

THE
MIND OF PRIMITIVE MAN

BY
FRANZ BOAS

A COURSE OF LECTURES DELIVERED BEFORE THE LOWELL
INSTITUTE, BOSTON, MASS., AND THE NATIONAL
UNIVERSITY OF MEXICO, 1910-1911

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1922

All rights reserved

PREFACE

THE problem discussed in the following pages has occupied my attention for many years, and I have at various times dealt with it in brief essays. Some of these, in revised form and enlarged, are embodied in the present volume :—

Human Faculty as determined by Race (*Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science*, vol. xliii [1894], pp. 301-327).

The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology (*Science*, N. S., vol. iv [1896], pp. 901-908).

The Mind of Primitive Man (*Journal of American Folk-Lore*, vol. xiv [1901], pp. 1-11).

Some Traits of Primitive Culture (*Ibid.*, vol. xvii [1904], pp. 243-254).

Race Problems in America (*Science*, N. S., vol. xxix [1909], pp. 839-849).

Psychological Problems in Anthropology (*American Journal of Psychology*, vol. xxi [1910], pp. 371-384).

I have also utilized a small part of the Introduction to my "Handbook of American Indian Languages"

(Bulletin 40 of the Bureau of American Ethnology), and some of the results of my report on "Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants" (vol. 39, Reports of the Immigration Commission, Washington, Government Printing Office).

FRANZ BOAS.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. RACIAL PREJUDICES	1
Racial achievement and aptitude, 1. — The white race, having achieved the highest civilization, represents the highest physical type, 2.	
Does cultural achievement depend upon hereditary aptitude alone? 5. — Many races have contributed to the origin of civilization, 5. — Early civilization in America, 7. — Interpretation of rapidity of development, 8. — The spread of civilization, 10. — Summary, 16.	
Are anatomical characteristics of foreign races expressions of inferiority? 17. — Lower characteristics of various parts of the body, 18. — Development in different races of traits differentiating man from animal, 21. — Significance of these traits for discussion of mental character, 22. — Size of brain, 24. — Lack of correlation between size of brain and ability, 28. — Structure of brain, 29. — Summary, 29.	
II. INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT UPON HUMAN TYPES .	30
Problems of racial and social characteristics, 30. — Definition and description of variability of types, 31.	
Differences between civilized and primitive members of the same race, 39. — Problem of stability of type of the human species, 41. — Evolution of human species, 41. — Problem of stability of races, 44. — Variations due to changes in rate of growth, 45. — Arrest of growth, 49. — Variations not due to growth, 50. — Differences between rural and urban types, 50. — Influence of selection, 53. — Changes in bodily	

CHAPTER	PAGE
form of American immigrants, 53. — Explanation of changes, 57. — Range of changes, 63. — Changes of mental traits, 64.	
Domestication, 65. — Changes due to environment, 70. — Changes due to selection, 72. — Changes due to crossing, 73.	
III. INFLUENCE OF HEREDITY UPON HUMAN TYPES . . .	76
Importance of heredity, 76. — Alternating and mid-parental heredity, 77. — Heredity in race-mixture, 78. — Intra-racial heredity, 80. — Regression to ancestral types, 81. — Similarity of brothers and sisters, 83. — Mendelian inheritance, 84.	
Origin of local types, 84. — Descent in large and in small communities, 84. — Johannsen's observations on plants, 89. — Mixture of local types, 90. — Variability in local types and in races, 91.	
IV. THE MENTAL TRAITS OF PRIMITIVE MAN AND OF CIVILIZED MAN	95
Method of approach, 95. — Animal and man, 96. — Primitive man and civilized man, 97. — Historical notes, 99. — Racial and social problem, 101.	
Mental characteristics of primitive man regardless of race, 104. — Inhibition, 106. — Improvidence, 109. — Attention, 110. — Originality of thought, 111. — Quantitative character of racial differences, 114. — Differences between closely related groups of people, 116. — Effects of malnutrition, 117. — Experimental method, 117.	
Influence of continued civilization, 118. — Relapse of individuals into primitive life, 120. — Influence of early habits, 121. — Summary, 122.	
V. RACE AND LANGUAGE	124
Is language an expression of the mental development of a race ? 124.	

CONTENTS

ix

CHAPTER

PAGE

Relations between type, language, and culture, 125. — Classifications from these three points of view irreconcilable, 126. — Permanence of type and change of language, 127. — Permanence of language and change of type, 129. — Permanence of type and language and change of culture, 132. — Hypothesis of original correlation between type, language, and culture, 134.

Are there "lower" and "higher" languages? 140. — Phonetics, 140. — Classification of ideas, 142. — Examples, 145. — Holophrasis, 147. — Necessity of formal elements, 147. — Relations between language and thought, 148. — Abstract terms, 149. — Numeral systems, 152.

VI. THE UNIVERSALITY OF CULTURAL TRAITS . . . 155

Similarities of cultural traits, 155. — Explained as due to the influence of environment, 159. — Cases of lack of adjustment to environment, 162. — Influence of former environment, 163. — Similarities explained as survivals of times antedating dispersion of human species, 164. — Dissemination, 166. — Areas of dissemination, 169. — Similarities explained as due to sameness of elementary ideas, 171. — Psychological explanation, 173.

VII. THE EVOLUTIONARY VIEWPOINT . . . 174

Does human culture represent an evolutionary series? 174. — Examples: Social organization, 176. — Inventions, 177. — Agriculture, 178. — Art, 179. — Religion, 180. — Parallelism of cultural development, 181. — Dissimilarity of sequence in industrial development, 182.

Convergent development, 184. — Lack of comparability of data, 188. — Examples: Life after death, 189. — Totemism, 190. — Ethics, 191.

CHAPTER	PAGE
Types of development from simple to complex forms, and <i>vice versa</i> , 193.	
VIII. SOME TRAITS OF PRIMITIVE CULTURE	197
Mental re-actions of primitive and of civilized man, 197. — Classification of phenomena, 198. — With the advance of civilization, principles of classification rise into consciousness, 201. — Effect of traditional material upon thought, 203. — Example of development of ethical concepts, 206.	
Types of association in civilized society, 209. — Associations due to customary re-actions, and their emotional value, 211. — Secondary explanations, 214.	
Types of association in primitive society, 220. — Their unconscious origin, 221. — Their rise into consciousness, 224. — Secondary explanations, 225. — Associations peculiar to primitive life, 228. — Ritual, 229. — Myth, 230. — Decorative art, 231. — Totemism, 235. — Origin of associations, 237. — Importance of emotional elements in establishing associations, 237.	
IX. SUMMARY	244
X. RACE PROBLEMS IN THE UNITED STATES	251
Origins of the American nation, 252. — Characteristics of race-mixture in the United States and in Europe, 254. — Amalgamation of distinct types, 258. — Effects of change of environment and of mixture, 261. — The negro problem, 268.	
NOTES	279

THE MIND OF PRIMITIVE MAN

I. RACIAL PREJUDICES

PROUD of his wonderful achievements, civilized man looks down upon the humbler members of mankind. He has conquered the forces of nature and compelled them to serve him. He has transformed inhospitable forests into fertile fields. The mountain fastnesses are yielding their treasures to his demands. The fierce animals which are obstructing his progress are being exterminated, while others which are useful to him are made to increase a thousand-fold. The waves of the ocean carry him from land to land, and towering mountain-ranges set him no bounds. His genius has moulded inert matter into powerful machines which await a touch of his hand to serve his manifold demands.

With pity he looks down upon those members of the human race who have not succeeded in subduing nature; who labor to eke a meagre existence out of the products of the wilderness; who hear with trembling the roar of

the wild animals, and see the products of their toils destroyed by them; who remain restricted by ocean, river, or mountains; who strive to obtain the necessities of life with the help of few and simple instruments.

Such is the contrast that presents itself to the observer. What wonder if civilized man considers himself a being of higher order as compared to primitive man, if he claims that the white race represents a type higher than all others!

Before accepting this conclusion which places the stamp of eternal inferiority upon whole races of man, we may well pause, and subject the basis of our opinions regarding the aptitude of different peoples and races to a searching analysis. The naïve assumption of the superiority of the European nations and their descendants is obviously based upon their wonderful achievements. We conclude that, as the civilization is higher, the aptitude for civilization is also higher; and, as the aptitude for civilization presumably depends upon the perfection of the mechanism of body and mind, the inference is drawn that the white race represents the highest type of perfection. In this conclusion, which is reached through a comparison of the social status of civilized man with that of primitive man, the tacit

assumption is made that achievement depends solely, or at least primarily, upon the aptitude for an achievement.

The assertion of a higher aptitude of the European nations leads at once to a second inference relating to the significance of difference in type between the European race and the races of other continents, or even of differences between various European types. The line of thought which we unconsciously pursue is about as follows. Since the aptitude of the European is highest, his physical and mental type is also highest, and every deviation from the white type necessarily represents a characteristic feature of a lower type.

That this unproved assumption underlies our judgments of races, appears from the fact, that, other conditions being equal, a race is commonly described as the lower, the more fundamentally it differs from the white race. Its effect may also be noticed in the long-continued discussions of the occurrence of anatomical peculiarities in primitive man which would characterize him as a being of lower order in the zoölogical series, and in the emphasis laid upon the non-occurrence of such traits in primitive man and their occurrence in the European race.

The subject and form of these discussions show that

the idea dwells in the minds of investigators that we should expect to find in the white race the highest type of man.

In drawing inferences from social distinctions, the same point of view is frequently held. It is assumed, that, as the mental development of the white race is the highest, it also has the highest aptitude in this direction, and therefore its mind is supposed to have the most subtile organization. As the ultimate psychical causes are not so apparent as anatomical characteristics, the judgment of the mental status of a people is generally guided by the difference between its social status and our own: the greater the difference between their intellectual, emotional, and moral processes and those which are found in our civilization, the harsher the judgment on the people. It is only when a Tacitus finds the virtues of past stages of the life of his own people among foreign tribes that their example is held up to the gaze of his fellow-citizens, who probably had a pitying smile for the dreamer who clung to the ideas of a time which they had left far behind.

In order to understand clearly the relations between race and civilization, the two unproved assumptions to which I have referred must be subjected to a searching

analysis. We must investigate in how far we are justified in assuming that achievement is primarily due to exceptional aptitude, and in how far we are justified in assuming that the European type — or, taking the notion in its extreme form, that the North European type — represents the highest development of mankind. It will be advantageous to clear up these points before we take up the detailed inquiry.

In regard to the former point, it might be said, that, although achievement is not necessarily a measure of aptitude, it seems admissible to judge the one by the other. Have not most races had the same chances for development? Why, then, did the white race alone develop a civilization which is sweeping the whole world, and compared to which all other civilizations appear as feeble beginnings cut short in early childhood, or arrested and petrified in an early stage of development? Is it not, to say the least, probable that the race which attained the highest stage of civilization was the most gifted one, and that those races which remained at the bottom of the scale were not capable of rising to higher levels?

In order to find an answer to these questions, let us consider briefly the general outlines of the history

of civilization; let our minds go back a few thousand years, until we reach the time when the civilizations of eastern and of western Asia were in their infancy. As time passed on, these civilizations were transferred from one people to another; some of those who had represented the highest type of culture sinking back into obscurity, while others took their places. During the dawn of history we see civilization cling to certain districts, in which it is taken up, now by one people, now by another. In the numerous conflicts of these times the more civilized people were often vanquished. The conqueror, however, learned the arts of life from the conquered, and carried on the work of civilization. Thus the centres of civilization were shifting to and fro over a limited area, and progress was slow and halting. At the same period the ancestors of the races that are now among the most highly civilized were in no way superior to primitive man as we find him now in regions that have not come into contact with modern civilization.

Was the civilization attained by these ancient people of such character as to allow us to claim for them a genius superior to that of any other race?

First of all, we must bear in mind that none of these

civilizations was the product of the genius of a single people. Ideas and inventions were carried from one to the other; and, although intercommunication was slow, each people which participated in the ancient development contributed its share to the general progress. Proofs without number have been forthcoming which show that ideas have been disseminated as long as people have come into contact with one another, and that neither race nor language nor distance limits their diffusion. As all have worked together in the development of the ancient civilizations, we must bow to the genius of all, whatever group of mankind they may represent, — Hamitic, Semitic, Aryan, or Mongol.

We may now ask, Did no other races develop a culture of equal value? It would seem that the civilizations of ancient Peru and of Central America may well be compared with the ancient civilizations of the Old World. In both we find a high stage of political organization: we find division of labor and an elaborate ecclesiastical organization. Great architectural works were undertaken, requiring the co-operation of many individuals. Animals and plants were domesticated, and the art of writing had been invented. The inventions and knowledge of the peoples of the Old World seem to have been somewhat

more numerous and extended than those of the races of the New World, but there can be no doubt that the general status of their civilization was nearly equally high.¹ This will suffice for our consideration.

What, then, is the difference between the civilization of the Old World and that of the New World? It is essentially a difference in time. The one reached a certain stage three thousand or four thousand years sooner than the other.

Although much stress has been laid upon this greater rapidity of development in the Old World, I think that it is not by any means proof of greater ability of the races of the Old World, but that it is adequately explained by the laws of chance. When two bodies run through the same course with variable rapidity, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, their relative position will be more likely to show accidental differences, the longer the course which they run. Thus two infants a few months old will be much alike in their physiological and psychical development; two youths of equal age will differ much more; and two old men of equal age may, the one still be in full possession of his powers, the other on the decline, due mainly to the accidental acceleration or retardation of

¹ For authorities, see note to this page at end of book.

their development. The difference in period of development does not signify that the one is by heredity structurally inferior to the others.

Applying the same reasoning to the history of mankind, we may say that the difference of a few thousand years is insignificant as compared to the age of the human race. The time required to develop the existing races is entirely a matter of conjecture, but we may be sure that it is long. We also know that man existed in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres at a time that can be measured by geological standards only. Penck's recent investigations on the glacial age in the Alps have led him to the conclusion that the age of man must be measured by a span of time exceeding one hundred thousand years, and that the highly specialized civilization of the Magdalenian is not less than twenty thousand years old. There is no reason to believe that this stage was reached by mankind the world over at the same period, but we must assume as the initial point the remotest times in which we find traces of man. What does it mean, then, if one group of mankind reached the same stage at the age of a hundred thousand years as was reached by the other at the age of a hundred and four thousand years? Would not the life-history of the people, and the vicissitudes of its history,

be fully sufficient to explain a delay of this character, without necessitating us to assume a difference in their aptitude to social development? (See Waitz.) This retardation would be significant only if it could be shown that it occurs independently over and over again in the same race, while in other races greater rapidity of development was found repeatedly in independent cases.

The fact deserves attention, however, that at present practically all the members of the white race participate to a greater or less degree in the advance of civilization, while in none of the other races has the civilization that has been attained at one time or another been able to reach all the tribes or peoples of the same race. This does not necessarily mean that all the members of the white race had the power of originating and developing the germs of civilization with equal rapidity; for there is no evidence that the cognate tribes which have all developed under the influence of a civilization originated by a few members of the race, would not, without this help, have required a much longer time to reach the high level which they now occupy. It seems to show, however, a remarkable power of assimilation, which has not manifested itself to an equal degree in any other race.

Thus the problem presents itself of discovering the