

## An Evaluation of Cultural, Social and Technological Diffusion in the Modern World

Brian Daurelle

When two different cultures come together, their better ideas, innovations and ideals tend to mesh into one another. It pertains mostly to technological advances that one people have on meeting another group, that this second group then learns of and takes advantage of. This happens invariably whenever two cultural groups interact for a sustained time; it is particularly acute when developed culture collides with a less developed one. Diffusion is the process of cultural integration by the mixing of ideas and objects. To some critics, this process is a destruction of smaller ethnic cultures and a loss of diversity, driving them to term it 'Cultural Contamination'. The following are several specific cases in which such 'contamination' or diffusion has occurred, and an appraisal of its effect on the world.

The great cities in Africa are prime examples of diffusion. The cultural and ethnic diversity there spans a broad range. While the common people may still wash their clothing and get their drinking at a village or personal well, they can also be found talking on cell phones, which have become integrated into society in many African nations. One of the biggest indicators of diffusion from Europe and America (the 'Western' cultures) are the African Political Leaders. Modern African Politicians are becoming valued more for their leadership and education rather than their backgrounds, as was the case in the time when Africa was rife with ethnic tensions and revolutions. The King of Ghana, for example, is a native from Kumasi, Ghana, but he is also an Oxford Graduate, a member of the Inns of Court in London, and a devout Catholic. Of course, there are people who think that such modernizations are 'contaminating' ancient traditions of tribal rule and culture. These people, who could be called purists, are almost always foreigners, often from developed Western countries, with little knowledge of what it's like to live in the shadow of world powers. The natives have an idea of how the culture and tradition have changed to suit their developing technology, even in the

ancient past, and diffusion of western culture should be no different. (Appiah, The Case for Contamination) The question becomes whether or not modern tribal cultures of Africa are to be viewed as absolute, concrete ways of life, or a still-changing framework that has adapted and can adapt. That such adaptations may take a lifetime or more to happen should be no deterrent to letting them take place.

Yet while the life in many African cities has been globalized, just twenty miles out from the city one can still find mostly native peoples and cultures. Such cities in Africa are like embassies from the rest of the world, small branches of a far-off way of life. Much of African society hasn't even begun to suffer from 'cultural contamination' on a dramatic scale. Furthermore, in general, the people there can hardly wait until they are brought up from their lower standard of living. They know that their culture can adapt to modernization and westernization, as it has done for every other change and innovation in the past.

As an extreme example of one-sided diffusion or contamination (here, the word is perhaps more pertinent), we can consider Japan. After World War II, Japan allowed itself to be 'Westernized', putting up no resistance to the influx of culture that came with temporary American occupation. They quickly changed from an ancient culture focused on honor and education to one based around economy. Their industrialism has made them a world trade capitol, but next to nothing they actually provide or manufacture is genuinely Japanese in origin. Their specialization is primarily in trade, management, and organization, all of which are Western motifs that have been adopted by ambitious Oriental society. Even the western business suit is dominant in the streets. Tall, modern buildings tower over every cityscape, and the only real Japanese culture left to be found is in the scant farming areas that are unsuitable for urbanization. The crowds in Japanese cities are peppered with Westerners, while there are many less Europeans in the outlying suburbs.

An example of diffusion well-known to American schoolchildren is one that occurred in the mid-western United States during the age of Westward expansion. The Spanish and other European immigrants came with their technology and found the Native

Americans. A time later, serious settlement across all of the western U.S. solidified the process of Western cultural domination. Of course, at the time, there was little to no concern for 'purity' or to preserve Native culture, so the two were able to mesh freely. The two groups traded, fought and intermarried and their ways were intermingled, resembling in some ways the interactions Native American tribe had had among themselves before contact with European society. Among the signs of diffusion; It became common for a Native child to leave his tribe and participate in white society; Children began to have names that incorporated elements from both societies (McGinn). The Europeans brought the horse, the gun, eventually even the railroad, light bulb and telegraph. Native Americans today live on reservations that are specially set aside for their use, but many have come to accept modernizations into their everyday life, such as electricity and running water, and it is also not uncommon for a child to leave the tribe and join American society when he comes of age.

Because of its unique nature, America is a constant site of diffusion. The national catchphrase 'The Melting Pot' assures that there is little or no attempt to preserve what can be seen as a unique culture. Therefore, diffusion of new technology and ideas is virulent. One of the easiest cause and effect chains to spot diffusion in is dialect and accent. African-Americans tend to live on the East coast because that is the closest shore to Africa; these were the areas inhabited by the colonists when African slaves were in demand. In the past, their native languages contributed to a dialect and jargon common to slave plantations in the south, which has developed into what we now term Ebonics. This, in turn, has led to distinctive changes of inflection and vocabulary in areas with high percentages of African-Americans that are not present in the predominantly Caucasian Midwest or Northwest. This is the case with any instance of language-contact; one language will monopolize everyday use due to the technological or numerical superiority of its users, but the other will contribute to the first in the subtle forms of inflection changes and vocabulary acquisitions. Regional accents in America are particularly indicative of this; the common 'inner city' dialect is heavily influenced by Ebonics, the typical New York and Boston accents are reminiscent of Italian and Eastern

European inflections, and the 'New Orleans drawl' takes its sound and vocabulary from the creolization of French, English, and African languages.

Diffusion can be seen by contrasting innovation and development with instances in which there is no change at all in a society. The Amish people of the North East America attempt to stop diffusion by their way of living. No technological advances past pumping water and horse-drawn carriages have been allowed to seep into their lives. Because of their contentment with the way they live, there is little room for diffusion of anything except thoughts and ideas, possibly language as well. In the rest of America, a new technology that revolutionizes the way something is done spreads like a wildfire, adapting itself to the needs and ways of the people that take part in the process of diffusion; in a community as strictly self-conscious about development as Amish society, the very idea of improvement through innovation is seen as useless at best, or dangerous at worst. Through their careful control of societal patterns and technology, we can see that culture, technology and language are relatively stagnant when such things are not allowed to develop freely.

So, despite the growing concern for containing and preserving ethnic cultures and societal structures, one can argue that diffusion is one of the best things that human culture can do; it helps those who are behind in their social and technological development to move faster and be a part of the outside world; it attempts to bring all people to the same levels of living. Diffusion is, by its very nature, a process by which a people can better their way of life. Every culture imaginable is a product of historical diffusion, be it internal or external; it is somewhat paradoxical to choose a particular moment in time at which to halt and preserve a particular culture. Recording its current state is of some interest, but much more interesting would be to see how it responds and develop as diffusion occurs, and look back on its previous states only to observe how it has changed. Preservation of culture is suited for museums, not for real societies. Cultural contamination is something that may well exist, by definition, but those whose cultures are being 'contaminated' see it as a way to take part in the world, to better their own lives by taking after those whose cultures have come to dominate it.

### Bibliography

Carley, Kathleen M. "Communication Technologies and Their Effect on Cultural Homogeneity, Consensus, and the Diffusion of New Ideas." *Sociological Perspectives*, no. 38, Winter 1995.

"The Case for Contamination." *New York Times*, 01 January 2006, 'International' section, p. 14

McGinn, Noel. "Education, Democratization, and Globalization: A Challenge for Comparative Education." *Comparative Education Review*, no. 40, November 1966, 341-357.