
OUR PRIMITIVE CONTEMPORARIES

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TO
THE TRAVELERS, MISSIONARIES, GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AND
ANTHROPOLOGISTS, BUT FOR WHOSE PAINSTAKING
RESEARCHES AND PENETRATING OBSERVA-
TIONS THIS BOOK COULD NOT HAVE
BEEN WRITTEN

INTRODUCTION

How does the "savage" actually live? The general reader who is curious on this point can turn to scores of books about "primitive man" with selections on religion, marriage, and other institutions culled from hundreds of diverse peoples. Or he can read one of the systematic ethnographies which attempt to cover the whole world by devoting a few lines to each of some thousands of tribes. Or he may pick up a work on some particular region and acquire a general idea of the distribution of "culture traits" in that area. But in none of these books, however excellent, can he gain any adequate conception of the actual mode of life of a primitive people. For this he must turn to the original descriptive monographs themselves. Many of these, because they are rare, out of print, or buried away in obscure scientific journals, will be unavailable to him. The others, if they are really authoritative, he will find so freighted with masses of detail, of interest only to the professional anthropologist, that he will turn from them in discouragement, if not in boredom.

The present work springs from an appreciation of this gap in the literature, and seeks to remedy it. There are here gathered together, within the compass of a single volume, brief descriptions of eighteen different primitive peoples representative of all the great regions and races of the world and of all the major types and levels of culture. Each account, though short, aims to cover with reasonable adequacy every important aspect of economic, political, and social life, with some reference also to the racial, geographic, and historical background. An insight into the drama of life, as it actually unfolds among a number of diverse peoples, should yield, the author strongly feels, a truer

picture of aboriginal civilizations than any generalized account of "primitive man."

The tribes selected are not always either "primitive" or "contemporary" in a literal sense. The Aztecs and Incas, for instance, are primitive only in the sense that they are usually studied by the anthropologist rather than by the historian and the sociologist. The descriptions, though usually couched in the present tense for greater vividness in presentation, depict the culture of each tribe, in so far as possible, as of the time of its first contact with western civilization. The cultures are contemporary, therefore, only in the broad historical or evolutionary perspective, which regards a century as but a moment in the immense span of human history.

The book is frankly addressed to the general reader and the college student. It therefore abjures footnotes and the other badges of scholarship. It includes, however, a bibliography at the end of each chapter to guide the reader who may wish to learn more about a given culture. Asterisks indicate the most reliable comprehensive works; highly technical or specialized contributions, however excellent, are not thus marked. Primitive culture is intrinsically interesting, as the author knows from years of teaching experience with classes in anthropology and sociology. The facts of ethnography need no sugar-coating. Only facts, therefore, will appear in the text—not broad generalizations, or speculative reconstructions, or romantic idealizations, but the specific customs by which a number of primitive peoples actually order their lives.

The intelligent lay reader of this volume will, of himself, doubtless arrive at certain general conclusions which most specialists accept as axiomatic. He will, for example, fail to discover any direct correlation between race and cultural development. He will note that cultures are adjusted to their geographical environments, as is notably the case with the Polar Eskimos, but that vastly different cultures

can flourish in similar environments, *e.g.*, the diverse adaptations of the Aranda, the Hopi, and the Nama Hottentots to an arid habitat, and he will conclude that geography exerts a selective or conditioning rather than a determining influence on civilization. He will observe that simpler cultures differ amongst themselves at least as markedly as, for example, European civilization differs from Chinese, and he will conclude that there is no one distinctive "primitive culture" nor even any single series of cultural types. He will note, however, that there is no culture which does not possess some form of religion, marriage, economic organization, and the other major social institutions, and he will conclude that all cultures, including our own, are built according to a single fundamental plan, the so-called "universal culture pattern." He will perceive that a culture is something more than an accidental congeries of traits; it is a unified whole, with its constituent parts consistent with and adjusted to each other. It presents the aspect of a system in equilibrium—an equilibrium which is continually being disturbed and readjusted as new elements are borrowed or invented, and which may be completely destroyed by too sudden and fundamental a series of changes, as through white contact, with resulting cultural disorganization and decay. The reader may even come to the realization that his own culture is but one of many, and not in any vital respect different from the others. We are perhaps fortunate in having chosen applied science for special elaboration, rather than religious ceremonial, or war, or the potlatch, but only an incurable optimist could assert that our religious beliefs, our attitude toward sex and reproduction, and our political institutions are uniformly more rational than those of our primitive contemporaries.

Though addressed to the general reader, this volume raises certain questions of theory and method, to which the professional anthropologist and sociologist may legitimately

demand an answer. The layman and the student, therefore, are advised to turn directly to the text, while the author pens a

NOTE TO THE SPECIALIST

In the selection of the eighteen tribes, the aim has been to achieve a representative geographical distribution and at the same time to illustrate all the major variations in the primary social institutions as well as such notable specialties as the *couvade*, the *potlatch*, and cannibalism. These criteria have led to the inclusion of certain comparatively poorly documented tribes, *e.g.*, the Tasmanians, the Semang, and the Witotos, in preference to others about which a richer literature exists. Geographic distribution has been disregarded to some extent in the selection of a disproportionate number of tribes from native North America, partly because of the special interest of American readers in their own aboriginal predecessors, but mainly as a practical demonstration of the tremendous diversity of primitive culture even on a single continent and within a comparatively homogeneous race.

The nature of the material in the individual case, and not any hard-and-fast rule, has determined the arrangement of the facts in each chapter. The aim is always to present first those elements of the particular culture which can be understood without anticipation of what is to follow. So far as possible, all aspects of culture receive treatment. Some subjects, however, notably folklore and ceremonial and to a lesser extent language and kinship systems, require so much space for adequate presentation that, in a short chapter, they can be treated only with regrettable brevity.

The facts have been derived from extensive reading in the literature on each of the tribes. Experience has demonstrated the danger of relying upon any single author, no matter how excellent his work. Each writer has his blind spots and his limitations. A trained anthropologist, for ex-

ample, may give complete data on the kinship system and religious ceremonies but fail to record the incidents of everyday life, which the sympathetic missionary, who has lived amongst the people for years, describes at length in his memoirs. The early explorer and the colonial administrator make their own unique contributions. Each writer, moreover, has his prejudices—the official's consciousness of the superiority of his own race, the missionary's abhorrence of savage "idolatry," the anthropologist's preoccupation with the theories of his own particular school of thought. With wider reading, personal biases tend to cancel out, the lacunæ are filled, and a complete picture of the culture emerges.

The author has not, of course, exhausted the literature. He has surveyed all the more important contributions and sampled the rest, including in the bibliographies only the works actually read and found useful in compiling the chapter. In general, he has placed little reliance upon writers who have not had personal contact with the peoples they describe. Secondary sources have been drawn upon only incidentally or where a preliminary review of the primary sources has demonstrated the accuracy and thoroughness of the writer, as in the cases of Roth on the Tasmanians and Schapera on the Hottentots. One important exception should be noted. In writing the chapters on the Aztecs and the Incas, the author, not being himself a specialist on these civilizations, has preferred to depend upon the scholarly compilations and reconstructions by qualified students of the original sources, rather than trust to his own more immature judgment.

The text, though designed for the layman, strives for accuracy. It makes no statement of fact without authority, or without weighing the relevant circumstances where the authorities conflict. Statements by authors of doubtful reliability, such as those of Vaughn Stevens on the "soul bird" and "name tree" of the Semang, have been ac-

cepted only in so far as they seem consistent with the context and have been partially substantiated. Nevertheless, some errors of fact and of interpretation must inevitably have crept in. All corrections thereof will be gratefully received.

Though largely the product of library research, the volume is not exclusively so. The chapter on the Haidas incorporates a considerable amount of original material gathered by the author in 1932 on a field trip sponsored by the Institute of Human Relations in Yale University. The chapters on the Samoans and the Dahomeans have benefited by the authoritative criticisms and suggestions of Professor Peter H. Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa) and Professor Melville J. Herskovits respectively, and those on the Iroquois and Hopi have similarly profited through the alterations suggested by two former students of the author's, Mr. W. N. Fenton and Mr. J. Spierer, on the basis of their respective field experience with the tribes in question. That these readers have suggested only minor changes in the four chapters augurs well, perhaps, for the essential accuracy of the others. The chapter on the Haidas has undergone an even severer test. Composed two years before the author's visit to the tribe, it was read in the original form at the close of his trip to an intelligent native of the old régime, whose manifest surprise gave additional weight to his confirmation. That the chapter required no fundamental revision or correction, but only expansion on the basis of new material, while primarily a tribute to the soundness of the pioneer work of Dr. John R. Swanton and others, was nevertheless highly gratifying.

The present work has no ax of anthropological or sociological theory to grind; it is concerned only with facts and description. Some interpretation, to be sure, is unavoidable. When it becomes necessary, the author gives preference to the views of his most reliable authorities, unless they seem naïve, inconsistent with the facts, or influenced by

theoretical presuppositions. Hoernlé's conception of *!nau* among the Nama Hottentots, for example, seems, on the basis of the cited facts, to be forcibly crammed into the mold of Van Gennep's "rites of passage" theory, and to be more readily reconciled with the widespread notion of ritual uncleanness.

Certain theorists will doubtless criticize the treatment of religion for virtually ignoring the concept of *mana* or impersonal supernatural power. To the scientist, the reason for this omission should be sufficiently cogent. The author began with the intention of making full use of the concept. In tribe after tribe, however, he found it inapplicable, the more so the more deeply he dug into the facts, and he ended without being able to use it at all. To choose but one example out of many, he could find little relation between Handy's reconstruction of Polynesian religion in terms of *mana* and the reported facts on Samoan religion. In science, when a theory, however plausible, parts company with the facts, there is no choice; the theory must yield. Thus, though the author still feels the inadequacy of animism as a universal explanation of religious phenomena, he is now convinced that it must be supplemented by something more substantial than *mana*.

In the field of social organization, British usage has been followed in preference to American. The term "clan," since it lends itself readily to the formation of compounds such as "clansmen," is used for a unilateral kin-group in place of the more awkward "sib" and "gens." The Americanist who is startled to read of a "patrilineal clan" or to find the present tense used for the now decadent culture of a tribe which he himself has studied, need only remember that the work is addressed, not to him, but to the general reader. The specialist may be interested in the Haida chapter as a summary report of the author's own field work, and he will find the Inca chapter probably a more integrated survey of Peruvian social organization than appears else-

where in English, but in other cases he will naturally prefer to consult the original sources. The lay reader and the student, however, may conceivably profit from a brief, non-technical description of a number of living, functioning, primitive cultures as of a date when they were actually in full flower.

The teacher who adopts this volume as a text in a course in anthropology will doubtless find it most suitable when used in conjunction either with one of the standard textbooks dealing with anthropological theory or with lectures covering the same subjects. Since it concerns itself entirely with fact, the book should not conflict with any reasonable theoretical position. Teachers of sociology will perhaps find it useful as a background against which to project their analysis of present-day social phenomena. There is, of course, no virtue in assigning the chapters in the exact order of their presentation. The arrangement adopted is purely geographical, beginning with Oceania simply because the Tasmanians happen to have had the lowest culture of modern times, and ending with Africa chiefly because, contrary to popular prejudice, the Negro peoples display, on the average, a more complex development of government, art, industry, and material culture than the non-literate inhabitants of any other great continental area.

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G. P. M.

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