

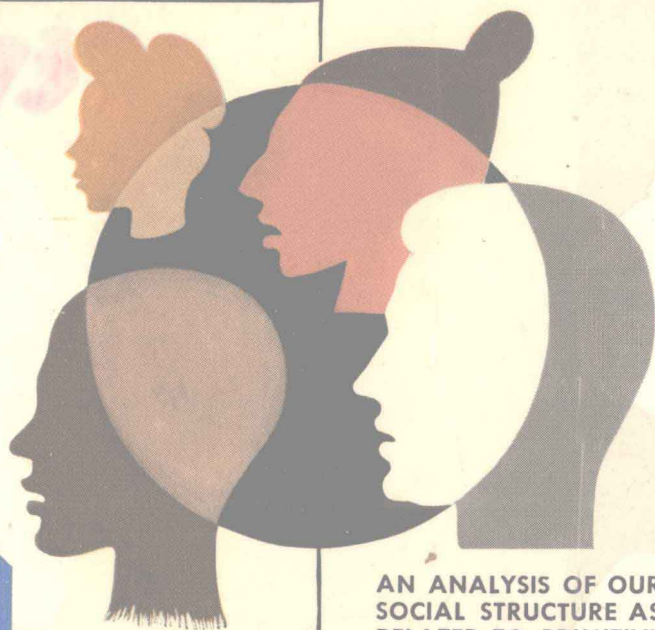
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PATTERNS OF CULTURE

RUTH BENEDICT



AN ANALYSIS OF OUR
SOCIAL STRUCTURE AS
RELATED TO PRIMITIVE
CIVILIZATIONS

Mentor Books

Patterns of Culture

By

RUTH BENEDICT



A MENTOR BOOK

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About This Book

Since the thirties the psychoanalysts have looked for many explanations of complex civilized behavior in the tabus and drives of primitive man. Dr. Benedict was one of the first anthropologists to implement these theories with technical data. She visualizes culture as an integrated whole, applying to groups the psychological concepts usually reserved for individuals.

In this book she compares three cultures dominated by one ruling motivation. The Zuñi Indians of New Mexico are Apollonian in their sobriety and moderation, their love of ritual and their effacement of the individual before society. The Kwakiutls of Vancouver Island are in almost direct antithesis to the Zuñi with their Dionysian preference for individual rivalry and ecstasies; they have *paranoid* delusions of grandeur. While the Dobus of Melanesia—a race of Iagos, secretive, dour, prudish and treacherous—see life in terms of personal conflict with a harsh environment; they have a *schizophrenic* fear of nature and a morbid suspicion of their neighbors.

However, the moral that Dr. Benedict points is that although these cultures evinced clinical deviations from our norm, abnormality in any culture is simply the failure of the individual to adopt socially valued drives—that cultures (our own included) cannot be compared on an ethical basis, but simply as coexisting and equally valid patterns of life. Today when racial and cultural prejudices have brought our civilization to the edge of Armageddon, her message is one that has a desperate importance.

Patterns of Culture

In the beginning God gave to every people
a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank
their life.

Proverb of Digger Indians

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The three primitive peoples described in this volume have been chosen because knowledge of these tribes is comparatively full and satisfactory and because I was able to supplement published descriptions with many discussions with the field ethnologists who have lived intimately with these peoples and who have written the authoritative descriptions of the tribes in question. I have myself lived several summers in the pueblo of Zuñi, and among some of the neighbouring tribes which I have used to contrast with pueblo culture. I owe a great debt to Dr. Ruth L. Bunzel, who learned the Zuñi language and whose accounts of Zuñi and collections of texts are the best of all the available pueblo studies. For the description of Dobu I am indebted to Dr. Reo F. Fortune's invaluable monograph, *The Sorcerers of Dobu*, and to many delightful conversations. For the Northwest Coast of America I have used not only Professor Franz Boas's text publications and detailed compilations of Kwakiutl life, but his still unpublished material and his penetrating comment upon his experience on the Northwest Coast extending over forty years.

For the presentations here I am alone responsible and it may be that I have carried some interpretations further than one or another of the field-workers would have done. But the chapters have been read and verified as to facts by these authorities upon these tribes, and references to their detailed studies are given for those who wish to consult the full accounts.

I wish to make grateful acknowledgment to the original publishers for permission to reprint certain paragraphs from the following articles: 'The Science of

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Custom,' in *The Century Magazine*; 'Configurations of Culture in North America,' in *The American Anthropologist*; and 'Anthropology and the Abnormal,' in *The Journal of General Psychology*.

Thanks are due also to E. P. Dutton and Company, publishers of *Sorcerers of Dobu*.

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INTRODUCTION

DURING the present century many new approaches to the problems of social anthropology have developed. The old method of constructing a history of human culture based on bits of evidence, torn out of their natural contacts, and collected from all times and all parts of the world, has lost much of its hold. It was followed by a period of painstaking attempts at reconstruction of historical connections based on studies of distribution of special features and supplemented by archæological evidence. Wider and wider areas were looked upon from this viewpoint. Attempts were made to establish firm connections between various cultural features and these were used to establish wider historical connections. The possibility of independent development of analogous cultural features which is a postulate of a general history of culture has been denied or at least consigned to an inconsequential rôle. Both the evolutionary method and the analysis of independent local cultures were devoted to unraveling the sequences of cultural forms. While by means of the former it was hoped to build up a unified picture of the history of culture and civilization, the adherents of the latter methods, at least among its more conservative adherents, saw each culture as a single unit and as an individual historical problem.

Under the influence of the intensive analysis of cultures the indispensable collection of facts relating to cultural forms has received a strong stimulus. The material so collected gave us information on social life, as though it consisted of strictly separated categories, such as economic life, technology, art, social organization, religion, and the

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unifying bond was difficult to find. The position of the anthropologist seemed like that satirized by G  the.

Wer will was Lebendig's erkennen und beschreiben,
Sucht erst den Geist heraus zu treiben,
Dann hat er die Teile in seiner Hand,
Fehlt leider nur das geistige Band.

The occupation with living cultures has created a stronger interest in the totality of each culture. It is felt more and more that hardly any trait of culture can be understood when taken out of its general setting. The attempt to conceive a whole culture as controlled by a single set of conditions did not solve the problem. The purely anthropo-geographical, economic, or in other ways formalistic approach seemed to give distorted pictures.

The desire to grasp the meaning of a culture as a whole compels us to consider descriptions of standardized behaviour merely as a stepping-stone leading to other problems. We must understand the individual as living in his culture; and the culture as lived by individuals. The interest in these socio-psychological problems is not in any way opposed to the historical approach. On the contrary, it reveals dynamic processes that have been active in cultural changes and enables us to evaluate evidence obtained from the detailed comparison of related cultures.

On account of the character of the material the problem of cultural life presents itself often as that of the interrelation between various aspects of culture. In some cases this study leads to a better appreciation of the intensity or lack of integration of a culture. It brings out clearly the forms of integration in various types of culture which prove that the relations between different aspects of culture follow the most diverse patterns and do not lend themselves profitably to generalizations. However, it leads rarely, and only indirectly, to an understanding of the relation between individual and culture.

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This requires a deep penetration into the genius of the culture, a knowledge of the attitudes controlling individual and group behaviour. Dr. Benedict calls the genius of culture its configuration. In the present volume the author has set before us this problem and has illustrated it by the example of three cultures that are permeated each by one dominating idea. This treatment is distinct from the so-called functional approach to social phenomena in so far as it is concerned rather with the discovery of fundamental attitudes than with the functional relations of every cultural item. It is not historical except in so far as the general configuration, as long as it lasts, limits the directions of change that remain subject to it. In comparison to changes of content of culture the configuration has often remarkable permanency.

As the author points out, not every culture is characterized by a dominant character, but it seems probable that the more intimate our knowledge of the cultural drives that actuate the behaviour of the individual, the more we shall find that certain controls of emotion, certain ideals of conduct, prevail that account for what seem to us as abnormal attitudes when viewed from the standpoint of our civilization. The relativity of what is considered social or asocial, normal or abnormal, is seen in a new light.

The extreme cases selected by the author make clear the importance of the problem.

FRANZ BOAS

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The Science of Custom

ANTHROPOLOGY is the study of human beings as creatures of society. It fastens its attention upon those physical characteristics and industrial techniques, those conventions and values, which distinguish one community from all others that belong to a different tradition.

The distinguishing mark of anthropology among the social sciences is that it includes for serious study other societies than our own. For its purposes any social regulation of mating and reproduction is as significant as our own, though it may be that of the Sea Dyaks, and have no possible historical relation to that of our civilization. To the anthropologist, our customs and those of a New Guinea tribe are two possible social schemes for dealing with a common problem, and in so far as he remains an anthropologist he is bound to avoid any weighting of one in favour of the other. He is interested in human behaviour, not as it is shaped by one tradition, our own, but as it has been shaped by any tradition whatsoever. He is interested in the great gamut of custom that is found in various cultures, and his object is to understand the way in which these cultures change and differentiate, the different forms through which they express themselves, and the manner in which the customs of any peoples function in the lives of the individuals who compose them.

Now custom has not been commonly regarded as a subject of any great moment. The inner workings of our own brains we feel to be uniquely worthy of investigation, but custom, we have a way of thinking, is behaviour at its most commonplace. As a matter of fact, it is the other way around. Traditional custom, taken the world over, is

a mass of detailed behaviour more astonishing than what any one person can ever evolve in individual actions, no matter how aberrant. Yet that is a rather trivial aspect of the matter. The fact of first-rate importance is the predominant rôle that custom plays in experience and in belief, and the very great varieties it may manifest.

No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probings he cannot go behind these stereotypes; his very concepts of the true and the false will still have reference to his particular traditional customs. John Dewey has said in all seriousness that the part played by custom in shaping the behaviour of the individual as over against any way in which he can affect traditional custom, is as the proportion of the total vocabulary of his mother tongue over against those words of his own baby talk that are taken up into the vernacular of his family. When one seriously studies social orders that have had the opportunity to develop autonomously, the figure becomes no more than an exact and matter-of-fact observation. The life history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part. There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than this of the rôle of custom. Until we are intelligent as to its laws and varieties, the main complicating facts of human life must remain unintelligible.

The study of custom can be profitable only after certain preliminary propositions have been accepted, and some of these propositions have been violently opposed. In the first place any scientific study requires that there be no preferential weighting of one or another of the items in the series it selects for its consideration. In all the less controversial fields like the study of cacti or termites or the nature of nebulæ, the necessary method of study is to group the relevant material and to take note of all possible variant forms and conditions. In this way we have learned all that we know of the laws of astronomy, or of the habits of the social insects, let us say. It is only in the study of man himself that the major social sciences have substituted the study of one local variation, that of Western civilization.

Anthropology was by definition impossible as long as these distinctions between ourselves and the primitive, ourselves and the barbarian, ourselves and the pagan, held sway over people's minds. It was necessary first to arrive at that degree of sophistication where we no longer set our own belief over against our neighbour's superstition. It was necessary to recognize that these institutions which are based on the same premises, let us say the supernatural, must be considered together, our own among the rest.

In the first half of the nineteenth century this elementary postulate of anthropology could not occur to the most enlightened person of Western civilization. Man, all down his history, has defended his uniqueness like a point of honour. In Copernicus' time this claim to supremacy was so inclusive that it took in even the earth on which we live, and the fourteenth century refused with passion to have this planet subordinated to a place in the solar scheme. By Darwin's time, having granted the solar system to the enemy, man fought with all the weapons at his command for the uniqueness of the soul, an unknowable attribute given by God to man in such a manner that it

disproved man's ancestry in the animal kingdom. No lack of continuity in the argument, no doubts of the nature of this 'soul,' not even the fact that the nineteenth century did not care in the least to defend its brotherhood with any group of aliens—none of these facts counted against the first-rate excitement that raged on account of the indignity evolution proposed against the notion of man's uniqueness.

Both these battles we may fairly count as won—if not yet, then soon; but the fighting has only massed itself upon another front. We are quite willing to admit now that the revolution of the earth about the sun, or the animal ancestry of man, has next to nothing to do with the uniqueness of our human achievements. If we inhabit one chance planet out of a myriad solar systems, so much the greater glory, and if all the ill-assorted human races are linked by evolution with the animal, the provable differences between ourselves and them are the more extreme and the uniqueness of our institutions the more remarkable. But *our* achievements, *our* institutions are unique; they are of a different order from those of lesser races and must be protected at all costs. So that today, whether it is a question of imperialism, or of race prejudice, or of a comparison between Christianity and paganism, we are still preoccupied with the uniqueness, not of the human institutions of the world at large, which no one has ever cared about anyway, but of our own institutions and achievements, our own civilization.

Western civilization, because of fortuitous historical circumstances, has spread itself more widely than any other local group that has so far been known. It has standardized itself over most of the globe, and we have been led, therefore, to accept a belief in the uniformity of human behaviour that under other circumstances would not have arisen. Even very primitive peoples are sometimes far more conscious of the rôle of cultural traits than