

Unit 3: Cultural Patterns and Processes

Unit 3 explains how culture spreads, changes, and shows up in the landscape. It covers the definition of culture, cultural landscapes, the five types of diffusion, the historical and modern forces behind diffusion, how religions and languages diffuse from their hearths, and what happens when cultures meet.

AP Human Geography

Cultural Patterns and Processes

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. Section 3.1 defines culture, 3.2 and 3.3 show how culture shapes places, 3.4 gives you the diffusion vocabulary that 3.5 through 3.8 all use, and 3.7 applies diffusion to religion and language. Exam questions usually describe a real example and ask you to name the process.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions the exam tests most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Cultural Patterns and Processes is about 12 to 17 percent of the AP Human Geography exam. The diffusion vocabulary shows up in other units too, so these terms carry beyond their own weight. Migration in Unit 2 is one of the main engines of relocation diffusion, and Unit 4 borrows centripetal and centrifugal forces from this unit.

3.1 Introduction to Culture

Culture is the shared practices, technologies, attitudes, and behaviors transmitted by a society. Notice what is on the list. Technologies count as culture, not just art and food. **Culture traits** are the individual elements of culture, such as food preferences, architecture, and land use. A trait is one piece. Culture is the whole set.

Two attitudes toward cultural difference run through this unit. **Cultural relativism** is the attitude of judging another culture by its own standards rather than by the standards of one's own culture.

Ethnocentrism is the attitude of judging other cultures by the standards of one's own culture, assuming it is superior. They are exact opposites, and the exam loves the pair.

Trap. The difference is the direction of judgment. Cultural relativism asks what a practice means inside its own culture. Ethnocentrism assumes your culture's way is the right way and finds others lacking. A question that describes someone evaluating a practice "on its own terms" is pointing at cultural relativism.

3.2 Cultural Landscapes

The **cultural landscape** is what culture leaves behind on the land. It combines physical features, agricultural and industrial practices, religious and linguistic characteristics, evidence of sequent occupance, and other expressions of culture, including traditional and postmodern architecture and land-use patterns. When a question asks what you can read in a landscape, it is asking about this list.

Sequent occupance is the notion that successive societies leave their cultural imprints on a place, each contributing to the cumulative cultural landscape. Picture a city where an old road still sets the street pattern, a medieval church stands beside a nineteenth-century factory, and modern housing fills the gaps. Each layer is one society's imprint, and they are all readable at once.

Attitudes toward ethnicity and gender also shape how space gets used. The role of women in the workforce, **ethnic neighborhoods**, and indigenous communities and lands all help shape land use in a given society. An ethnic neighborhood is an area where a particular ethnic group clusters, reflecting cultural beliefs and shaping the use of space. The storefronts, places of worship, and signage are the cultural landscape of that neighborhood.

Trap. Sequent occupance is about time, not just variety. A neighborhood where several cultures live side by side today is a snapshot. Sequent occupance is the layering, where each era's changes are still readable in the landscape.

3.3 Cultural Patterns

Sense of place is the emotional connection people build to locations. Regional patterns of language, religion, and ethnicity feed it. **Placemaking** is the process by which people create that meaning, identity, and attachment for a place. Monuments, festivals, murals, and the deliberate preservation of old buildings are all placemaking. They turn a location into a place people identify with.

The same cultural forces that build attachment can hold a state together or pull it apart. Language, ethnicity, and religion are factors in creating **centripetal forces**, which unify a state, and **centrifugal forces**, which divide it. A shared language can be centripetal in one country and centrifugal in another where several language groups compete for recognition. You will meet the formal definitions of these forces in Unit 4.

Trap. Sense of place and placemaking are not interchangeable. Sense of place is the feeling. Placemaking is the work that produces it. If the question describes people doing something to a place, that is placemaking.

3.4 Types of Diffusion

Diffusion is how a trait spreads from one place to another. Learn the five types in two groups, because the exam expects you to sort examples into them.

Relocation diffusion happens when people move from one place to another, carrying their culture with them. The trait relocates because the carriers do. Migrants bringing their language or religion to a new city are relocation diffusion.

Expansion diffusion happens when a trait spreads outward from a hearth while remaining strong there. The hearth keeps the trait. Expansion diffusion has three subtypes.

TYPE	HOW IT MOVES	KEY TEST
Contagious	Spreads rapidly and widely from person to person through a population, like a disease.	No hierarchy involved. It jumps from anyone to anyone.
Hierarchical	Spreads from authority figures or prominent places downward or outward through a hierarchy.	It moves down a rank order, such as major cities to smaller ones.
Stimulus	The underlying idea of a trait spreads even though the trait itself does not, prompting a modified version in the new location.	The original trait never arrives. Only the adapted idea does.

Trap. Stimulus diffusion is the subtype students miss most. The exam gives an example where the specific practice never arrives but the idea behind it does, changed to fit local conditions. If the trait itself arrives intact, it is not stimulus diffusion.

3.5 Historical Causes of Diffusion

Three forces have shaped cultural patterns across centuries. **Colonialism, imperialism, and trade** describe domination and economic exchange between unequal powers, which helped shape cultural patterns and practices worldwide. Spanish is spoken across Latin America because of Spanish colonization. That is diffusion by conquest and administration.

Creolization is the blending of two or more cultures into a new form of cultural expression, resulting from interactions between culture traits and larger global forces. Louisiana Creole culture, which blends French, African, Spanish, and Native American elements, is the standard example.

A **lingua franca** is a common language used for communication between groups that speak different native languages. English serves this role in international business and aviation.

3.6 Contemporary Causes of Diffusion

Two tendencies describe what is happening to cultures now. **Cultural convergence** is the tendency for cultures to become more alike as communication technologies and globalization spread shared practices. **Cultural divergence** is the tendency for cultures to retain or revive distinct identities, sometimes in reaction to globalization. The two are not contradictory. Both can be true at once, with global brands spreading while local identities strengthen in response.

Time-space convergence is the shrinking of relative distance between places through improved transportation and communication technology. The physical distance has not changed, but a flight that once took weeks by ship now takes hours, which reshapes and accelerates interactions among people. **Communication technologies** such as the internet are reshaping and accelerating those interactions and changing cultural practices, with measurable effects including the increasing use of English and the loss of indigenous languages.

Trap. Convergence and divergence can both be correct answers in different questions about the same region. Read what the question describes. Shared practices spreading is convergence. A culture pushing back and reviving its identity is divergence.

3.7 Diffusion of Religion and Language

A **cultural hearth** is the place of origin from which cultural traits such as language families, religions, and gender roles diffuse outward. Everything in this section traces back to a hearth.

Start with language. A **language family** is a collection of languages related through a common ancestral language. The Indo-European family is the one the course names, and English, Spanish, Hindi, and Russian all belong to it. A **dialect** is a regional variation of a language, differing in vocabulary, spelling, or pronunciation from the standard form. American and British English are dialects of one language. A **toponym** is a place name, and the distributions of language families and religions can be read in toponyms. Spanish names like San Diego and Los Angeles mark the Spanish imprint on California, and French names like New Orleans and Baton Rouge mark the French imprint on Louisiana.

Now religion. A **universalizing religion** actively seeks converts and appeals to all people. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism are universalizing, and they spread through expansion and relocation diffusion. An **ethnic religion** is closely tied to a particular ethnic group or place. Hinduism and Judaism are ethnic, and they are generally found near the hearth or spread through relocation diffusion, because people carry them when they move rather than sending missionaries. Religions have distinct places of origin from which they diffused through different processes, and their practices and belief systems affected how widely each religion diffused.

RELIGION	HEARTH	TYPE	HOW IT DIFFUSES
Christianity	Jerusalem, in the Roman province of Judea	Universalizing	Expansion and relocation
Islam	Mecca, western Arabia	Universalizing	Expansion and relocation
Buddhism	Northeastern India and Nepal	Universalizing	Expansion and relocation
Sikhism	The Punjab region	Universalizing	Expansion and relocation
Hinduism	The Indus River valley	Ethnic	Near the hearth or by relocation
Judaism	The eastern Mediterranean	Ethnic	Near the hearth or by relocation (diaspora)

Trap. Do not confuse a religion's type with its size. Ethnic religions can be enormous. Hinduism has over a billion followers and is still ethnic, because it is tied to a people and a place rather than to active conversion.

3.8 Effects of Diffusion

When cultures meet, four outcomes describe what can happen. Keep them distinct, because the exam tests the differences directly.

Acculturation is the adoption of cultural traits by one group under the influence of another, without full absorption into the dominant culture. The group changes but keeps its identity. **Assimilation** is the process by which a minority group fully adopts the culture of the dominant group, losing its distinct identity. The identity is the difference between the two. **Syncretism** is the blending of elements of two or more cultures into a new cultural form. **Multiculturalism** describes a society in which distinct cultural groups coexist while maintaining their separate identities.

A note on **syncretism** and **creolization**. The two cards define nearly the same process, blending into a new cultural form. In practice, creolization appears in questions about historical forces like colonialism and trade, while syncretism appears as the general effect when cultures meet through diffusion.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
Cultural relativism vs ethnocentrism	Relativism judges a culture by its own standards. Ethnocentrism judges by your own standards, assuming superiority.
Acculturation vs assimilation	Acculturation adopts traits and keeps identity. Assimilation adopts the dominant culture and loses distinct identity.
Syncretism vs creolization	Both are blending into a new form. Creolization is tied to historical global forces. Syncretism is the general effect of diffusion.
Expansion vs relocation diffusion	Expansion keeps the trait strong at the hearth. Relocation moves the trait with people who carry it.
Hierarchical vs contagious diffusion	Hierarchical moves down a hierarchy or rank order. Contagious moves person to person, like a disease.
Universalizing vs ethnic religion	Universalizing seeks converts and appeals to all people. Ethnic is tied to a group or place and spreads mainly by relocation.
Convergence vs divergence	Convergence is cultures becoming more alike. Divergence is cultures retaining or reviving distinct identities.
Sense of place vs placemaking	Sense of place is the feeling. Placemaking is the work that produces it.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

1. A new fashion trend appears first among celebrities and in major cities, then spreads to smaller towns over several months. This is an example of

- A. contagious diffusion
- B. hierarchical diffusion
- C. relocation diffusion
- D. stimulus diffusion

2. Which of the following best distinguishes an ethnic religion from a universalizing religion?

- A. Ethnic religions actively seek converts in new regions.
- B. Universalizing religions are tied to a specific ethnic group.
- C. Ethnic religions are closely tied to a particular group or place and usually spread through relocation diffusion.
- D. Universalizing religions cannot spread through relocation diffusion.

3. An immigrant neighborhood adopts the host country's workplace customs but keeps its home language, food, and religious holidays. This is best described as

- A. assimilation
- B. acculturation
- C. syncretism
- D. multiculturalism

4. A city's downtown shows colonial-era government buildings, nineteenth-century factories, and new apartment towers built by recent immigrants. A geographer studying these visible layers is examining

- A. time-space convergence
- B. sequent occupance
- C. cultural divergence
- D. stimulus diffusion

Answer Key

1. B. The trend moves from celebrities and major cities down a rank order to smaller towns, which is hierarchical diffusion. A is wrong because contagious diffusion moves person to person without a hierarchy. C is wrong because relocation diffusion requires people physically moving and carrying the trait. D is wrong because the trend itself arrives intact; stimulus diffusion would require only the idea to arrive in a modified form.

2. C. This is the course definition: ethnic religions are closely tied to a particular group or place and are generally found near the hearth or spread through relocation diffusion. A reverses the definitions, since seeking converts is the mark of a universalizing religion. B reverses them the other way. D is false, since universalizing religions spread through both expansion and relocation diffusion.

3. B. The neighborhood adopts some traits but keeps its language, food, and holidays, so its distinct identity survives. That is acculturation, adoption without full absorption. A would require full adoption of the dominant culture and loss of distinct identity, which has not happened. C would require the blending to produce a new cultural form. D describes the society as a whole, not what this group did.

4. B. The question asks about visible layers left by successive societies, which is sequent occupance. A is wrong because time-space convergence is about the shrinking of relative distance, not about layers in a landscape. C is wrong because cultural divergence is about cultures retaining distinct identities. D is wrong because nothing here involves an idea spreading in modified form.

One-Page Recall Check

- Define culture and name three culture traits.
- Explain the difference between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism.
- Define cultural landscape and sequent occupance in your own words.
- Explain how an ethnic neighborhood reflects cultural beliefs in land use.
- Distinguish sense of place from placemaking.
- Explain how language can act as both a centripetal and a centrifugal force.
- Define relocation and expansion diffusion, and give an example of each.
- Describe contagious, hierarchical, and stimulus diffusion, and name the test that tells them apart.
- Explain creolization and give an example.
- Define lingua franca and give an example.
- Explain how colonialism and trade shaped cultural patterns.
- Distinguish cultural convergence from cultural divergence.
- Define time-space convergence and explain what shrinking relative distance means.
- Explain two effects of communication technologies on culture.
- Define cultural hearth.
- Distinguish a language family from a dialect, and give an example of each.
- Explain what a toponym reveals about diffusion.
- Distinguish universalizing from ethnic religions, with examples of each.
- Name the hearth of each of the six religions in the table on page 5.
- Distinguish acculturation, assimilation, syncretism, and multiculturalism.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP Human Geography deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Culture, Culture traits, Cultural relativism, Ethnocentrism, Cultural landscape, Sequent occupance, Culture and land use, Ethnic neighborhood, Sense of place, Placemaking, Culture and centripetal/centrifugal forces, Relocation diffusion, Expansion diffusion, Contagious diffusion, Hierarchical diffusion, Stimulus diffusion, Creolization, Lingua franca, Colonialism, imperialism, and trade, Cultural convergence, Cultural divergence, Time-space convergence, Communication technologies and culture, Cultural hearth, Language family, Dialect, Universalizing religion, Ethnic religion, Religious hearths and diffusion, Toponym, Acculturation, Assimilation, Syncretism, Multiculturalism.

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