Cultural Diffusion and Convergence

How does spatial diffusion of ideas, products, and traits lead to change, including cultural divergence and convergence?

Important Vocabulary

Diffusion
Spatial Exchange
Columbian Exchange
Cultural Convergence
Cultural Divergence
Pandemics

A thousand years ago, separate cultural regions thrived in the Americas, the Middle East, Europe, India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa.

- They often had very little contact with one another or none at all.
- Various elements of culture-food, clothing, shelter, religious beliefs, and technology-were very different in each part of the world.
- Today, developments in one region often spread quickly to other areas of the world, creating more similarities.

**Location of the World's Ancient Culture Hearths**
Patterns of Diffusion

Diffusion refers to how something diffuses or spreads.

I. The spread of new products
   a. Sometimes contact between cultures leads to an exchange of products
   b. Travelers and merchants bring new products back to their homelands
   c. Use of the products quickly spreads, stimulating trade
   d. People demand more of the product, and merchants compete to obtain it
      i. The Silk Road
         1. Series of roads connects China with the Middle East and the Roman Empire
         2. Romans had never encountered a material such as silk
            a. They had only worn wool, cotton, or linen
            b. Silk quickly became the symbol of status in elite Roman society
         3. Silk Road also saw exchange of chariots, languages, and metallurgy
         4. Chinese traded silks for horses and camels for use by their armies to prevent foreign invasions

Case Study: Chinese Inventions Foster European Exploration

China developed gunpowder, the compass, and printing at the time of the Middle Ages in Europe.

   o Marco Polo brought news of these inventions back to Europe.
   o Borrowing from the Chinese, the Europeans copied these products.
      ▪ They used gunpowder to construct cannons
      ▪ They adapted the compass to improve their seafaring skills

These Chinese inventions later allowed the rulers of Spain and Portugal to launch voyages of exploration across the Atlantic Ocean.
Case Study: The Columbian Exchange

European and Native American cultures encountered each other for the first time in 1492

- This led to the introduction of new products to both cultures
- Europeans brought horses, goats, cattle, pigs, chickens, wheat, and goods like cannons, crossbows, and steel to the Americas
- Native Americans had developed many foods unknown to the Europeans
- As a result, European diet was greatly improved
- Europeans also learned how to smoke tobacco
Today:

Spread of technologies and products is especially rapid. People learn through:

- Travel
- Newspapers
- Television
- Telephone
- Internet

- The spread of new **ideas**
  - Contact between cultures can lead to important exchanges of ideas
    - Religious beliefs
    - Political ideas

**Case Study: The Spread of Chinese Culture**

Japan’s location close to China brought many aspects of Chinese culture to Japan

- Japan’s rulers came to be known as absolute emperors (like those of China)
- Buddhism and Confucianism came from China
  - Interacted with Japanese traditions to create new values and belief systems
  - Confucianism taught loyalty to the ruler
  - Buddhism taught the Japanese to reject selfish desires

Japan also adopted Chinese characters to create their own written language and art forms.
Case Study: The Global Reach of American Popular Culture

American culture is the product of many influences, including those from Native American, English, French, Spanish, African, Asian and other cultures.

- Early 20th century, a vibrant American culture emerged with new technologies:
  - Radio
  - Record player
  - Moving pictures
  - Television
- After WWII, American popular music and movies became popular in Europe, and later spread to every continent
- English is the international second language
Pandemics: The Spread of Disease

I. We often think of the diffusion of a new phenomenon as beneficial, but sometimes it can have negative effects. One example is the spread of new diseases from one culture to another.

   a. The Bubonic Plague

      i. Highly contagious disease that first emerged in China and Central Asia
      ii. The bacteria that caused the disease were carried by fleas that lived on rats
      iii. European merchant ships unknowingly carried these rats to Italy in the 1340s
      iv. The disease spread quickly to Italy, Spain and France, then reached England, Germany, and the Netherlands.
      v. In less than 10 years, 1/3 of Europe’s population was killed by the spread of the disease.

> Spread of the Black Death. Spread by merchants and travelers, the plague killed more than a third of Europe’s population within five years.
b. Spread of “Old World” diseases to the Americas
   i. The Spanish conquest of the Americas brought important changes to the Americas
      1. Europeans had built up immunities over the centuries to diseases such as small pox, typhus and measles
         a. Europeans had living amongst domesticated herd animals, a rich breeding ground for disease
         b. Native American never had exposure and lacked immunity
      2. Devastating effects on the Native American population
         a. An enormous portion of the population perished from these diseases
c. The Avian Flu Threat (Bird Flu) : 2004
   i. Avian flu virus detected in birds in Vietnam
   ii. The virus that causes this infection in birds can mutate (change) to infect humans, who have no immunity against it
iii. It was feared that this might lead to a highly contagious and deadly outbreak.

iv. In 2005, cases of the Avian Flu (H5N1) were identified in Turkey, Russia, Mongolia and China.
   1. Cases were later identified in Romania, Greece, Croatia, Bulgaria and the United Kingdom.

v. Fortunately, fears of a global pandemic, which might have killed millions of people, were not realized.
Cultural Divergence and Convergence

To diverge is to separate or go in different directions. To converge is to come together.

I. Cultural Divergence
   a. The tendency of societies, or groups within societies, to become increasingly dissimilar with the passage of time.
   b. This often happens from exposure to new ideas through cultural diffusion
   c. Physical barriers, like mountains might also separate people in different regions
      i. Isolated from each other they gradually develop completely different cultures
   d. The Roman Empire
      i. Occurred later in the Roman Empire
      ii. At one time this empire controlled vast amounts of European lands and parts of the Middle East and Northern Africa
      iii. Eventually Germanic tribes invaded
      iv. The Roman Empire broke into two main regions (East and West) which were extremely different from one another
   e. India
      i. Aryan India was once unified by a common Hindu culture
      ii. But arrival of Islamic influences from the northwest led India to become divided into Hindu and Muslim areas
f. Aztecs and Yaquis
   i. Mexico
      1. Many scholars believe that they once spoke the same language and shared a common culture
      2. They later became separate cultural groups
      3. Aztecs migrated southwards to Central Mexico
      4. Both came to speak different languages and hold different religious beliefs

II. Cultural Convergence and Globalization
   a. Cultural diffusion can lead to cultural convergence
      i. This is when different cultures become similar or even come together
         1. Europeans and Native Americans
            a. 15\textsuperscript{th} century completely separate cultures
            b. Columbian Exchange brought about cultural convergence
            c. European ideas such as Catholicism, landholding, the Spanish language, and royal government, merged with Native American traditions, such as tobacco, eating corn, tomatoes, chocolate and squash
            d. Created a new “Latin American” culture
ii. Globalization

1. Today the rapid pace of cultural diffusion is contributing greatly to cultural convergence
2. Every society quickly learns through air travel, internet, phones, newspapers, television, etc.
3. Global transportation and trade make it easy to exchange products with other cultures
4. Each society borrows or adapts what it finds best in other societies
   a. This is called globalization—the creation of a common global culture
   b. **We realize that we are all citizens, not only of our own countries, but of a common global community**

iii. Examples of Convergence

1. Democratic Ideas
   a. In the 1980s much of the world was still ruled by communist regimes
   b. By the 1990s, democracy spread to many new regions of the world:
      i. Philippines
      ii. Chile
      iii. Nicaragua
      iv. Argentina
      v. Panama
      vi. Haiti
      vii. Countries in Africa
2. The English Language

   a. There is an increasing trend to use English as an international second language
      i. This is another good example of cultural convergence
   b. Today, almost half a billion people speak English as their primary language
   c. Most countries speak English as their second language
   d. The use of English in former British colonies like Egypt and India, spread American popular culture since WWII
   e. Location of multi-national businesses, and the internet have both contributed to the adoption of English as a global language
3. New Technologies
   a. At one time in history, different parts of the world did not even know about each others’ existence
   b. It took months to reach some places by ship
   c. There were no other means of communication
   d. Today, we are closely linked by modern technology

4. Global Sports
   a. Today, it is easy to follow sports teams all over the world
   b. Olympics
   c. World Cup in soccer
   d. Sports provide a “universal language” that can bridge cultural gaps, resolve conflicts, and bring about greater understanding among people of different backgrounds and nationalities
Notes created by Audrey Alamo, PreAP World Geography based on excerpts from “Mastering the TEKS in World Geography,” Jarrett Publishing.