

## Guest Field Note

Montgomery, Alabama

Located in a predominately African American neighborhood in Montgomery, Alabama, the street intersection of Jeff Davis and Rosa Parks is symbolic of the debates and disputes in the American South over how the past is to be commemorated on the region's landscape. The Civil War and civil rights movement are the two most important events in the history of the region. The street names commemorate Montgomery's central role in both eras, and they do so in the same public space. Montgomery was the site of the first capital of the Confederacy in 1861 while Jefferson Davis was president. The Alabama capital was also the site of the 1955–1956 Montgomery bus boycott that launched the civil rights movement. The boycott was sparked by Rosa Parks's arrest after she refused to give up her seat on a city bus when ordered to do so by a white person. Most of my research examines the politics of how the region's white and African Americans portray these separate heroic eras within the region's public spaces, ranging from support for and against flying the Confederate flag to disputes over placing statues and murals honoring the Civil War and the civil rights movement on the South's landscape.

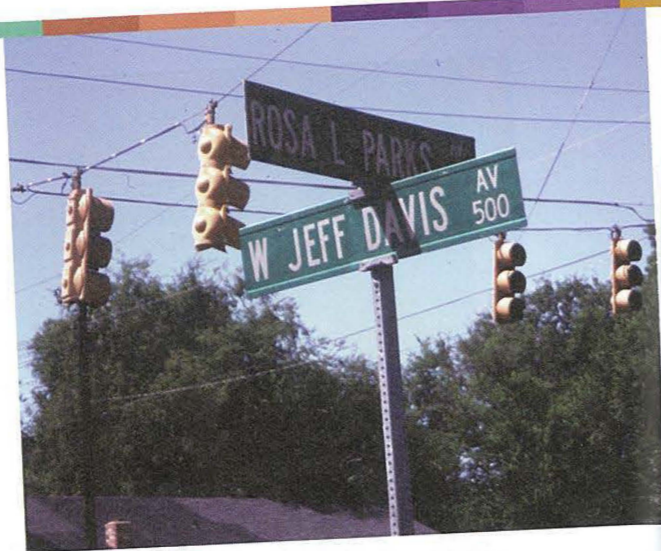


Figure 1.21

Credit: Jonathan Leib, Old Dominion University

houses and their porches, items on a roadside restaurant menu (grits, for example), a local radio station's music, the sound of accents that you perceive to be Southern, a succession of Baptist churches in a town along the way. These combined impressions become part of your overall perception of the South as a region.

Such cultural attributes give a certain social atmosphere to the region, an atmosphere that is appreciated by many of its residents and is sometimes advertised as an attraction for potential visitors. "Experience the South's warmth, courtesy, and pace of life," said one such commercial, which portrayed a sun-drenched seaside landscape, a bowing host, and a couple strolling along a palm-lined path.

The South has its vigorous supporters and defenders, and occasionally a politician uses its embattled history to arouse racial antagonism. But today the South is so multifaceted, diverse, vigorous, and interconnected with the rest of the United States that its regional identity is much more complicated than traditional images suggest (Fig. 1.21). This serves as an important reminder that perceptual regions are not static. Images of the South are rapidly changing, and perceptions of the South as a region will change over time.

Regions, whether formal, functional, or perceptual, are ways of organizing humans geographically. They are a form of spatial classification, a means of handling large amounts of information so we can make sense of it.

## Culture

Location decisions, patterns, and landscapes are fundamentally influenced by cultural attitudes and practices. Culture refers not only to the music, literature, and arts of a society but to all the other features of its way of life: prevailing modes of dress; routine living habits; food preferences; the architecture of houses and public buildings; the layout of fields and farms; and systems of education, government, and law. **Culture** is an all-encompassing term that identifies not only the whole tangible lifestyle of peoples, but also their prevailing values and beliefs. Culture lies at the heart of human geography.

The concept of culture is closely identified with the discipline of anthropology, and over the course of more than a century anthropologists have defined it in many different ways. Some have stressed the contributions of humans to the environment, whereas others have emphasized learned behaviors and ways of thinking. Several decades ago the noted anthropologist E. Adamson Hoebel defined culture as:

*[the] integrated system of learned behavior patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the result of biological inheritance... culture is not genetically predetermined; it is noninstinctive... [culture] is wholly the result of social invention and is transmitted and maintained solely through communication and learning.*

Hoebel's emphasis on communication and learning anticipated the current view of culture as a system of meaning, not just a set of acts, customs, or material products. Clifford Geertz advanced this view in his classic work, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), which has influenced much recent work in human geography. Hence, human geographers are interested not just in the different patterns and landscapes associated with different culture groups, but in the ways in which cultural understandings affect both the creation and significance of those patterns and landscapes.

Cultural geographers identify a single attribute of a culture as a **culture trait**. For example, wearing a turban is a culture trait in certain societies. Many men in the semiarid and desert areas of North Africa, Southwest Asia, and South Asia wore turbans before the birth of Islam. The turbans protected the wearers from sunlight and also helped distinguish tribes.

Not all Muslim men wear turbans, but in some Muslim countries, including Afghanistan, wearing turbans is popular because either religious or political leaders (in the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban) prescribe it for men. Today, turbans often distinguish a man's status in society or are worn as a sign of faithfulness to God. In many Muslim countries, including Egypt and Turkey, men rarely wear turbans. The appearance of turbans in other Muslim countries varies a great deal. For instance, in Yemen men who cover their heads typically wear *kalansuwa*, which are caps wrapped in fabric. In Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, men who cover their heads typically wear *kaffiyeh*, which are rectangular pieces of cloth draped and secured on the head.

Wearing turbans is not a cultural trait limited to Muslims. In the United States, most men who cover their heads with a turban are Sikhs, which is a separate religion from Islam. In the Sikh religion, men are required to keep their hair uncut. The common practice is to twist the hair and knot it on top of one's head and then cover it with a turban. The Sikh religion began in the 1500s, and in the late 1600s, the tenth guru of the religion taught that wearing a turban was a way to demonstrate one's faithfulness to God. As the turban example exhibits, culture traits are not necessarily confined to a single culture. More than one culture may exhibit a particular culture trait, but each will consist of a discrete combination of traits. Such a combination is referred to as a **culture complex**. In many cultures, the herding of cattle is a trait. However, cattle are regarded and used in different ways by different cultures. The Maasai of East Africa, for example, follow their herds along seasonal migration paths, consuming blood and milk as important ingredients of a unique diet. Cattle occupy a central place in Maasai existence; they are the essence of survival, security, and prestige. Although the Maasai culture complex is only one of many cattle-keeping complexes, no other culture complex exhibits exactly

the same combination of traits. In Europe, cattle are milked, and dairy products, such as butter, yogurt, and cheese, are consumed as part of a diet very different from that of the Maasai.

A **cultural hearth** is an area where cultural traits develop and from which cultural traits diffuse. Often a cultural trait, for example the religion of Islam, can be traced to a single place and time. Muhammad founded Islam in the 500s C.E. (current era) in and around the cities of Mecca and Medina on the Arabian Peninsula. Other culture traits, such as agriculture, can be traced to several hearths thousands of years apart. When such a trait develops in more than one hearth without being influenced by its development elsewhere, each hearth operates as a case of **independent invention**.

## Connectedness through Diffusion

Geographer Carl Sauer focused attention on how ideas, specifically the innovation of agriculture, spread in *Agricultural Origins and Dispersals*. Based on geography and archaeological evidence, Sauer established that Mesoamerica independently invented agriculture, adding it to the hearths of agriculture in Europe, Africa, and Asia. When ideas, people, or goods move across space, this process of dissemination is called **cultural diffusion**.

In 1970, Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand published pioneering research on the role of time in the diffusion process. Hägerstrand's research revealed how time, as well as distance, affects individual human behavior and the diffusion of people and ideas. Sauer and Hägerstrand's fascinating research attracted many geographers to the study of diffusion processes. Geographers are still using principles of diffusion to model movement and diffusion through GIS and other geographic techniques.

Whether diffusion of a cultural trait occurs depends, in part, on time and distance from the hearth. The farther a place is from the hearth, the less likely an innovation will be adopted. Similarly, the acceptance of an innovation becomes less likely the longer it takes to reach its potential adopters. In combination, time and distance cause **time-distance decay** in the diffusion process.

Not all cultural traits or innovations diffuse. Prevailing attitudes or cultural taboos can mean that certain innovations, ideas, or practices are not acceptable or adoptable in particular cultures. Religious teachings may prohibit certain practices or ideas, such as divorce, abortions, or contraceptive use, on the grounds of theology or morality. Some cultures or religions prohibit consumption of alcoholic beverages, and others prohibit consuming certain kinds of meat or other foods. Prescriptions cultures make about behavior act as **cultural barriers** and can pose powerful obstacles to the spread of ideas or innovations.