

## Theories of Diffusionism: Myth and/or Reality?

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**Abstract:** In the nineteenth century, the paradigm of the age was cultural evolutionism represented by Friedrich Max Müller, Edward B. Tylor, and James G. Frazer. With the realization of the limits of this theory in the early part of the twentieth century, there arose the new paradigm of diffusionism, represented by George Elliot Smith and William James Perry in Great Britain, and by Father Peter Schmidt and Father Wilhelm Koppers in Austria-Germany. Curiously, this paradigm was not popular in other countries such as France and the United States and besides, the diffusionists in the two areas were not in league but showed open hostility to each other. The paper examines the diffusion theory of W. J. Perry as the representative example, and also discusses the reasons why the theory that once in vogue came to be criticized and disappeared.

Today, however, diffusionism has proved to be correct thanks to the development of various branches of sciences. In a word, the early diffusionists were overzealous in presenting a universalistic theory before they could secure a firmer ground by amassing reliable data. They consequently constructed a quasi-science myth. The line that separates myth and science is not firm as this case of diffusion theory attests.

**Keywords:** cultural diffusionism, mythology.

Il me semble seulement que si, dans les sociétés sans écriture, les connaissances positives étaient très en deçà des pouvoirs de l'imagination et qu'il incombait aux mythes de combler cet écart, notre propre société se trouve dans la situation inverse, mais qui, pour des raisons opposées certes, conduit au même résultat. Chez nous, les connaissances positives débordent tellement les pouvoirs de l'imagination que celle-ci, incapable d'appréhender le monde dont on lui révèle l'existence, a pour seule ressource de se retourner vers le mythe. Autrement dit, entre le savant qui accède par le calcul à une réalité inimaginable, et le public avide de saisir quelque chose de cette réalité dont l'évidence mathématique dément toutes les données de l'intuition sensible, la pensée mythique redevient un intercesseur, seul moyen pour les physiciens de communiquer avec les non-physiciens.

(Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Histoire de Lynx*, Plon, 1991, p.11)

[It simply seems to me if, in societies without writing, positive knowledge is far inferior to the power of imagination and the duty of filling the gap is allocated to myth, our own society find itself in the opposite situation, but it is certainly for the opposite reason, although the result is the same. In

our society, as positive knowledge reaches far beyond the imagination, the imagination not being able to understand the world disclosing itself can only have recourse to myth. In other words, between scholars who reach unimaginable realities through calculation and the general public who are eager to grasp something of this reality in which mathematical evidences betrays all the products of intuitional senses, mythical thinking comes in as an intercessor, the only means for physicists to communicate with non-physicists.]

### **What is Research History for?**

Research history helps to avoid committing the same mistakes. Max Müller's theory of Solar Mythology was judged and sentenced guilty. Recent researchers of comparative mythology however are publishing papers emphasizing the solar elements found in many Indo-European mythological themes (Jackson 2006). In retrospect, we can say that Müller's intuition was right. The same situation can be argued for diffusionism. The theory was basically right, but was denied. What is common to these two theories is that they went too far ahead before constructing a secure basis. Solar mythology and diffusionism both declared that they had found a universal theory that would explain everything, while the truth is that their theories were only part of the truth. They were not the whole truth. There are a lot of grand theories that met the same fate (Skinner 1990). These theories might have been appreciated more if they had been more modest and content to be the holders of a limited truth. In what follows I would like to look at this tendency of grand theories, examining the case of diffusionism as an example. In my opinion, a grand theory is a modern myth, a dream of a scholar who wishes to find a universal key to previously unexplained matters.

### **What is Myth and What is Science?**

Explanations (=Theories) in both myth and science have common roots. Without the curiosity or effort to give an adequate explanation or solution, neither myth nor science would have existed. The source of an idea is restricted by the paradigm of a specific cultural environment. In the nineteenth century, it was cultural evolutionism, represented by Friedrich Max Müller, E. B. Tylor, and J. G. Frazer. With the realization of the limits of cultural evolutionistic theory and the development of ethnology and comparative linguistics in the early part of the twentieth century, there arose a new paradigm of diffusionism, represented by George Elliot Smith, and W. J. Perry. This paradigm was criticized by the American school of cultural relativism headed by Franz Boas. Consequently, diffusionism has been out of vogue since then. Recently, however, with the remarkable development of dating techniques using carbon 14 and mtDNA, which have enabled us to trace both the dates and routes of human movements very precisely, diffusionism is once again taking a superior position. Nowadays, nobody denies that humans originated in East Africa and spread to other parts of the globe. The movements have been scientifically proved. Not only humans, but their cultural elements such as

language and myth also diffused. As to the origin and diffusion of myths, this is best studied by Michael Witzel and Yuri Berezkin (Witzel 2012; Berezkin 2013). Diffusionism was called a myth in the past, but now is regarded as a proper science. What is the difference? The distinction of myth and science seems very subjective when something once called a myth could be called science in a later generation. Diffusionism in the past has been criticized as speculative, neglecting geographical-historical realities, and lacking in originality and creative power. They had to be speculative because there was insufficient evidence. Those who advocated diffusionism inevitably had to be speculative. In a sense, they invented a pseudo-scientific myth without realizing it. But the point is that, in the end, diffusionism proved to be right and those who criticized it and who claimed themselves true scientists are now not always regarded as such.

My opinion is that the speculative diffusionism of the first half of the twentieth century was excessive and extravagant, but it was a necessary step to reach the true scientific diffusionism of this century. Speculative diffusionism was a kind of myth which researchers had intuitively dreamed of. More stringent scholars could not accept such an unfounded hypothesis. But the scientific diffusionism of the present age could not perhaps be pursued without this incorrect predecessor. Myth existed before science. Myth was necessary before the coming of true science [Fig.1 & Fig.2].

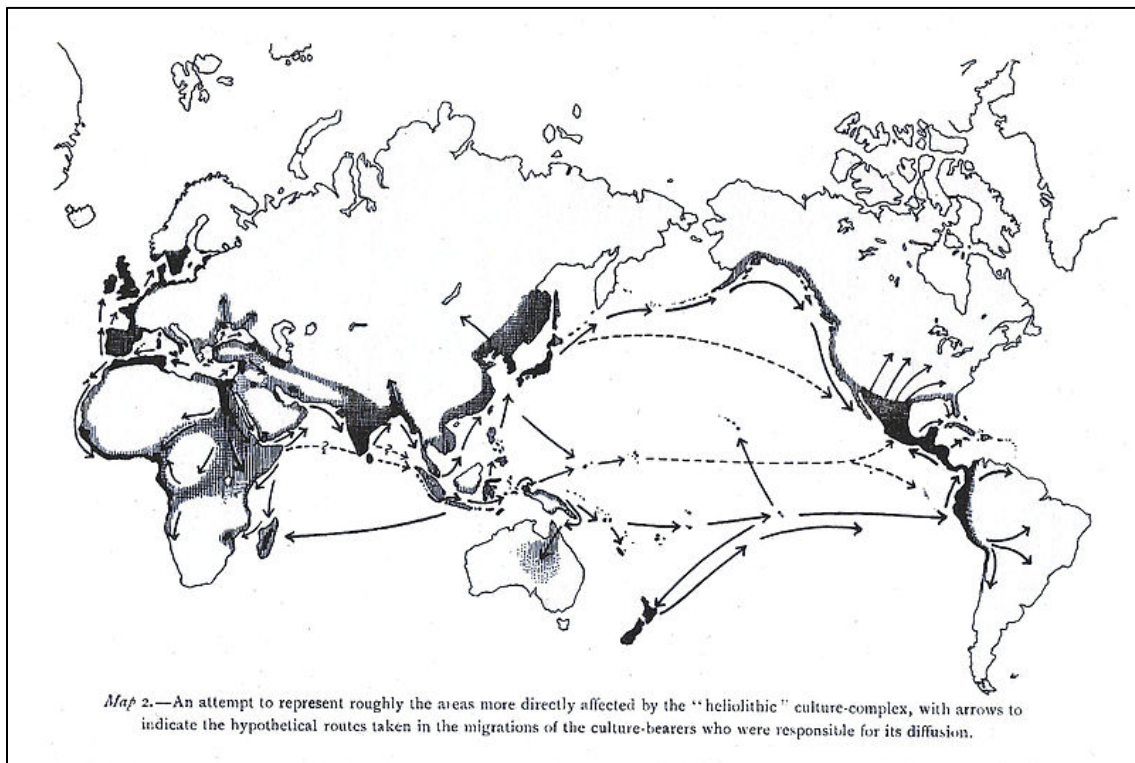


Fig.1: Cultural Diffusion Map from Egypt by Grafton Elliot Smith<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Source: [https://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-cultural\\_diffusion](https://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-cultural_diffusion)



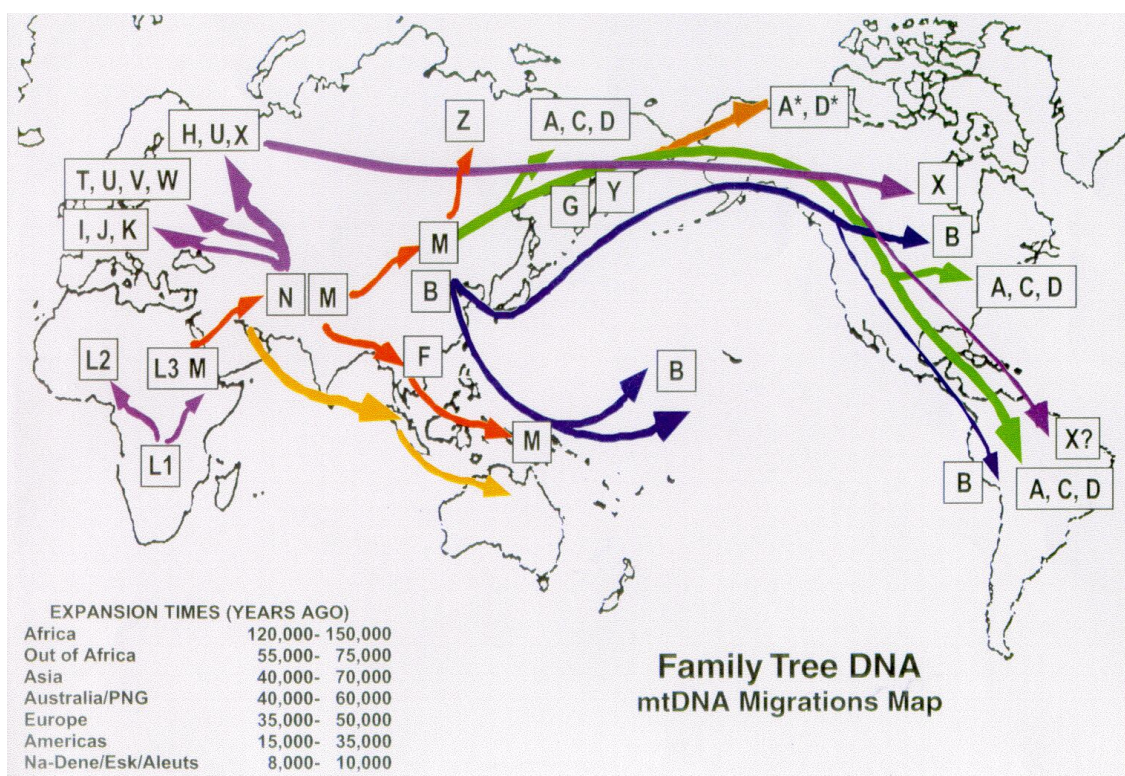


Fig.2 Migration Map for founding haplogroups<sup>2</sup>

### From the End of Eighteenth Century to the Nineteenth Century

Theorists of the quasi-myth diffusionism started from Depuis, who was then followed by such scholars as Creuzer, Benfey, Müller, Smith, and Perry. In the year 1794, a French savant Charles François Depuis (1742-1809) published a book titled *Origine de tous les cultes, ou religion universelle*. According to the author, religious rituals, processions, images, and myths were all derived from the sun, moon, planets, and constellations. Among them, the sun was the chief god. From the victory of the sun over darkness and winter sprang the idea of a Restorer of the world, a Saviour. The ancient Chaldeans, who were distinguished for their achievements in astronomy, taught that the planets were the interpreters of the will of the gods. The beast-forms of the Egyptian deities were copied from the constellations. (Toy 1910: 47)

This Pan-Babylonianism was followed by Eduard Stucken, Hugo Winckler, and Alfred Jeremias.

German philologist and classicist George Friedrich Creuzer (1771-1852) presented a different type of diffusionism, in this case the origin being India. Creuzer published *Symbolik und Mythologie* (Creuzer 1810-12) and presented his idea of the diffusion of religious doctrine in form of symbols. According to him, "The origins of this Symbolik lay among the priestly castes of ancient India. Based on their observations of the heavens the Brahmanic clerics had created an esoteric

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.roperld.com/mtDNA.htm>

cosmology, which they expressed by means of religious symbols.” (Williamson 2004: 127), “But in their attempt to explain this theology to the people, the priests were forced to transform these symbols into narratives, thus giving rise to mythology” (Ibid.). “Eventually the ancient prelates spread their wisdom beyond India, traveling to Asia Minor, Egypt, and even Israel. Here they encountered primitive hunters and shepherds, whose religion consisted of a crude fetishism. The priests taught the natives religion, as well as the elements of agriculture and statecraft. From Egypt, the clerics crossed the Mediterranean, colonizing the Pelagian people of Samothrace and establishing the Cabiri mysteries. The island of Samothrace would become the great “dividing line” between Asia and Europe, as the ancient *Symbolik* spread into Greece and Italy” (Ibid.).

Dupuis and Creuzer, before Darwin’s evolutionism, discussed the origin of the idea of god and the process of diffusion without recourse to Christian theology.

The Pan-Indianism of Creuzer was shared by Indologist Theodor Benfey (1809-1881). He presented the idea that folktales originated in India and spread to the rest of the world in the Introduction to his edition of the *Panchatantra* in 1859. (Tompson 1946: 376-379).

Then, about the middle of the nineteenth century, the theory of biological evolutionism by Charles Darwin and the theory of social evolutionism by Herbert Spencer came about. Diffusionism, with its interest in heavenly bodies, particularly the sun, naturally took into account the evolutionary ideas and proceeded to the next stage. This stage of the theory that combined diffusionism, evolutionism, a solar myth, and an explanation about the birth of myth is what Max Müller presented.

One of the newer forms of diffusionism was presented by Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900). During the editing of the Rigveda manuscripts, Müller faced the task of how to locate this Indian classical text in the stages of human evolution. His answer was given in his essay “Comparative Mythology” (1856). Like his predecessor Creuzer, Müller emphasized that the impression of the sun gave the early mankind of India the chance of creating the first language and consequently the first myth. He also declared India to be the oldest cradle of human civilization. In that essay, Müller talked about the feelings of the children of mankind, how they were impressed by the movement of the sun and how that impression eventually gave birth to myths. In this case, too, the emphasis on the Indian origin of human wisdom and its diffusion therefrom had been emphasized. Müller’s myth theory, usually called Nature Myth or Solar Mythology, was attacked by Andrew Lang (1844-1912) and William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894) and faded away like a setting sun.

The issue of Indo-Europeans should naturally be treated separately from Müller’s mythological theory. With the academic efforts of Indo-Europeanists such as Schleicher, Bopp, Schlegel, Hirt, Burgmann, Schröder, Meillet, Benveniste, Gimbutas, and many others, we know about the homeland, history and culture of Indo-Europeans fairly accurately. The Proto-Indo-European group dispersed themselves from their homeland into various directions in various periods, thus leaving their descendants across Eurasia from the Tarim Basin in the east to Iceland in the Atlantic (Mallory 1989; Mallory and Adams 2006).

## The First Half of the Twentieth Century

Still, belief in the importance of the sun for early mankind and the belief in the diffusion of the solar doctrine survived into the twentieth century. It took on different styles in Germany-Austria and in Great Britain.

In Germany, Fritz Graeber (1877-1934) presented the idea of *Kulturkreis* (Lips 1935). There are unique culture zones that were once independent across the globe, several of them coexisting and later diffusing to other parts (Kluckhohn 1936; Andriolo 1979). This concept was accepted by the Vienna ethnological school headed by Father Wilhelm Schmidt and Father Wilhelm Koppers (Koppers 1955).

In Great Britain, the earlier advocate of diffusionism was Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) (Smith 1916a; 1916b; Wilson 1938). He was born in Australia and first engaged in medical studies. After working at Cambridge, he took the first professorship of anatomy in the Government School of Medicine in Cairo (Stocking 1995:210). In Egypt, Smith was greatly impressed by the great pyramids and the technique of mummification. After returning to England in 1907, he argued that the particular distribution of megalithic monuments in India, East Asia, Oceania and America was due to the influence, directly or indirectly, of Egyptian civilization (Stocking: 212). With his insistence on the sun and megalithic building, his position was called the “heliolithic school” (Stocking: *ibid.*). In 1915, Smith published *The Migration of Early Culture*. In that book, he said this heliolithic culture complex included megalithic monuments; sun and serpent worship; the swastika symbol; the practice of massage, circumcision, cranial deformation, and tattooing; stories of creation, the deluge, the divine origin of kings, and the genesis of a chosen people from an incestuous union. These elements had been carried westward and eastward in a series of maritime expeditions in the centuries after 900 B.C. (Stocking: *ibid.*)

Another British diffusionist was William James Perry (1887–1949), a Reader in Comparative Religion at Manchester University (Perry 1921; 1924; 1935). Perry was first attracted by Melanesian societies through the lectures of W. H. Rivers. Rivers in 1913 told Perry that he had found the existence of megalithic monuments and a sun-cult in Indonesia. With this information, Perry thought the stone-works of Indonesia were the products of migrants who had entered the area in search of gold, and who had introduced irrigation, metal-working, and a sun-cult. Megalith culture, according to him, was transmitted to the rest of the world from Egypt. Later collaborating with Grafton Elliot Smith, Perry argued that megalithic culture was transmitted to the rest of the world from Egypt (Stocking 1995: 214).

In the chapter five of his book *The Growth of Civilisation*, Perry says “the first food-producing communities in all parts of the world outside the area of the Ancient East, especially those that could be reached by sea, possessed a culture so similar to that of Ancient Egypt that little doubt can exist as to their mode of origin. Part of this wave of cultural influence was that which brought the builders of megalithic monuments to the shores of Britain. This movement also took builders of megalithic monuments to the coasts of America .... No reasonable doubt can



exist as to the cultural relationship of this far-flung line of settlements, or the common aims of builders of megaliths the wide world over” (Perry 1924: 93).

American anthropologist Kroeber explains Perry’s idea more comprehensively in his article “Diffusionism”: “...it is monogenetic. Primitive culture is conceived as essentially stagnant, inclined to retrogression as much as to progress. It is contended that at one time and place in human history, namely, in Egypt around 3000 B.C., an unusual constellation of events produced a cultural spurt leading to the rapid development of agriculture, metallurgy, political organization and kingship, priesthood, concern with the afterlife and mummification, writing and other cultural institutions. From this center of origination this great cultural complex was carried in whole or in part, with secondary embellishments and degenerations, to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean world, to India, Oceania, Mexico and Peru and in fragmentary form even to remote peoples who remained otherwise primitive. The remainder of cultural history is essentially the story of the minor modifications of this one great culture, until the Greeks began to dissolve and replace it by civilization” (Kroeber 1931: 141).

Kroeber also gives a shrewd observation on two branches of diffusionism, German-Austrian and British in the same article: “The British school has won about the same degree of adherence at home as the German; and likewise has tended to label as evolutionists and antidiffusionists all students who showed themselves unsympathetic to its full tenets. It is perhaps significant that both schools have made practically no converts from each other nor outside their countries of origin. Scandinavia, France and the United States have held almost unanimously aloof” (ibid. 142).

### **Diffusionism Being Denied**

Looking at these theories of diffusionists now, we are not surprised to witness their downfall. These grand theories of human prehistory were built upon on very meager evidence. The scholars put so much value on the sun and the megalithic architecture that wherever they found the traces of these two symbols, they immediately declared that they had found the prehistoric footprints of emigrating culture heroes. Their diffusionism was essentially a myth created to make people (including themselves) accept a picture of human prehistory, when scientifically there was insufficient material to make such reconstruction possible. These scholars were simply romanticists, rather than scientists. Diffusionism came to be denied probably for the following three reasons:

1. Exact science, with the criteria of objective data for validity, gradually started to expel the cloud-built castle out of academia. Here are just the names of the grand theorists of the nineteenth century: J. J. Bachofen, Henry Morgan, Edward Burnett Tylor, Karl Marx, and James George Frazer.
2. Accumulation of usable and useful data became more important.
3. In the twentieth century, newcomers such as Germany and Italy came to join in the colonial wars. Ethnology changed its form into social anthropology to

better serve colonial politics. Knowledge of the ruling tribes became more important than the grand picture of human prehistory.

These three terms could be put in different words:

1. More respect for exact science is equivalent to the denial of subjective and dreamy theories.
2. More insistence on the accumulation of objective data.
3. More emphasis on knowledge for colonial administrations.

These three points are very much in accordance with the political situation of the twentieth century. Cultural Anthropology in the United States was pioneered by German-immigrant Franz Boas (1858-1942). He and his students denied diffusionism and recommended a more restricted theory of cultural relativism (Boas 1924; Goldenweiser 1925; White 1945). Boas says, "To us the assumption of a unique form of cultural beginnings does not seem plausible. Setting aside the question of what form of social life may have existed at the time when our ancestors first developed speech and the use of tools, we find everywhere phenomena that point to very early differentiations from which even the simplest cultural forms developed. Language and art are perhaps the best proof of this contention" (Boas 1924:293); "It seems to us that the uniformity of early patterns cannot be proved. By analogy to the phenomena recently mentioned, we may rather infer diversity of early patterns" (*Ibid.*, 294)

Two reasons could be posited for his criticism of diffusionism: 1) In his new home, Boas wished to establish a more scientific anthropology, which was different from the European ethnology that was more traditional and more hospitable to diffusionism; 2) Unlike European colonial states, United States already had Native Americans to be ruled inside its own country. Boas and his students had no time to waste to on reconstructing a map of prehistoric global human movement. They had to make grammar books and dictionaries of native languages; they had to edit texts of myths and folktales; they had to investigate native social structures, and ceremonies before these natives died out due to the destruction of their lives by the U.S government and invading white new-comers.

### **Diffusionism Now**

As we have seen, diffusionism became unpopular by the middle of the twentieth century. I have presented three conditions that made diffusionism unpopular. If the three conditions were removed, then the resurgence of diffusionism would become possible. Condition 1 can be dealt with simply by the attitude of the researcher. If a researcher forgets about the romantic dream and looks only at the objective data, there is no problem. Condition 2 is conquerable with megadata in a tiny computer. Condition 3 is disappearing with no colonies in this century. The revival of diffusionism now became possible. The most effective tool for this is the scientific proof of the intercontinental and interoceanic migration of men, animals, plants, cultural devices by the investigation of mitochondrial DNA (Oppenheimer 2003; Sorenson and Johannessen 2006). In



the field of comparative mythology, the accumulation of myths and motifs leaves no doubt about the diffusion of myths (Witzel 2012; Berezkin 2013). There are, of course, still some old-fashioned diffusionists (Heyerdahl 1950; Davis 2001), but they are exceptions, remaining fossils to disappear soon.

American anthropologist James Morris Blaut explains the rise and fall of diffusionism from sociological factors: “The diffusionist world model became explicit, powerful, and important as the scientific underpinning of colonialism. ... Classical diffusionism was appropriate to the epoch in which capitalism was expanding mainly by means of colonialism and related processes. This epoch ended after World War I, to be followed by a period characterized by a search for stability, normalcy, and peace, hence equilibrium, and characterized in social thought by models of equilibrium, not of expansive diffusion: Keynesian models in economics, regionalism in geography, functionalism and relativism in anthropology, and the like. Diffusionism was in eclipse during this period ... ” (Blaut 1987: 33). I think what Blaut says is true and, although the expressions are different, my argument is basically the same.

Finally, we can get back to the quotation of Lévi-Strauss at the top of this paper. Lévi-Strauss says when there is a discrepancy between the amount of information and the capacity of understanding, in the case of too little information and too big an issue (pre-modern society and the nineteenth century humanities) and vice versa (modern science), people tend to recourse to myth for bridging the gap. When faced with the huge amount of knowledge about the world and the very small amount of precise historical, ethnological, and archaeological information, researchers of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries first took a fanciful diffusionism and later switched to a stricter cultural relativism. When we face a big issue with little information in hand, we have to make a rational picture by filling vacant spaces with imagination. We now have large amounts of information in proportion with the big issue of human prehistory. We thus now have more scientific diffusionism in place of the old fanciful diffusionism.

Practical research, however, has not stopped even after the methodological issue ended with the victory of diffusionism. In specific cases, we still have to prove whether similar myths of distant areas are the result of diffusion or not (mere coincidence or independent invention?). The general rule and the particular case are different. Although the story of the *Odyssey* surely spread across Eurasia, it is still disputed whether a Jesuit mission which came to Japan in the Muromachi period (the sixteenth century) passed the story around and in result stimulated the production of such Japanese voyage stories as the *Yuriwaka-daijin* or the *On-zōshi Shima Watari* (Matsumura 2016).

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