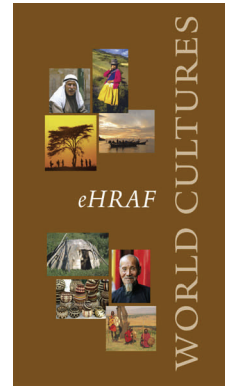


# HRAF News

Winter/Spring 2008



## The Newsletter for HRAF Members

### FROM THE PRESIDENT: Getting Closer to Cultural Causality

A frequent complaint about comparative research, whether or not based on a HRAF database, is that correlation is not necessarily causation. And that's true. Unless the supposed cause is measured for an earlier time than the supposed effect, one variable correlated with another doesn't tell us which (if either) came first. Unless we can assess how things are ordered in time, we can't talk about the likely causality. Still, if one of the correlated variables is something located in the physical or social environment, the cultural correlate is probably an effect. Consider that societies between 1,000 and 25,000 in population tend to prohibit all cousin marriage (presumably because of the dangers of inbreeding). It would be difficult to argue that the absence of cousin marriage caused the society to be small. It is much more likely that the social environment (the small society) came first.

But even if we can't link something cultural to something environmental, we might still be able to provide additional support for a presumed causal sequence, if we can test the implications of the causal theory against other comparative ethnographic data. And we may be able to look at archaeological or historical data to find evidence that one thing precedes another. If these additional tests also support the causal theory, we could be very confident about the causality.

For example, John Fischer found years ago that the art of stratified societies tended to have different design elements than the art of egalitarian societies. The latter have symmetrical design (presumably reflecting social equality), repetition of simple elements (reflecting the absence of stratification), more empty space (reflecting low population density), and unenclosed figures (reflecting the absence of private property).

There are fascinating parallels in Alan Lomax's cross-cultural study of folk songs. He found that simpler cultures have fewer words in their songs than more complex cultures. Also, simpler cultures have no differentiation of parts (symmetry again) whereas more complex cultures have parts and soloists (reflecting stratification). Finally, simpler cultures have wider musical intervals (analogous to unenclosed figures and empty space) than more complex cultures.

Recently, Peter Peregrine has replicated Fischer's general findings for the cultures in eHRAF World Cultures. He has also shown that the findings apply as well to the prehistoric cultures in eHRAF Archaeology.

So there are now a number of studies in various domains whose results are consistent with the conclusion that certain artistic and musical features are generally caused by cultural complexity. Still, although these findings may suggest that complexity comes first, they don't definitely show it. Unless we have historical documentation of the sequences, we can still be skeptical.

It is important then that we have two studies that do provide historical documentation. One is the study by William Dressler and Michael Robbins of Athenian Greek vase designs. They explicitly tested Fischer's theory by comparing the designs from three time periods with different degrees of social stratification. In the period with the most stratification (600-450 BC), vase designs were the most complex, most crowded, and most enclosed. The other periods, with less stratification, had less complexity in the vase designs. It would be difficult to argue that the vase designs could influence the social system; more likely the causation was vice versa. And then there is the study by Elizabeth Merrill of Shoshonean-Bannock art in western North America. The pre-reservation art (from 1870 to 1901) was simpler than the art a century later, which was associated with many indicators of sociopolitical complexity including social stratification, a higher level of political integration, and permanent rather than less fixed settlements.



Correlational studies can suggest causality, particularly if the supposed effects are linked to conditions in the physical or social environment that had to come first. But it is more convincing to have sequential historical or archaeological data that support the causal theory. With all of the historical data in the annually growing eHRAF World Cultures (many of the sample cultures are described for more than one point in time) and with the archaeological sequences increasingly described in eHRAF Archaeology, we can expect many more demonstrations of cultural causality in the future.

**Melvin Ember**



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## New Interface is Launched

Carol R. Ember, Executive Director

**eHRAF World Cultures** (formerly eHRAF Collection of Ethnography) and **eHRAF Archaeology** (formerly eHRAF Collection of Archaeology) were launched on February 1, 2008. What makes the eHRAF databases so unusual is subject-indexing at the paragraph level using over 700 subject categories from the *Outline of Cultural Materials* (OCM). This helps find important information buried in out-of-the way places or described by uncommon words. What we have tried to do in this application is make finding and using subject categories easier. The first innovation is the Lookup Search, which allows you to look up subject categories and even cultures by typing in words (e.g., diet in Africa; childbirth). Your search can then be modified by adding or removing cultures, subjects, and words. The second innovation is that we de-emphasize the OCM subject category numbers and use the subject category words (descriptors) instead. The third is a new subject thesaurus based on 18 major-subjects in addition to the traditional thesaurus based on more than 70 broad subjects. Basic Search is a simpler version of Lookup with hidden default settings that take the user to results quickly. Although the defaults can be modified in Basic Search, we recommend a switch to Lookup Search (via Modify Search) to gain more control over the searched combinations.

Other new features include: 1) complete citations that automatically accompany search results; 2) ability to choose to see a whole searched paragraph, a paragraph in the context of a page, or the next or previous page; 3) email and print functions; 4) browsing cultures by region/subregion as well as by country; and 5) finding collection documents with an emphasis on particular subjects.

Like most new applications we have had some rough patches at the beginning, mostly due to very high volume on the first few days. We are taking steps to increase our capacity as quickly as possible. If you experience any problems at all, please call (203-764-9401 or 800-520-HRAF) or email us (we are using a special email for help issues [help@ehraf.org](mailto:help@ehraf.org)). Your reports help us solve any problems. We are also going to keep the former site served by DLPS at the University of Michigan open until the end of June for the convenience of institutions who have not yet switched over and are in the middle of classroom exercises based on the DLPS interface. If you haven't yet switched to the new site, we encourage you to try it so that the switchover on July 1, 2008 is easier.

URL for **eHRAF World Cultures** (<http://ehrafWorldCultures.yale.edu>)

URL for **eHRAF Archaeology** (<http://ehrafArchaeology.yale.edu>)

Help email: [help@ehraf.org](mailto:help@ehraf.org)

The screenshot shows the eHRAF World Cultures search interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with 'Home', 'Search', 'Browse', and 'Help'. Under 'Search', there are options for 'Basic' and 'Lookup'. The 'Lookup' option is selected, and the text 'Lookup or Select Search Criteria' is displayed. Below this, there is a search box containing the word 'childbirth' and a 'Lookup' button. Underneath the search box, there are examples of search results: 'e.g.: irrigat', 'evil eye', and 'diet in South America'. The interface also includes sections for 'Cultures', 'Subjects', and 'Text'. The 'Subjects' section shows 2 subjects: 'Childbirth (844)' and 'Difficult and unusual births (845)'. The 'Text' section has a checkbox for 'childbirth' and a text input field. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'Submit eHRAF Search' and 'Reset Form'.

## Notes and Highlights

### HRAF Welcomes

**Hamilton College  
University of Salzburg  
Tufts University  
Washington University of St. Louis  
Universidad de Barcelona  
Monmouth College  
Keyano College  
University of New Brunswick  
Northwest Community College**

### Training Sessions and Demonstrations

**Society for American Archaeology  
Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Center  
Vancouver, British Columbia  
March 26-30, 2008  
Booth 305**

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