Outline of Archaeological Traditions

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for the
Human Relations Area Files, Inc.

January, 2001
(revised September 2010)

Advisory Board

Introduction

The Logic of Comparative Archaeology

Comparative research is a necessary tool in evolutionary science. It is only through comparison that we can identify diversity, and it is the creation and maintenance of diversity that evolutionary science attempts to understand. Within anthropology, comparative research is usually called cross-cultural research.

The unit of analysis in such research is the culture. What constitutes a culture is rather loosely defined, but includes sharing a common language, a common economic and socio-political system, and some degree of territorial continuity. Because any given population within a culture will show some divergence from the others, a culture is usually represented by a particular community, and because cultures are always changing, the representative or focal community is described as of a particular point in time.

Cross-cultural research makes two fundamental assumptions. First, that a culture can be adequately represented by a single community. And second, that cultures can be compared. The first assumption is based on the idea that any definition of culture will be broad enough that any given community in a culture will share fundamental features of behavior and organization with others similarly defined. The second is based on the uniformitarian assumption underlying all evolutionary science: if an explanation accurately reflects reality, "measures of the presumed causes and effects should be significantly and strongly associated synchronically" (Ember and Ember 1995:88).

Comparative archaeology extends traditional cross-cultural research in two dimensions. First, it adds new cases to those which can be used for comparison, and hence increases the sample size for cross-cultural research. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it allows the comparativist to determine whether the presumed cause of some phenomenon actually precedes its presumed effects. Like all forms of comparative research, comparative archaeology seeks to identify regular associations between variables and to test explanations for why those associations exist. Unlike in comparative ethnographic research, the associations identified can be either synchronic or diachronic, and the explanations for them can be tested both synchronically and diachronically.

The Purposes of Comparative Archaeology

Because of its ability to identify and test explanations diachronically, comparative archaeology is uniquely suited to exploring both unilinear and multilinear trends in cultural evolution. Unilinear trends refer to either progressive or regressive changes in societal scale, complexity, and integration which take place over a long period of time and large geographical areas. Comparative archaeology can examine change over a long period of time to determine empirically whether unilinear trends are present, and test explanations for those trends by determining whether presumed causes actually precede presumed effects. Similarly, multilinear evolutionary processes, those which create the specific features of different societies within the larger, unilinear trends, can be tested diachronically to see if presumed causes precede assumed effects.

The diachronic nature of comparative archaeology also makes it uniquely suited to exploring patterns of migration, innovation, and diffusion, and to investigating the roles of these processes in cultural evolution. A synchronic study of a given region might suggest that a trait diffused through cultures in a region, and perhaps might suggest the source and path of the diffused trait.

Only a diachronic study can demonstrate diffusion empirically, pinpoint the source of a given trait, and chart the path of its diffusion through time.

In short, the purpose of comparative archaeology is to establish and explain long-term processes of cultural stability and change.

The Methods of Comparative Archaeology

Comparative archaeology employs standard descriptive and inferential statistics to find patterns and test hypotheses about cultural evolution. Since both the ability to describe patterns in archaeological data and to test hypotheses is based on examining differences between actual observations and those expected from data collected under a specified set of conditions, the conditions governing case selection must be carefully defined. A random sample of cases from an established sampling universe is a basic requirement of almost all statistical explorations.

Such a sampling universe must meet several conditions. First, the cases included must all be equivalent on some set of defining criteria. Second, the criteria used to define cases must be sensitive enough to variables of interest that patterns within and among them can be recognized. Third, the universe should include all possible cases. Fourth, the universe must allow random samples large enough for hypothesis tests to be drawn from it, and taking into account the loss of cases due to missing data. Fifth, the universe must be small enough to allow basic information for stratified or cluster sampling, or for eliminating cases with specific characteristics from the universe.

The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* was designed to fulfill these criteria and to serve as a sampling universe for comparative archaeological research.

The Units of Analysis

The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*, as the name suggests, uses "archaeological traditions" as the units of analysis. Archaeological traditions are **not** equivalent to cultures in an ethnological sense because, in addition to socio-cultural defining characteristics, archaeological traditions have **both** a spatial and a temporal dimension. Ethnographic cultures are assumed to exist simultaneously in an "ethnographic present," and hence lack a temporal dimension. Archaeological traditions have a temporal dimension. Archaeological traditions are also defined by a somewhat different set of socio-cultural characteristics than ethnological cultures. Archaeological traditions are defined in terms of common subsistence practices, socio-political organization, and material industries, but language, ideology, kinship ties, and political unity play little or no part in their definition, since they are virtually unrecoverable from archaeological contexts. In contrast, language, ideology, and cross-cutting ties are central to defining ethnographic cultures.

The concept of archaeological tradition as it is used here was influenced by, but is also **not** equivalent to, the concept of archaeological tradition as used by Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips (1958:37), which they define as "a (primarily) temporal continuity represented by persistent configurations in single technologies or other systems of related forms." The emphasis for Willey and Phillips is on the temporal dimension, (Willey and Phillips [1958:33] use the concept of "horizon" to express the spatial dimension of archaeological traditions) and the focus is on technology (most frequently pottery) rather than broader socio-cultural characteristics. Once again, archaeological tradition as used here has both a spatial and temporal dimension, and is defined primarily by socio-cultural characteristics.

An archaeological tradition is defined as *a group of populations sharing similar subsistence practices, technology, and forms of socio-political organization, which are spatially contiguous over a relatively large area and which endure temporally for a relatively long period*. Minimal areal coverage for an archaeological tradition can be thought of as something like 100,000 square kilometers; while minimal temporal duration can be thought of as something like five centuries. However, these figures are meant to help clarify the concept of an archaeological tradition, not to formally restrict its definition to these conditions.

It must be emphasized that because the units of analysis are different, it is not valid to select cases for comparison from both the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* and a list of ethnographic cases, such as the *Outline of World Cultures* (Murdock 1958; for an empirical evaluation of this issue see Peregrine 2003:6-9). The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*, therefore, is best used as a stand-alone sampling universe.

The Scope of the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*

The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* is an attempt to catalogue all known archaeological traditions, covering the entire globe and the entire prehistory of humankind. It should be taken as a catalogue in process, which will be continually revised and updated as new information about human prehistory is generated, and as existing information is synthesized and reinterpreted.

The main concern in developing the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* was to generate a catalogue of roughly equivalent units. In other words, in defining the archaeological traditions in a given area it was a primary concern to ensure that those archaeological traditions were roughly equivalent to those defined for other areas. In many cases, the archaeological record would have allowed a much more detailed division of the archaeological traditions than was actually made; similarly, the archaeological record was "stretched" in many cases to create divisions in archaeological traditions that might be considered tenuous by area specialists. It must be emphasized that these decisions were made actively and purposely, not arbitrarily, and that critique and revision of a given archaeological tradition or set of traditions must be made in the context **of the whole catalogue**, not just one region or segment of it.

To develop the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*, the world was divided into six regions (North America and Mesoamerica [1000s], South America and the Caribbean [2000s], Europe and Western Asia [3000s], Central and Eastern Asia [4000s], Southern Asia and Oceania [5000s], and Africa and the Middle East [6000s]) with an additional division for human ancestors [7000s]. Basic, summary literature on the prehistory of each region was consulted, and a preliminary catalogue of the archaeological traditions was developed. The preliminary catalogue for each region was sent to members of the advisory board for comment and critique, and was then revised. The revised catalogue was synthesized into a complete draft of the *Outline*, and this was sent to members of the advisory board for their comments and critique, and final revisions were made based on their comments. Minor additional revisions were made while working with authors writing entries on the traditions for the *Encyclopedia of Prehistory* (Kluwer/Plenum 2001-2002). The *Encyclopedia of Prehistory* has more extensive descriptions of the traditions defined here.

The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* begins its coverage with the origins of our genus, *Homo*, approximately two million years ago in Africa. *Homo* spread throughout Eurasia by 500,000 years ago, into Oceania by 40,000 years ago, and into the Americas by 12,000 years ago. Area coverage for those regions begins when humans first enter them. The ending date of the *Outline's* coverage also varies by region. In Oceania, the Americas, and Sub-Saharan Africa, coverage ends at approximately 500 BP with European exploration and initial colonization. In Central Asia coverage ends with the rise and spread of nomadic states such as the Hsuing-Nu and Sarmatian ca. 1500 BP. In Europe coverage ends with the expansion of the Roman Empire ca. 2000 BP. In China coverage ends with the Shang dynasty, ca. 3100 BP. And in Northern

Africa and the Middle East, coverage ends with the rise of the New Babylonian and Old Kingdom Egyptian civilizations ca. 3500 BP.

Each entry in the *Outline* contains six pieces of information on each archaeological tradition. First is the tradition's identification number. Second is the tradition's name. In many cases, this name was created to uniquely describe the tradition, or was chosen from a group of alternate names. The approximate temporal range of the tradition in years before present (BP--with present being A.D. 2000), and in many cases rounded to the nearest millennium, is listed to the right of the name. These are bracketing dates, and should not be taken as firmly established dates for the beginning and ending of the tradition. The main body of each listing contains information on the tradition's location and characteristics. The description of characteristics is a brief statement of the tradition's subsistence base, settlement pattern, and socio-political organization. Taken together, the bracketing dates, location, and description formally define the tradition. Finally, *Outline of World Cultures* alphanumerics have been assigned by the HRAF staff. These numbers are used in eHRAF Archaeology (see below).

eHRAF Archaeology

eHRAF Archaeology online provides full-text source documents on a sample of archaeological traditions. The *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* was used as the sampling frame for eHRAF Archaeology. Cases for the first two installments of eHRAF Archaeology were chosen using random sampling from the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*. Installment 3 and later began to complete the temporal sequence (i.e. the traditions preceding and following) for a case included in previous installments. New cases were also added to eHRAF Archaeology by random sampling from the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions*. As of the fall of 2010, 28% of the traditions in the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* are represented in eHRAF Archaeology; the number grows annually as additional installments are published. Users should consult the HRAF home page (http://www.yale.edu/hraf) to determine which traditions are currently included.

[Editor's note: A few traditions are merged in eHRAF Archaeology because the literatures were not separable. The original distinctions in the *Outline of Archaeological Traditions* are preserved below, with the combined traditions added.]

References Cited

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