the Western Roman Empire while the Eastern Roman empire fell under the influence of the Greeks. This eventually led the empire to break apart; the Western portion would evolve into European kingdoms, while the east would flourish under the Byzantine Empire.

Cultural Diffusion



Cultural diffusion, or how culture spreads, has had enormous influence on historical events and continues to shape the present and future. Geographers and historians use diffusion to track the spread of activities from one group to another, which increases with advances in communication, transportation, and technology.

Sometimes, contact between two cultures leads to an exchange of products. Travelers and merchants bring new products back to their homelands; the use of these new products creates a demand that needs to be met through increased trade. Europeans and Native Americans first encountered each other in 1492. This encounter, the **Columbian Exchange**, led to the introduction of new products to both cultures. Europeans brought horses, goats, cattle, pigs, chickens, wheat, cannons, crossbows, and steel to the Americas. At the same time, Native Americans, who developed many foods unknown to the Europeans, traded their products with the Europeans. The European diet was greatly improved by the tomatoes, chocolate, potatoes, pumpkins, peanuts, squash and corn from the New World.

In the 20th century, American cultural traits such as music, movies, clothing, and the use of English spread to every continent. American fast-food restaurants have grown in popularity because they find innovative ways to make their food appeal to international consumers. For example, **McDonald's** serves 68 million people DAILY in 119 countries. Some of their international menu items include the Chicken & Fish Mac in Egypt, which are Big Macs with the beef patties replaced because the Muslim majority living in Egypt does not eat beef. The Rice Fantastic in Hong Kong is a burger with rice patties instead of bread buns because rice is a major crop produced in China. The McSpicy Paneer Burger from India is a fried patty of lemon-flavored cheese dough that replaces meat because the majority of Indians are vegetarians.

We often think of the diffusion of a new phenomenon as beneficial, but it can sometimes have negative effects. One example of this is the spread of **communicable diseases** from one culture to another. The disease diffuses as the micro-organisms that cause the disease are spread. The Spanish conquest in the Americas brought changes that had a devastating effect on the Native American population. The European explorers brought new diseases like typhus, measles, and smallpox, which the Native Americans had never been exposed to. Scientists believe that since Native Americans did not live among domesticated herd animals, which is a breeding ground for diseases, they could not develop a natural immunity to them once they were exposed. A large portion of the Native American population died from these illnesses after their encounter with the Europeans.