

Determinants of Culture

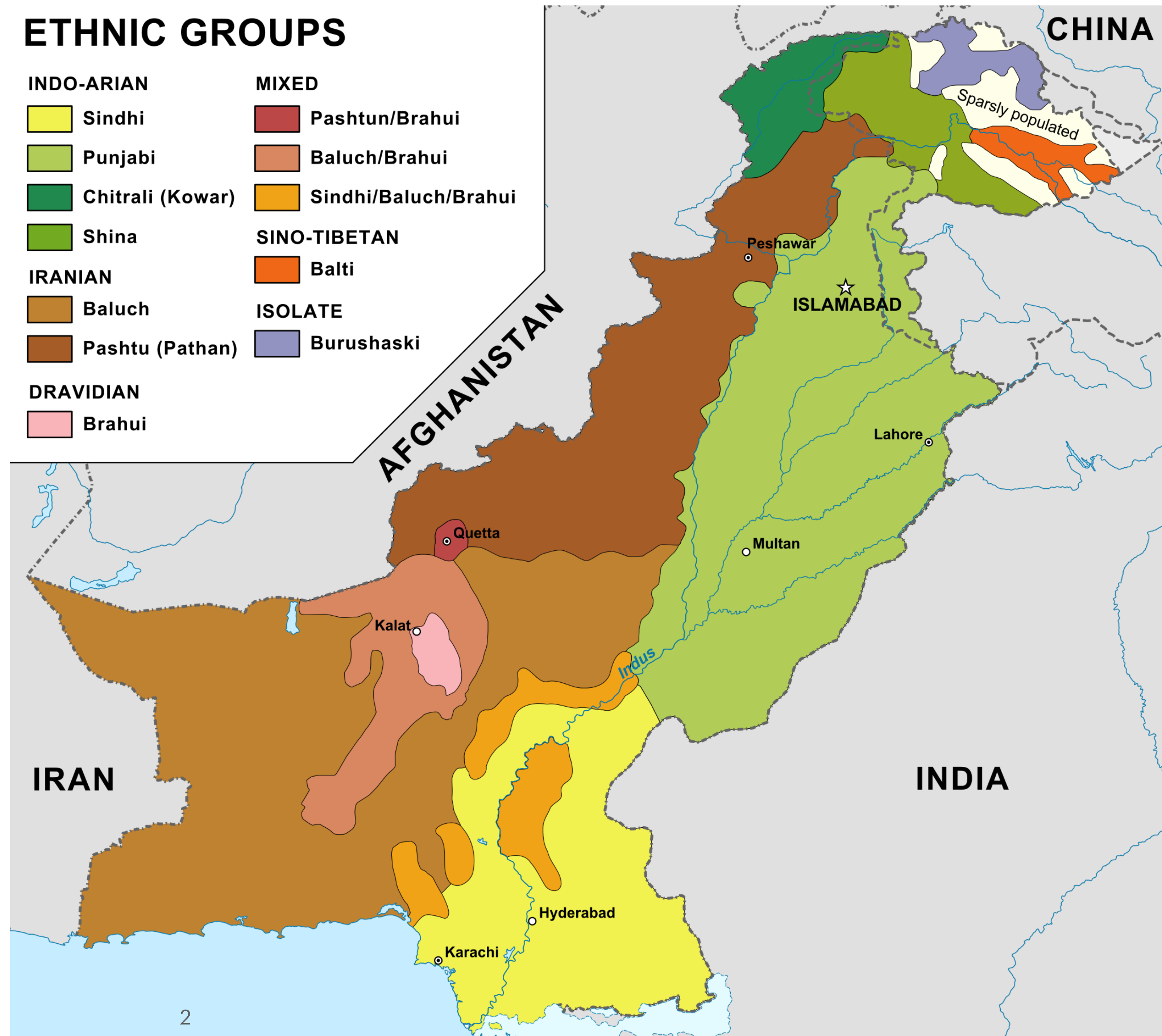
factors that most distinguish cultural groups

J. DeChicchis

Language

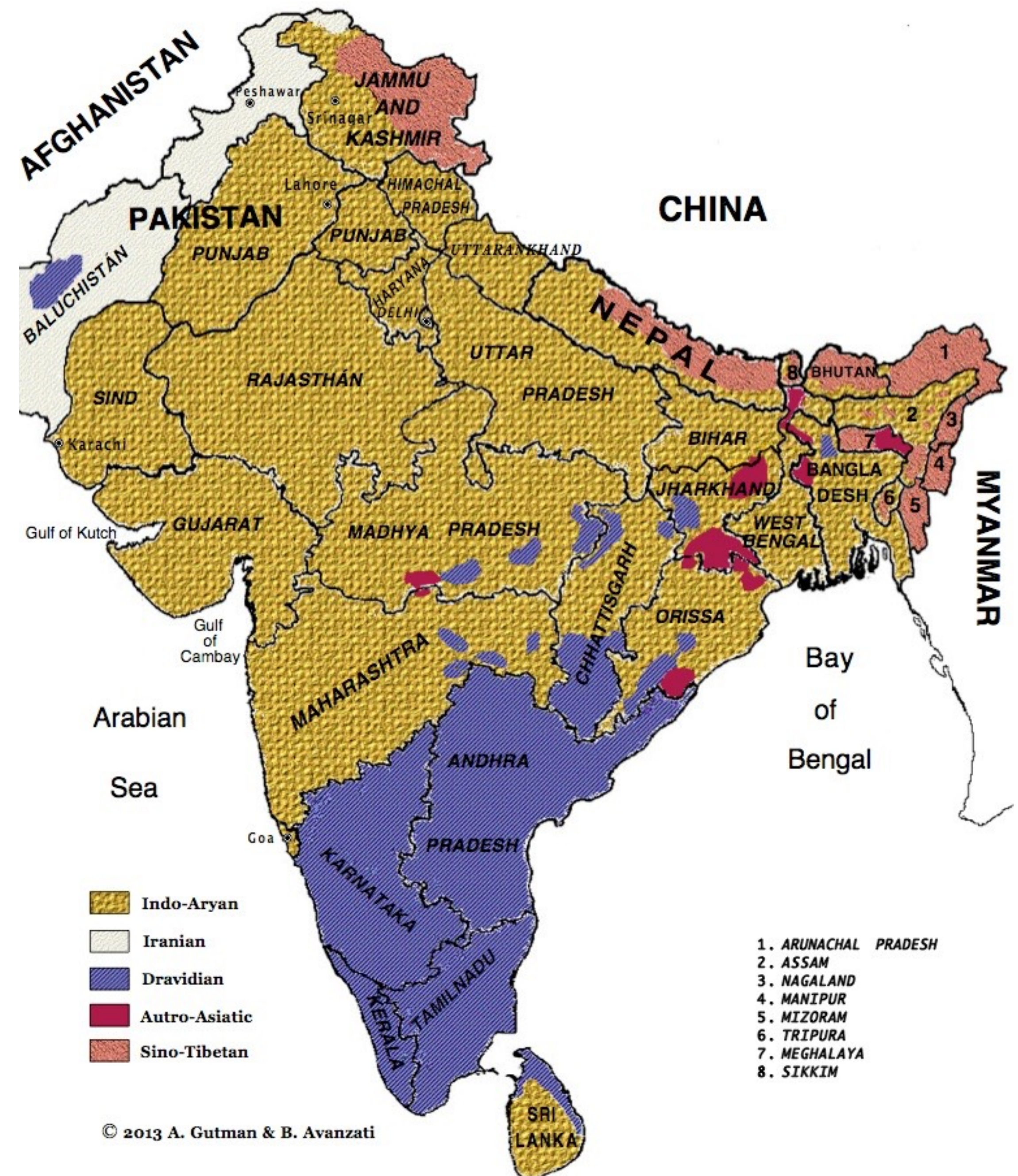
language family

- Language is the most important determinant of culture.
- People who speak languages that are genetically related (i.e., languages which are members of the same language family or of the same genetic subgroup) have other cultural similarities.
- The ability to speak a language is perhaps the most studied “learned collective behavior” of human beings.



Language sprachbund

- People in the same sprachbund have other cultural similarities.
- A sprachbund is an area where, after a long period of contact between peoples who speak different languages, the languages have formed similarities due to a convergence of linguistic features. In a sprachbund, such as in India, the people begin to share other cultural features: similarities of diet, religion, dress, architecture, music, etc.



Religion

dividing a culture into subcultures

- Many cultural differences can be predicted by religious differences.
- Religious differences can divide populations into subcultures.
- Despite its small area, the population of Lebanon has been divided because of civil conflict due to religious differences. This map shows dominance areas of the country's **seven important religions**.

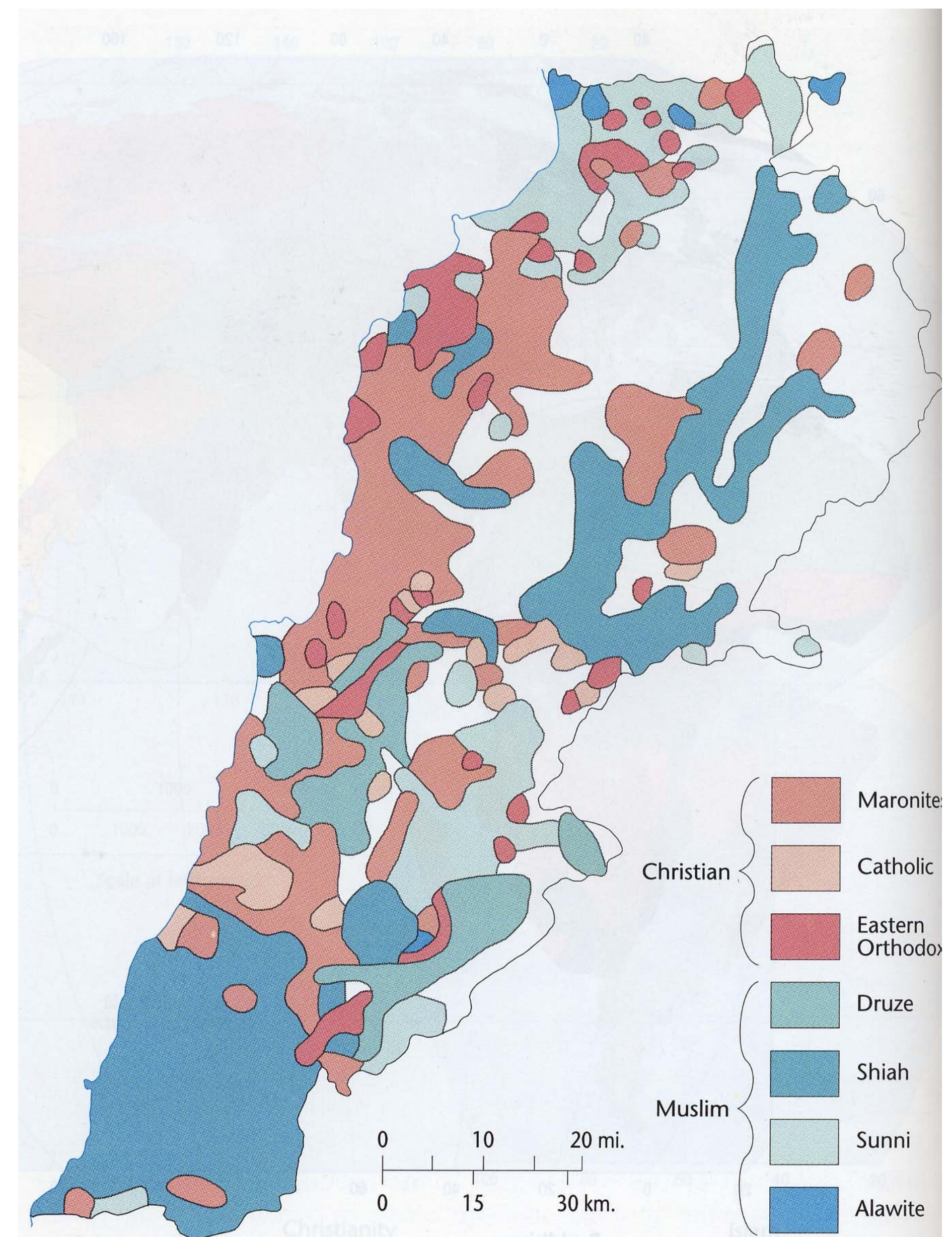


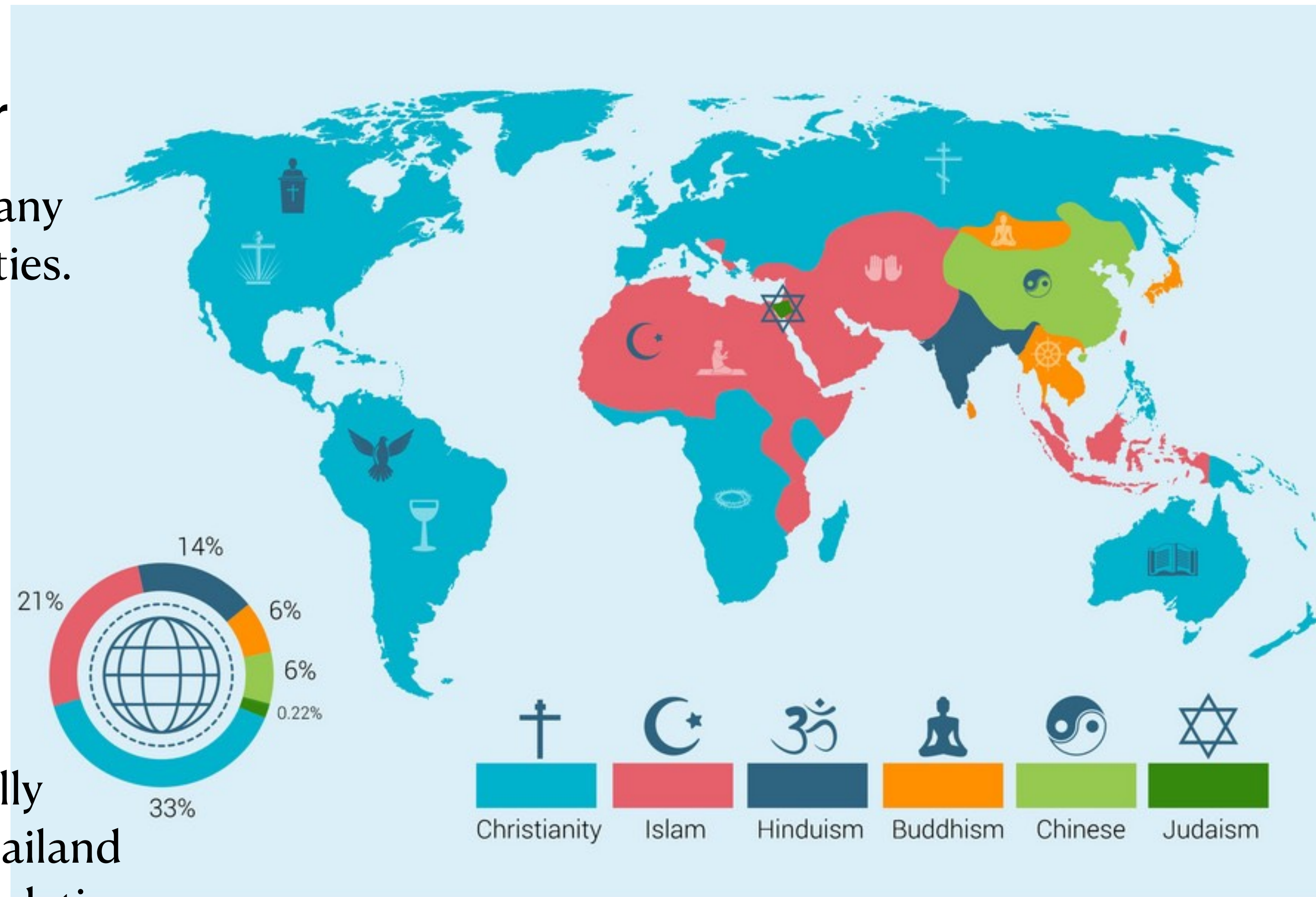
Figure 6.3

Distribution of religious groups in Lebanon. A land torn by sectarian warfare in recent times, Lebanon is one of the most religiously diverse parts of the world. Overall, Lebanon is today 37 percent Christian, 34 percent Shiah Muslim, 21 percent Sunni, and 7 percent Druze. (Derived, with changes, from Klaer, Wendelin, in *Heidelberger Geographische Arbeiten*, 15 [1966]: 333; and *The Economist* Feb. 24, 1996])

Religion

a transcultural unifier

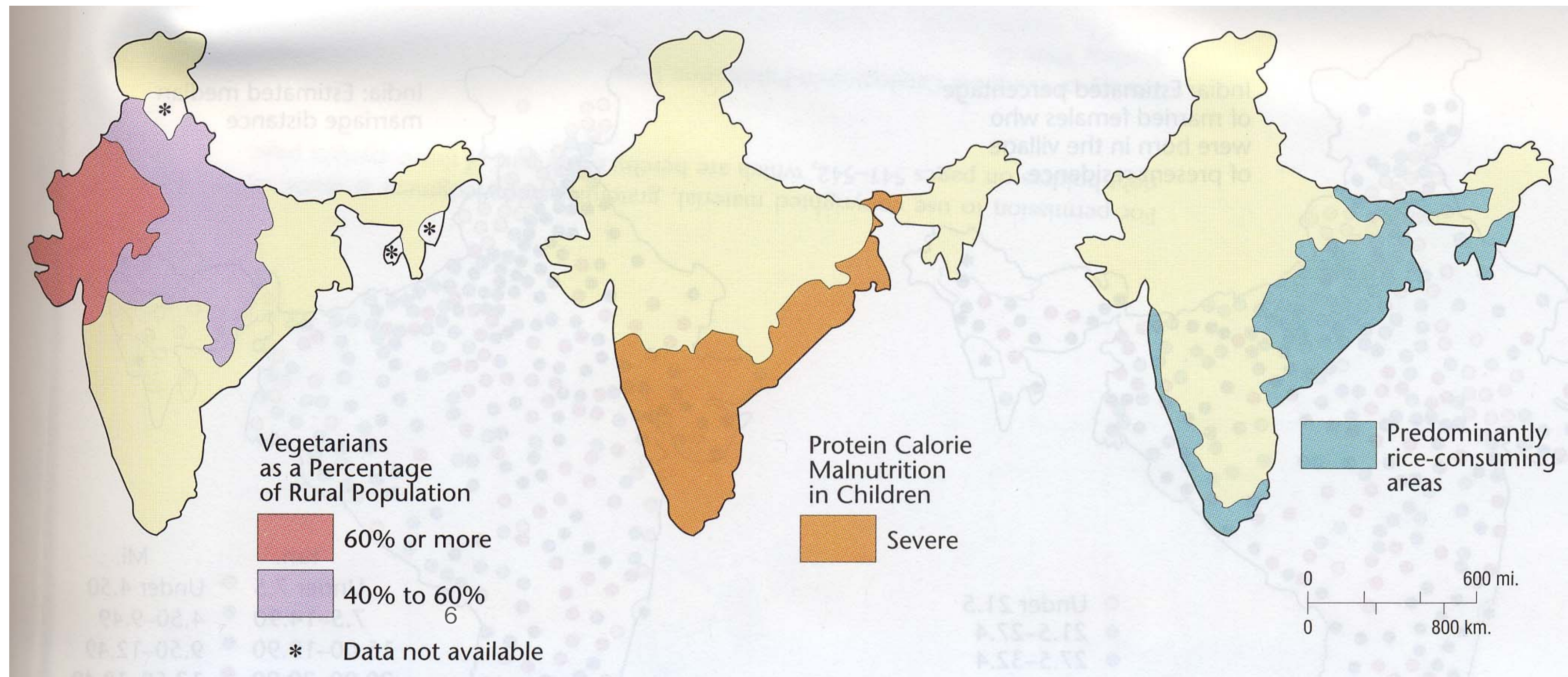
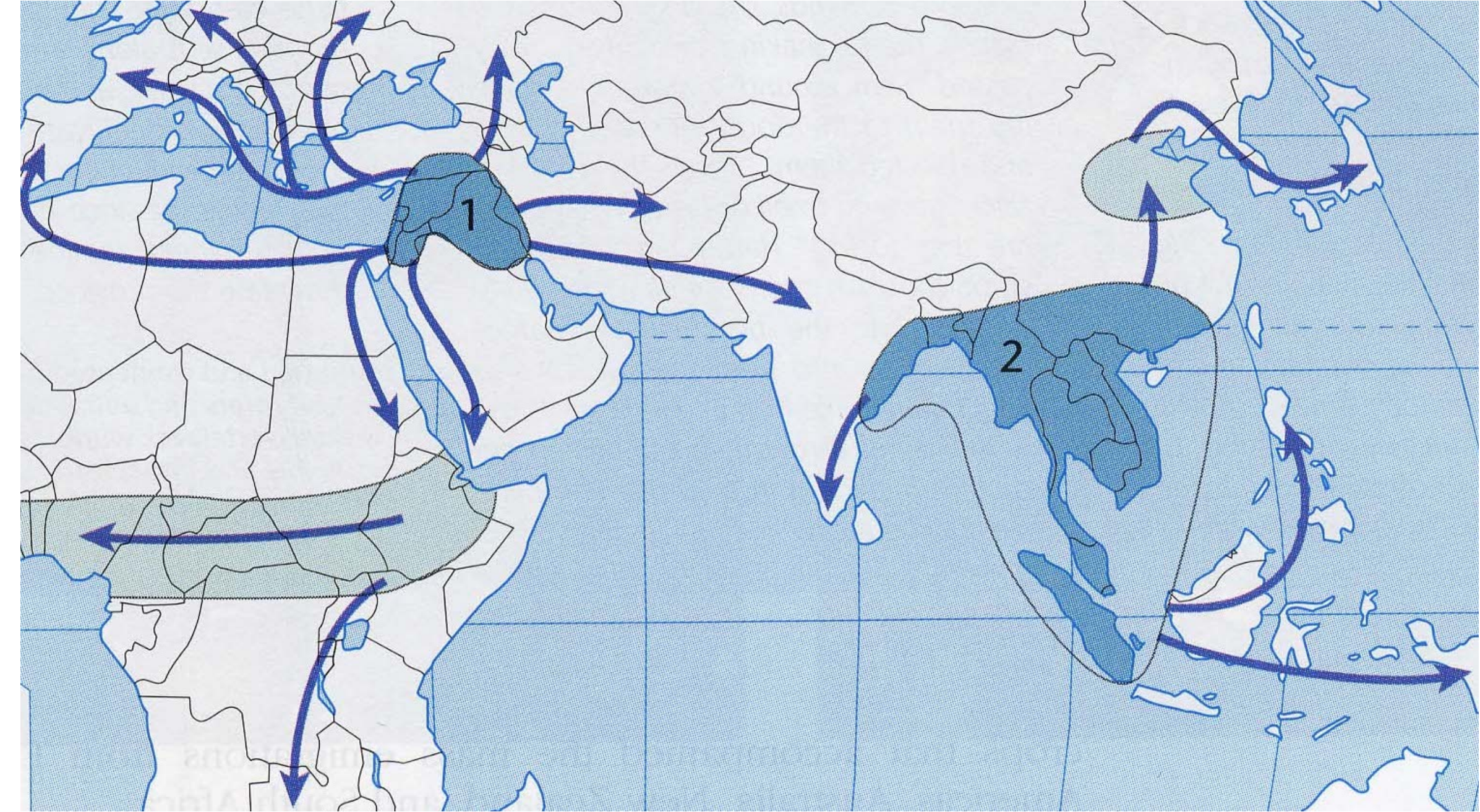
- Religion is also the basis of many transnational cultural similarities.
- $\frac{1}{3}$ of people are Christian.
- $\frac{1}{5}$ of people are Muslim.
- $\frac{1}{7}$ of people are Hindu.
- The majority Christian and Muslim areas span many countries across the globe.
- Although Buddhism is culturally important in areas such as Thailand and Mongolia, the global population of Buddhists is relatively small.



Agriculture

dietary effects

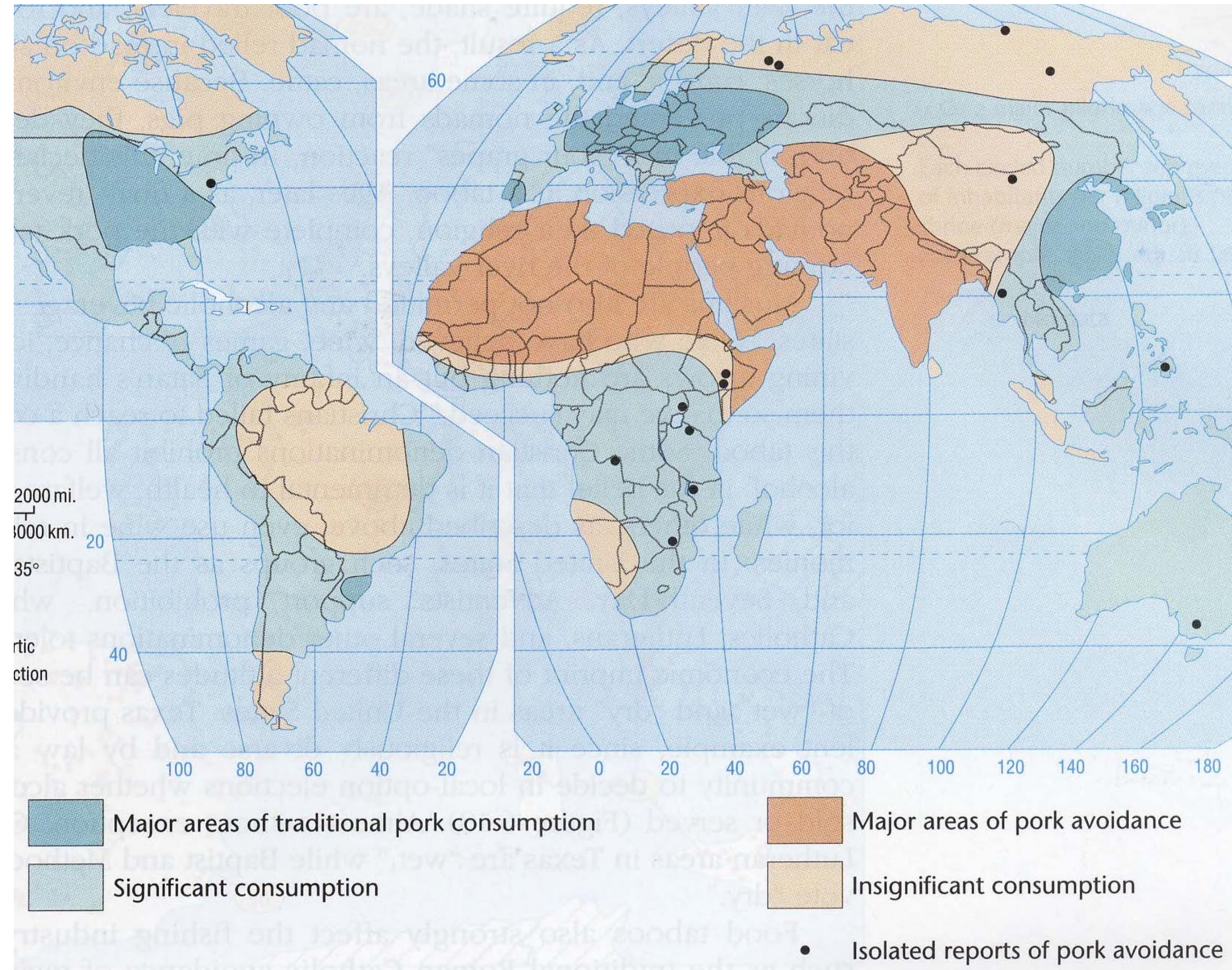
- The oldest Eurasian grain agricultures both spread to India (from areas 1 and 2 on map)
- In India, a certain type of malnutrition is strongly associated with eating rice, but not with vegetarianism.
- Agricultural and associated dietary patterns have been historically important in cultural development and human health.



Diet & Religion

special foods and taboos

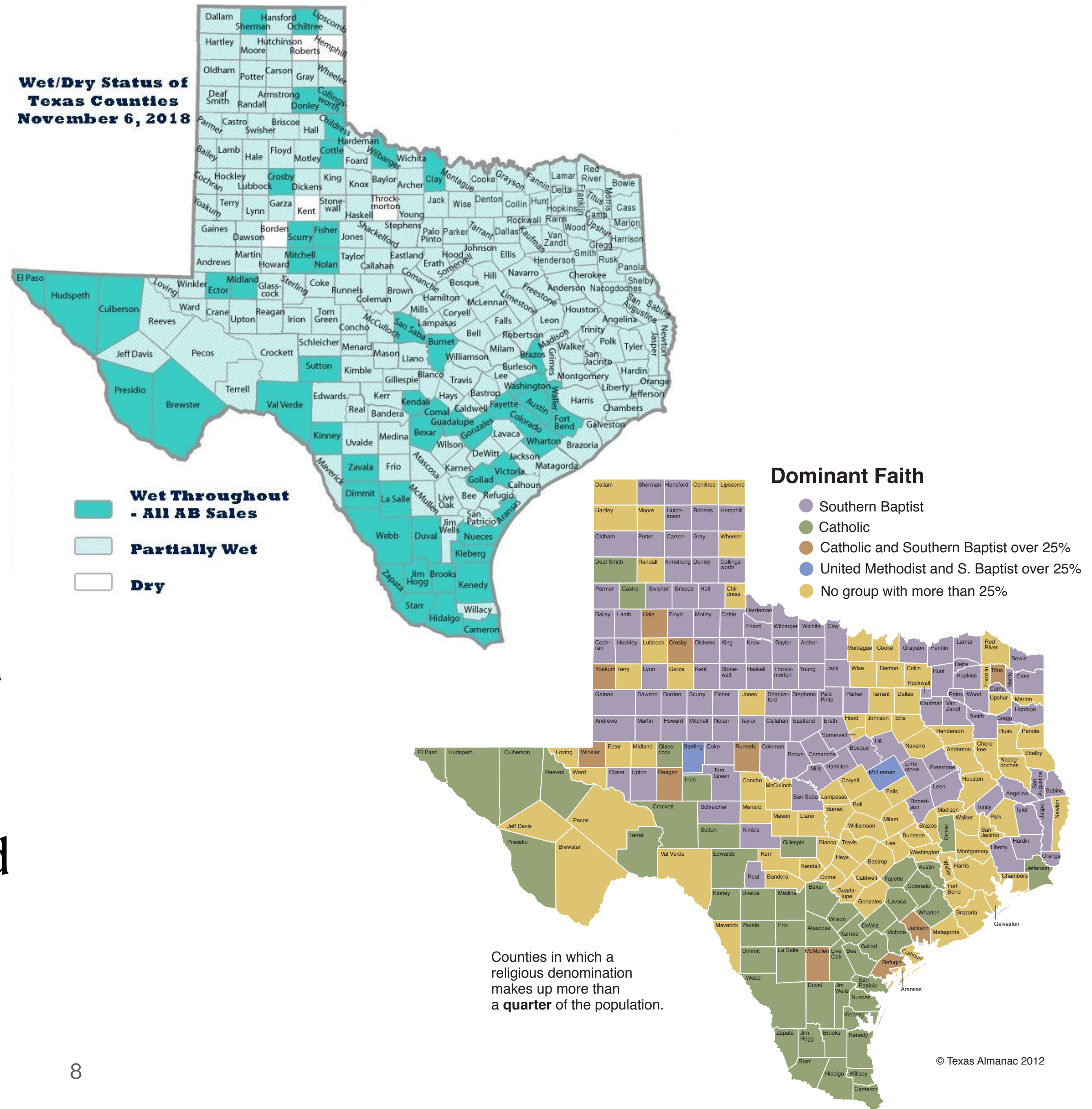
- Religion can also have a strong affect on a culture's dietary preferences.
- **Eating pork** is discouraged in Islamic areas.
- Some religions discourage the drinking of **alcohol**.
- Italians typically **eat fish** on Christmas Eve.
- Many religions designate special foods for special times.



Alcohol & Religion

dry counties in Texas

- In Texas, it is illegal to sell alcoholic beverages in the “dry” counties.
- In most counties, alcohol sales are possible, but quite restricted.
- There is a strong correlation between the counties with alcohol sale restrictions (the dry or partially wet counties) and the counties dominated by the Southern Baptist **religion**, but the Catholic areas are wet.



Social Effects of Religion

marriage and sexual behavior

- Religion can affect patterns of marriage, sex, and genetics.
- For many years, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints permitted **polygamy**. Some old-fashion Mormons continue to practice polygamy today. The Utah Population Database run by the Huntsman Cancer Institute at the University of Utah studies the DNA profiles of over a million people married and raised in the Mormon faith to better understand disease genetics, and how marital fidelity and historic polygamy distinguish this population from others.
- Currently, there is a debate in the USA over the recognition of **polyamory**, **polygyny**, and **polyandry**, and the legalization of **polygamy**.



the polygamous Brown family

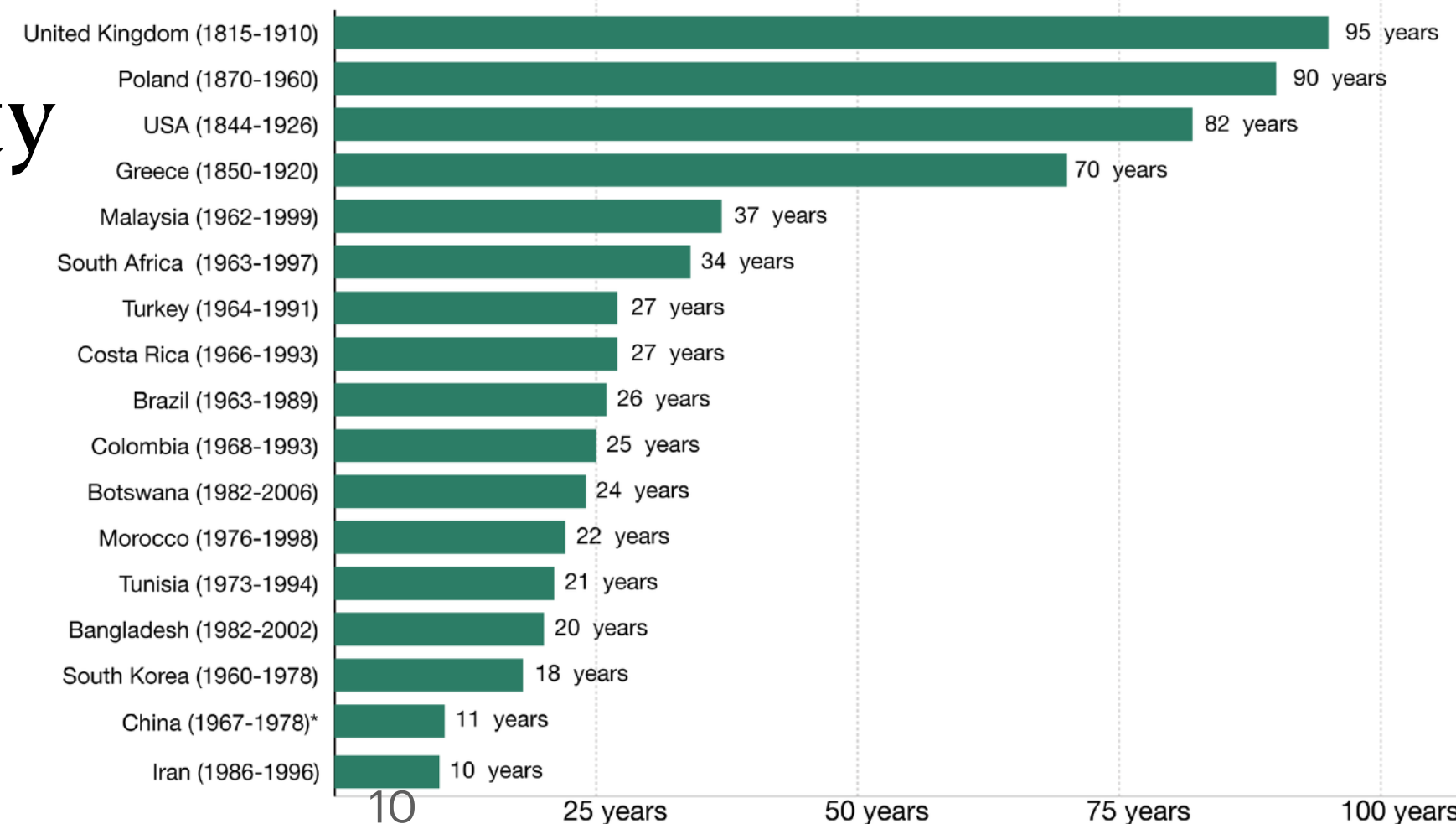


Social Effects of Language

sexual behavior and fertility

- Language, via communication, can affect patterns of sex.
- The striking difference in **birthrates** along the French-German border in 1910 was not due to the dominance of Catholicism in France and Protestantism in Germany, because the Catholic and Protestant areas of Germany had similar birthrates.
- French-based “education” had spread sexual practices of fertility regulation from Paris outward. Such communicative diffusion has been globally replicated, and it has been more rapid in newly modernizing societies.

How long did it take for fertility to fall from more than 6 children per woman to fewer than 3 children per woman?



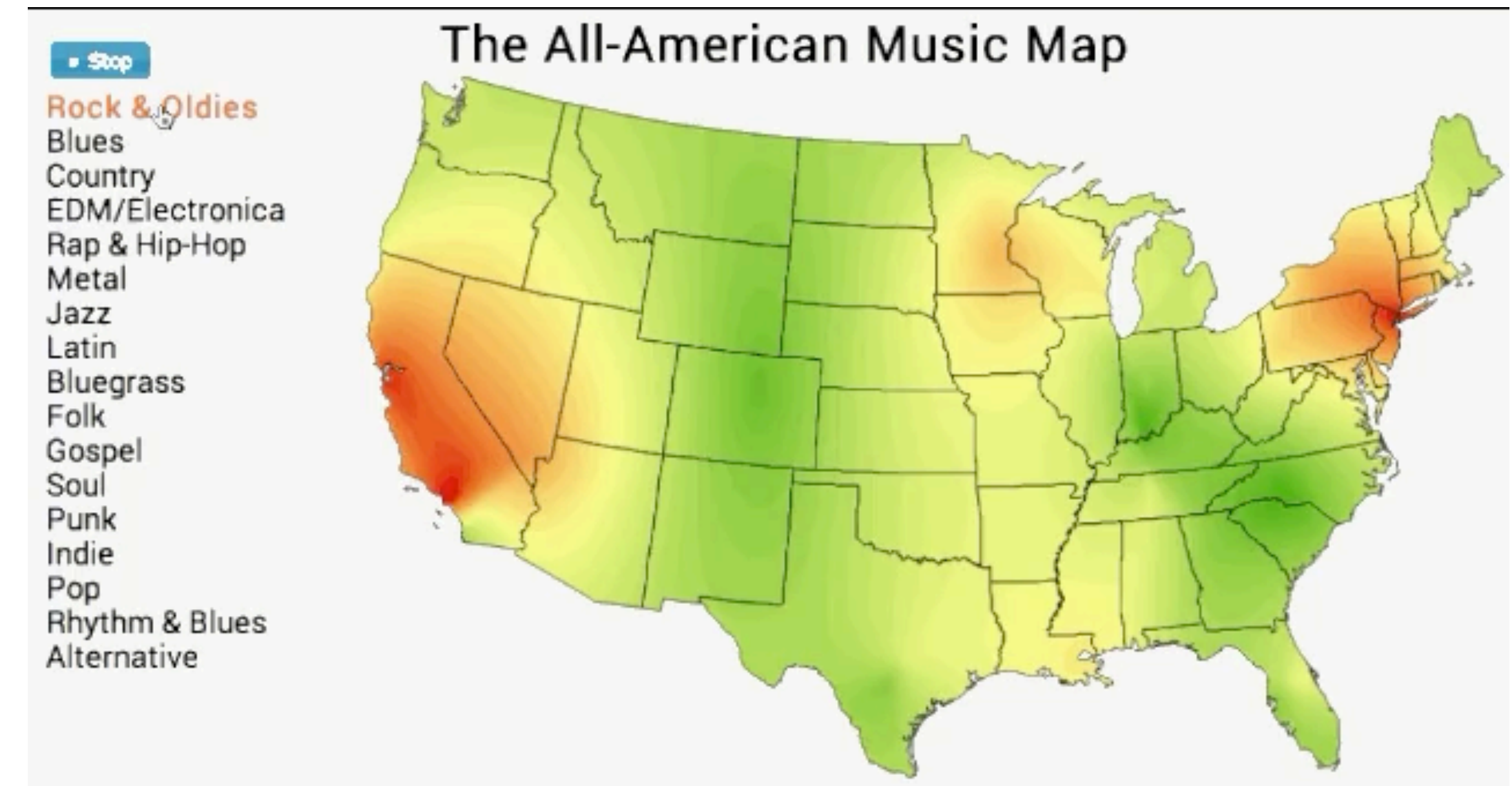
* The one-child-policy in China was introduced after the decline of the total fertility rate below 3. It was introduced between 1978 and 1980.
Data source: The data on the total fertility rate is taken from the Gapminder fertility dataset (version 6) and the World Bank World Development Indicators.
The interactive data visualization is available at [OurWorldinData.org](https://ourworldindata.org). There you find the raw data and more visualizations on this topic. Licensed under CC-BY-SA by the author Max Roser.



Music

attraction and self-segregation

- Very young children prefer other children whose favorite songs are familiar to them, and they avoid children who sing songs they do not know.
- Ethnomusicology research suggests that music serves to define and delimit social groups.
- Christmas carol popularity can distinguish cultural subgroups of Europeans.



- It is very important for workers in the music industry to understand the subcultures of musical taste in America. [Click on the image to run the video.]
- **Shared values** about music or other arts can define a cultural subgroup.

Clothing

materials, weaving, sewing

- Like food, clothing originally depended on local hunting, gathering, and agriculture for its raw materials.
- Technologies of spinning, weaving, knitting, crocheting, and sewing developed in various places.
- Over time, cultural variation has been extensive.
- Certain materials, technologies, and patterns have become **emblematic** of certain cultures.



Shibboleth

linguistic emblems

- A shibboleth is any custom or tradition that distinguishes one cultural group from another.
- Typically, it is a linguistic behavior, such as a particular pronunciation or phrasing that is **emblematic** of a group of people. In this photo, a man challenges people to pronounce “Tchoupitoulas” in order to identify his fellow citizens.
- In semiotics, nonlinguistic **emblems** may also be called shibboleths.



Determinants vs. Determinism

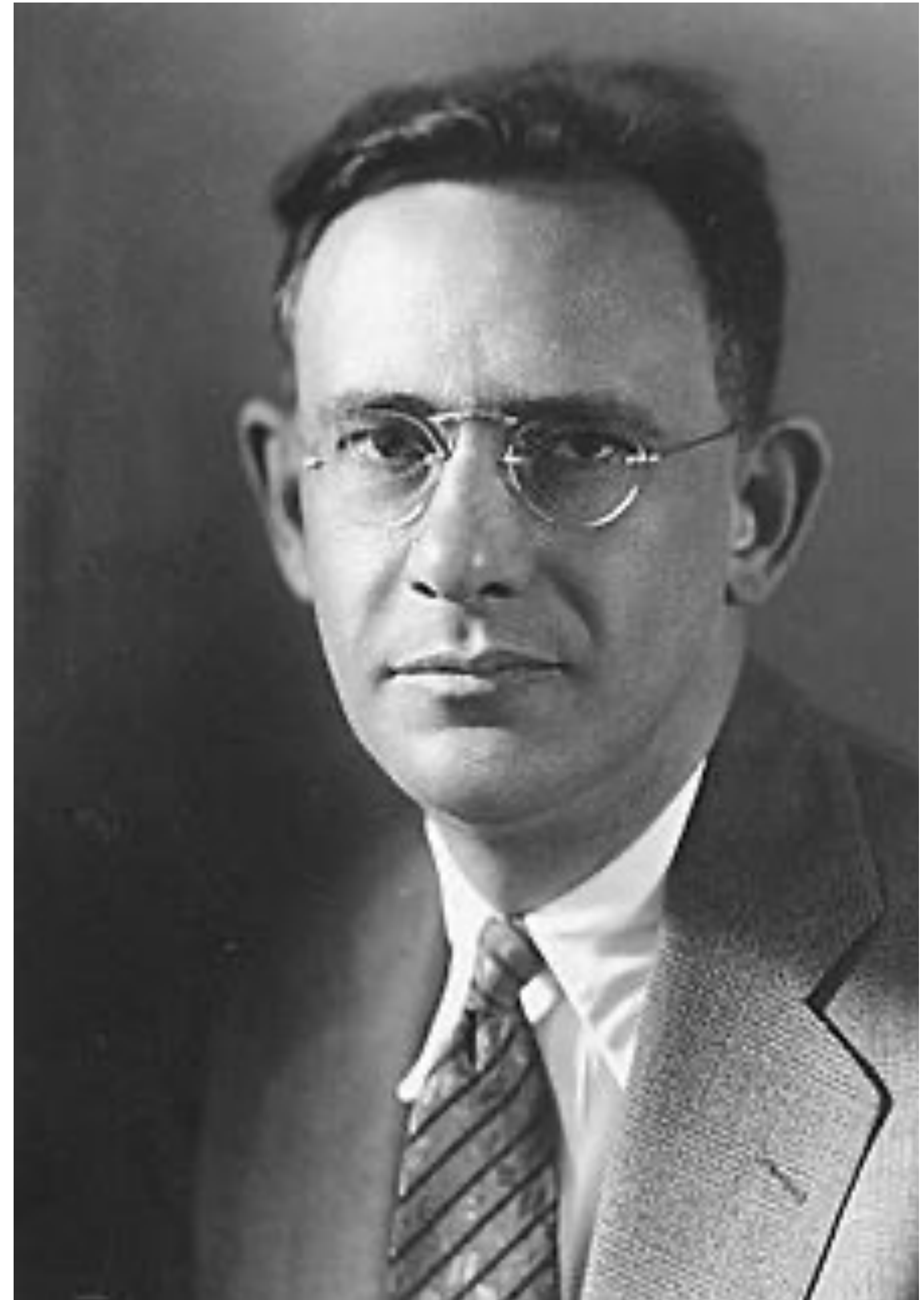
The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- The cultural **emblems** which we display are determinants of our cultural affiliations. Learning our culture causes us to acquire and display those emblems.
- The **values** which we assign to various behaviors are also determinants of culture.
- We are often unconscious of the emblems and values of our native culture.
- We are typically conscious of the “foreign” (i.e., our nonnative) emblems and values we adopt or express, especially when we are consciously trying to “fit in” or to pretend that we belong to a cultural group in which we were not raised naturally.
- Determinism is the idea that our unconscious norms of behavior, especially our unconscious ways of speaking, **influence or determine our ways of thinking**. This idea is often called the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.

Edward Sapir

“No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.”

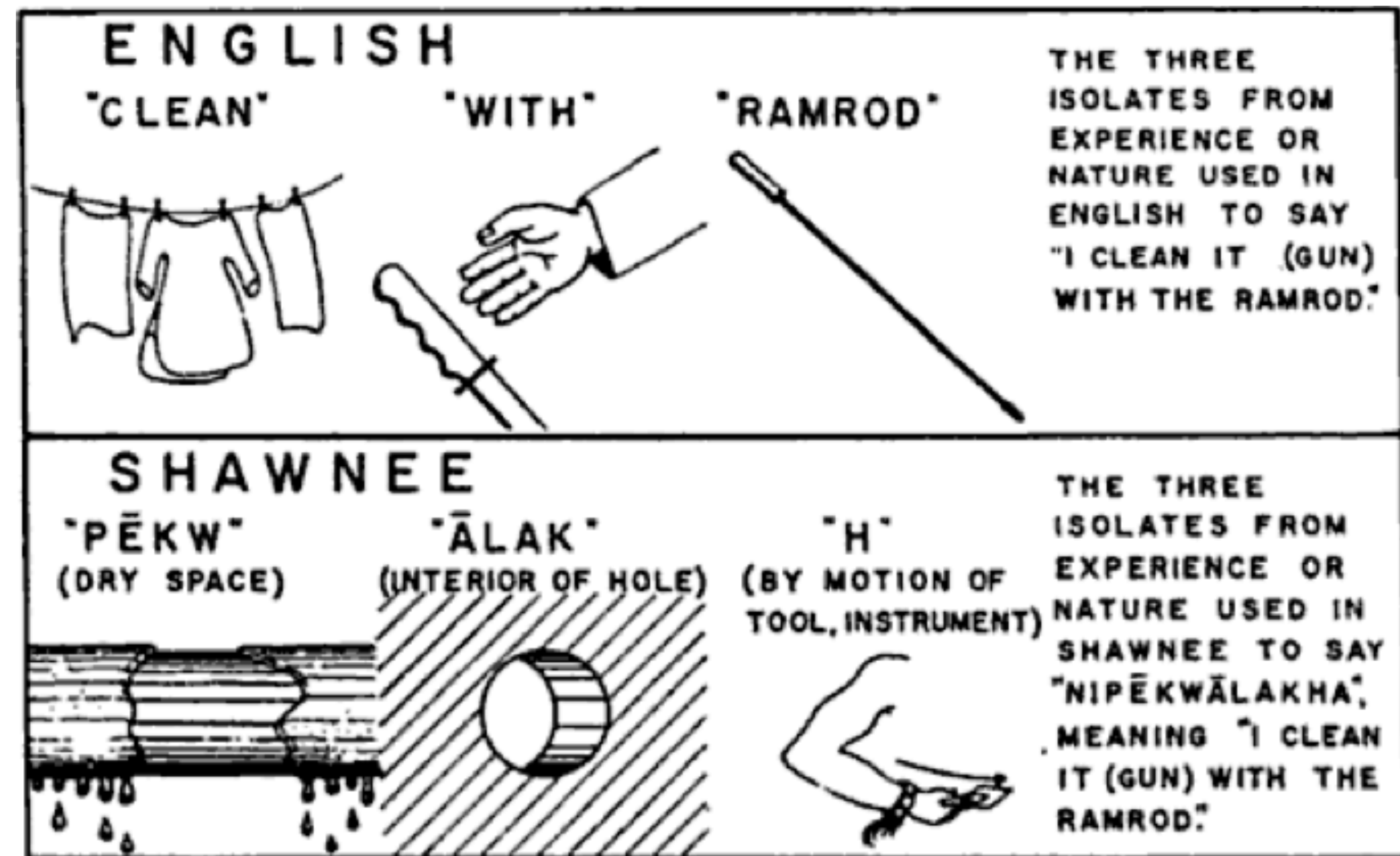
- According to Sapir, because different languages represented reality differently, it follows that the speakers of those different languages perceive reality differently. Sapir and his student Whorf seem to have held a “weak” view of determinism (or linguistic relativity), which later theorists contrasted with “strong” determinism.
- **The Weak Thesis:** Structural differences between language systems will, in general, be paralleled by nonlinguistic cognitive differences, of an unspecified sort, in the native speakers of the language.
- **The Strong Thesis:** The structure of anyone's native language strongly influences or fully determines the worldview he will acquire as he learns the language.



Benjamin Lee Whorf

“We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds.”

- Using examples of how different languages describe the same action or event in very different ways, Whorf claimed that those different speakers conceptualized reality differently, e.g., **the different ways that English and Shawnee speakers thought about cleaning a rifle.**
- Whorf also gave examples suggesting that a language's patterns could mislead speakers, as when **English speakers believed that limestone could not burn because it was “stone”.**

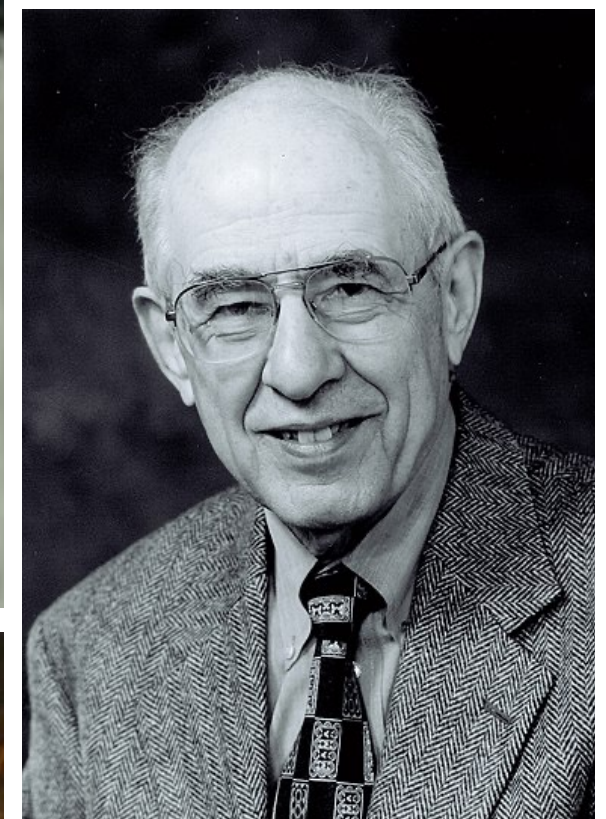


In a wood distillation plant the metal stills were insulated with a composition prepared from limestone and called at the plant ‘spun limestone’. No attempt was made to protect this covering from excessive heat or the contact of flame. After a period of use, the fire below one of the stills spread to the ‘limestone’, which to everyone’s great surprise burned vigorously. Exposure to acetic acid fumes from the stills had converted part of the limestone (calcium carbonate) to calcium acetate. This when heated in a fire decomposes, forming inflammable acetone. Behavior that tolerated fire close to the covering was induced by the name ‘limestone’, which because it ends in ‘-stone’ implies non-combustibility . . .

Linguistic/Cultural Relativity

How does culture influence thought?

- Scholars before and after Sapir-Whorf have argued that our culture, especially our language, influences or determines our thought. Wilhelm von Humboldt, Lev Vygotsky, and Alfred Korzybski have been influential.
- Willard Van Orman Quine's position on the indeterminacy of translation resonates well with Sapir's comments on cross-translation, though Hilary Putnam's caveats are noteworthy.
- George Lakoff reviewed arguments for Whorfianism in his book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*.
- Computer scientists, such as Yukihiro Matsumoto, have been inspired by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.



Technological Determinism

technology and thought

- What is the degree to which human thought or action is influenced by technological factors?
- Marshall McLuhan: “The medium is the message.” The medium used to communicate influences the mind of the receiver.
- Langdon Winner:
 - (1) The technology of a given society is a fundamental influencer of the various ways in which a society exists.
 - (2) Changes in technology are the primary and most important source that leads to change in the society.

