

**THE MIND**  
of  
**PRIMITIVE MAN**

**FRANZ BOAS**

**REVISED EDITION**

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## PREFACE

Since 1911, when the first edition of *The Mind of Primitive Man* was published much work has been done in all the branches of science that have to be considered in the problem with which the book deals. The study of heredity has made important strides and has helped to clear up the concept of race. The influence of environment upon bodily form and behavior has been the subject of many investigations and the mental attitudes of "primitive" man have been studied from new points of view. For this reason a large part of the book had to be rewritten and rearranged.

The first statement of some of the conclusions reached in the book were made in an address delivered by the author as vice-president of the Section of Anthropology of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, in 1895. Ever since that time the subject has remained one of his chief interests. The result of his studies has been an ever-increasing certainty of his conclusions. There is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man. A close connection between race and personality has never been established. The concept of racial type as commonly used even in scientific literature is misleading and requires a logical as well as a biological redefinition. While it would seem that a great number of American students of biology, psychology and anthropology concur with these views, popular prejudice, based on earlier scientific and popular tradition, has certainly not diminished, for race prejudice is still an

important factor in our life. Still worse is the subjection of science to ignorant prejudice in countries controlled by dictators. Such control has extended particularly to books dealing with the subject matter of race and culture. Since nothing is permitted to be printed that runs counter to the ignorant whims and prejudices of the governing clique, there can be no trustworthy science. When a publisher whose pride used to be the number and value of his scientific books announces in his calendar a book trying to show that race mixture is not harmful, withdraws the same book after a dictator comes into power, when great cyclopedias are rewritten according to prescribed tenets, when scientists either do not dare or are not allowed to publish results contradicting the prescribed doctrines, when others, in order to advance their own material interests or blinded by uncontrolled emotion follow blindly the prescribed road no confidence can be placed in their statements. The suppression of intellectual freedom rings the death knell of science.

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# **THE MIND OF PRIMITIVE MAN**





## 1. INTRODUCTION

A survey of our globe shows the continents inhabited by a great diversity of peoples different in appearance, different in language and in cultural life. The Europeans and their descendants on other continents are united by similarity of bodily build, and their civilization sets them off sharply against all the people of different appearance. The Chinese, the native New Zealander, the African Negro, the American Indian present not only distinctive bodily features, but each possesses also his own peculiar mode of life. Each human type seems to have its own inventions, its own customs and beliefs, and it is very generally assumed that race and culture must be intimately associated, that racial descent determines cultural life.

Owing to this impression the term "primitive" has a double meaning. It applies to both bodily form and culture. We are accustomed to speak both of primitive races and primitive cultures as though the two were necessarily related. We believe not only in a close association between race and culture; we are also ready to claim superiority of our own race over all others. The sources of this attitude spring from our every-day experiences. Bodily form has an aesthetic value. The dark color, the flat and wide nose, the thick lips and prominent mouth of the Negro; the slanting eye and prominent cheekbones of the East Asiatic do not conform to those ideals of human beauty to which we of West European traditions are accustomed. The racial isolation of Europe and the social segregation of races in America have favored the rise of

the so-called "instinctive" aversion to foreign types, founded to a great extent on the feeling of a fundamental distinctiveness of form of our own race. It is the same feeling that creates an "instinctive" aversion to abnormal or ugly types in our own midst, or to habits that do not conform to our sense of propriety. Furthermore such strange types as are members of our society occupy, very generally, inferior positions and do not mingle to any great extent with members of our own race. In their native land their cultural life is not as rich in intellectual achievement as our own. Hence the inference that strangeness of type and low intelligence go hand in hand. In this way our attitude becomes intelligible, but we also recognize that it is not based on scientific insight but on simple emotional reactions and social conditions. Our aversions and judgments are not, by any means, primarily rational in character.

Nevertheless, we like to support our emotional attitude toward the so-called inferior races by reasoning. The superiority of our inventions, the extent of our scientific knowledge, the complexity of our social institutions, our attempts to promote the welfare of all members of the social body, create the impression that we, the civilized people, have advanced far beyond the stages on which other groups linger, and the assumption has arisen of an innate superiority of the European nations and of their descendants. The basis of our reasoning is obvious: the higher a civilization, the higher must be the aptitude for civilization; and as aptitude presumably depends upon the perfection of the mechanism of body and mind, we infer that the White race represents the highest type. The tacit assumption is made that achievement depends solely, or at least primarily, upon innate racial ability. Since the intellectual development of the White race is the highest, it

is assumed that its intellectuality is supreme and that its mind has the most subtle organization.

The conviction that European nations possess the highest aptitude supports our impressions regarding the significance of differences in type between the European race and those of other continents, or even of differences between various European types. Unwittingly we pursue a line of thought like this: since the aptitude of the European is the highest, his physical and mental type is also highest, and every deviation from the White type necessarily represents a lower feature.

This unproved assumption underlies our judgments of races, for other conditions being equal, a race is commonly described as the lower, the more fundamentally it differs from our own. We interpret as proof of a lower mentality anatomical peculiarities found in primitive man which resemble traits occurring in lower forms of the zoological series; and we are troubled by the observation that some of the "lower" traits do not occur in primitive man, but are rather found in the European race.

The subject and form of all such discussions show that the idea is rooted in the minds of investigators that we should expect to find in the White race the highest type of man.

Social conditions are often treated from the same point of view. We value our individual freedom, our code of ethics, our free art so highly that they seem to mark an advancement to which no other race can lay claim.

The judgment of the mental status of a people is generally guided by the difference between its social status and our own, and the greater the difference between their intellectual, emotional and moral processes and those which are found in our civilization, the harsher our judgment. It is only when a Tacitus deploring the degeneration of his

time finds the virtues of his ancestors among foreign tribes that their example is held up to the gaze of his fellow-citizens; but the people of imperial Rome probably had only a pitying smile for the dreamer who clung to the antiquated ideals of the past.

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 how far we are justified in assuming achievement to be primarily due to exceptional aptitude, and how far we are justified in assuming the European type—or, taking the notion in its extreme form, the Northwest European type—to represent the highest development of mankind. It will be advantageous to consider these popular beliefs before making the attempt to clear up the relations between culture and race and to describe the form and growth of culture.

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 with which all other civilizations appear as feeble beginnings cut short in early childhood, or arrested and petrified at 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 have remained at the bottom of the scale were not capable of rising to higher levels?

A brief consideration of the general outlines of the history of civilization will give us an answer to these questions. Let our minds go back a few thousand years, until we reach the time when the civilizations of eastern and

western Asia were in their infancy. The first great advances appear. The art of writing is invented. As time passes, the bloom of civilization bursts forth now here, now there. A people that at one time represented the highest type of culture sinks back into obscurity, while others take its place. At the dawn of history we see civilization cling to certain districts, taken up now by one people, now by another. Often, in the numerous conflicts of these times the more civilized people are vanquished. The conqueror learns the arts of life from the conquered and carries on their work. Thus the centers of civilization are shifting to and fro over a limited area, and progress is slow and halting. At this period the ancestors of the races that are today 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 a 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. Neither race nor language limit their diffusion. Hostility and timid exclusiveness against neighbors are unable to hinder their flow from tribe to tribe and they filter through distances that are measured by thousands of miles. Since many races 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, North African, West Asiatic, European, East Indian or East Asiatic.

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, division of labor and an elaborate ecclesiastical hierarchy. Great architectural works were undertaken, requiring the co-operation of many individuals. Plants were cultivated and animals domesticated; 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 measured by their inventions and knowledge was nearly equally high.<sup>1</sup> 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 the greater rapidity of development of the races of the Old World, it is not by any means conclusive proof of exceptional ability. It may be adequately conceived as due to the laws of chance. When two bodies run through the same course with variable rapidity, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, their relative position will be the more likely to show accidental differences, the longer the course they run. If their speed is constantly accelerating, as has been the case in the rapidity of cultural development, the distance be-

<sup>1</sup> A general presentation of these data will be found in Buschan and MacCurdy.

tween these bodies, due to chance only, will be still wider than it would be if the rate were uniform. Thus two groups of infants a few months old will be much alike in their physiological and psychical development; youths of equal age will differ much more; and among old men of equal age, one group will be in full possession of their powers, the other on the decline; due mainly to the acceleration or retardation of their development, which is, to a great extent determined by causes that are not inherent in their bodily structure, but largely due to their modes of life. The difference in period of development does not always signify that the hereditary structure of the retarded individuals is inferior to that of 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 a matter of conjecture, but we may be sure that it is long. We also know that man existed in the Eastern Hemisphere at a time that can be measured by geological standards only, and that he reached America not later than the beginning of the present geological period, perhaps a little earlier. The age of the human race must be measured by a span of time exceeding considerably one hundred thousand years (Penck). As the initial point of cultural development we must assume the remotest times in which we find traces of man. What does it mean, then, if one group of mankind reached a certain stage of cultural development at the age of one hundred thousand years and another at the age of one hundred and four thousand years? Would not the life history of the people, and the vicissitudes of their history, be fully sufficient to explain a delay of this character, without necessitating the assumption of a difference in their aptitude to social development? Such retardation would



be significant only if it could be shown that it occurs regularly and at all times in one race, while in other races greater rapidity of development is the rule.

If the achievements of a people were a measure of their aptitude, this method of estimating innate ability would hold good not only for our time but would be applicable under all conditions. The Egyptians of 2000 or 3000 B.C. might have applied the argument in their judgment of the people of northwestern Europe who lived in the Stone Age, had no architecture and a very primitive agriculture. They were "backward people" like many so-called primitive people of our time. These were our ancestors, and the judgment of the ancient Egyptians would now have to be reversed. Precisely in the same way must the customary estimate of the Japanese of one hundred years ago be reversed on account of their adoption of the economic, industrial and scientific methods of the western world. The claim that achievement and aptitude go hand in hand is not convincing. It must be subjected to an exhaustive analysis.

At present practically all the members of the White race participate to a greater or lesser degree in their advancement, while in none of the other races has such civilization as has been attained at one time or another been able to reach all the constituent tribes or peoples. This does not necessarily mean that all the members of the White race had the power of developing with equal rapidity the germs of civilization. Civilization, originated by a few members of the race, gave a stimulus to the neighboring tribes who, without this help, would have required a much longer time to reach the high level which they now occupy. We do observe a remarkable power of assimilation, which has not manifested itself to an equal degree in any other race.