

PREFACE

This book is an attempt to give an analytical description of the fundamental traits of primitive art. The treatment given to the subject is based on two principles that, I believe, should guide all investigations into the manifestations of life among primitive people: the one the fundamental sameness of mental processes in all races and in all cultural forms of the present day; the other, the consideration of every cultural phenomenon as the result of historical happenings.

There must have been a time when man's mental equipment was different from what it is now, when it was evolving from a condition similar to that found among the higher apes. That period lies far behind us and no trace of a lower mental organization is found in any of the extant races of man. So far as my personal experience goes and so far as I feel competent to judge ethnographical data on the basis of this experience, the mental processes of man are the same everywhere, regardless of race and culture, and regardless of the apparent absurdity of beliefs and customs.

Some theorists assume a mental equipment of primitive man distinct from that of civilized man. I have never seen a person in primitive life to whom this theory would apply. There are slavish believers in the teachings of the past and there are scoffers and unbelievers; there are clear thinkers and muddleheaded bunglers; there are strong characters and weaklings.

The behavior of everybody, no matter to what culture he may belong, is determined by the traditional material he handles, and man, the world over, handles the material transmitted to him according to the same methods.

Our traditional experience has taught us to consider the course of objective events as the result of definite, objective causation. Inexorable causality governs here and the outer world cannot be

influenced by mental conditions. Hence our hesitating wonder at the phenomena of hypnotism and suggestion in which these lines seem no longer sharply drawn. Our cultural environment has impressed this view upon our minds so deeply that we assume as a fundamental fact that material phenomena, particularly outside of the field of human behavior, can never be influenced by mental, subjective processes. Still, every ardent wish implies the possibility of fulfilment and prayers for objective benefits or for help do not differ in principle from the attempts of primitive man to interfere with the uncontrollable course of nature. The credulity with which fantastic theories bearing upon health are accepted, the constant rise of religious sects with abstruse dogmatic tenets, as well as the fashions in scientific and philosophic theory prove the weakness of our claim to a rational view of the world.

Anyone who has lived with primitive tribes, who has shared their joys and sorrows, their privations and their luxuries, who sees in them not solely subjects of study to be examined like a cell under the microscope, but feeling and thinking human beings, will agree that there is no such thing as a "primitive mind", a "magical" or "prelogical" way of thinking, but that each individual in "primitive" society is a man, a woman, a child of the same kind, of the same way of thinking, feeling and acting as man, woman or child in our own society.

Investigators are too apt to forget that the logics of science,— that unattainable ideal of the discovery of pure relations of cause and effect, uncontaminated by any kind of emotional bias as well as of unproved opinion,— are not the logics of life. The feelings underlying taboo are everpresent among us. I remember that as a boy, when receiving instruction in religion,— that is in dogma,— I had an insuperable inhibition against uttering the word "God", and I could not be brought to answer a question that required the answer "God". If I had been older I should have searched for and found a personally satisfying explanation for this inhibition. Everyone knows by experience that there are actions he will not perform,

lines of thought that he will not follow, and words that he will not utter, because the actions are emotionally objectionable, or the thoughts find strong resistances and involve our innermost life so deeply that they cannot be expressed in words. We are right in calling these social taboos. It requires only a dogmatic standardization to transform them into true taboos.

And magic? I believe if a boy should observe someone spitting on his photograph and cutting it to pieces he would feel duely outraged. I know if this should have happened to me when I was a student, the result would have been a duel and I should have done my level best to do to my adversary *in natura* what he had done to me *in effigie* and I should have considered my success as a compensation for the harm done me;— all this without any psycho-analytic meaning. I do not believe that my feelings would have differed much from those of other young men. Again a standardization and dogmatization would bring us right back to "magical" attitudes.

Dr. Tozzer's¹ collection of superstitions of College students with the enlightening remarks by those who hold the beliefs will be read with profit by all those who are convinced of our mental superiority and the lack of ability of clear thinking among the primitives.

Still other considerations should caution us against the assumption of a radical difference between primitive and civilized mentality. We like to see this distinction in greater individual mental freedom from social bondage expressed in a free critical attitude that makes possible individual creativeness.

Our much admired scientific training has never proved a safeguard against the seductiveness of emotional appeals, just as little as it has prevented the acceptance as gospel truth of the grossest absurdities, if presented with sufficient energy, self assertion and authority. If anything, the late war with its organized governmental and private propaganda should make us understand this truth. Opinions ener-

¹ A. M. Tozzer, *Social Origins and Social Continuities*, New York, 1925, pp. 242 et seq.

getically propagated and spurious facts diligently disseminated color the thinking of the people, and not only of the uneducated. The intellectual is deceived as easily as the untutored by sanctimonious professions that conform to the moral code of time and place and flatter the feeling of selfrighteousness. They gloss over the conflict of deed and word and, when uttered by those in authority, make criminals appear like saints.

Our advantage over primitive people is one of greater knowledge of the objective world, painfully gained by the labor of many generations, a knowledge which we apply rather badly and which we, or at least most of us, discard just as soon as a strong emotional urge impels us to do so, and for which we substitute forms quite analogous to those of primitive thought.

The much maligned introspective psychology proves to the unbiased observer that the causes that make primitive man think as he does, are equally present in our minds. The particular behavior in each case is determined by the traditional knowledge at the disposal of the individual.

The second fundamental point to be borne in mind is that each culture can be understood only as an historical growth determined by the social and geographical environment in which each people is placed and by the way in which it develops the cultural material that comes into its possession from the outside or through its own creativeness. For the purpose of an historical analysis we treat each particular problem first of all as a unit, and we attempt to unravel the threads that may be traced in the development of its present form. For this reason we may not start our inquiries and interpretations, as though the fundamental thesis of a single unilineal development of cultural traits the world over, of a development that follows everywhere the same lines, had been definitely proven. If it is claimed that culture has run such a course, the assertion must be proven on the basis of detailed studies of the historical changes in single cultures and by the demonstration of analogies in their development.

It is safe to say that the critical study of recent years has definitely disproved the existence of far reaching homologies which would permit us to arrange all the manifold cultural lines in an ascending scale in which to each can be assigned its proper place.

On the other hand dynamic conditions exist, based on environment, physiological, psychological, and social factors, that may bring forth similar cultural processes in different parts of the world, so that it is probable that some of the historical happenings may be viewed under more general dynamic viewpoints.

But historical data are not available and when prehistoric research does not reveal sequences of cultural changes, the only available method of study is the geographical one, the study of distribution. This has been emphasized in the last third of the past century by Friedrich Ratzel. It has probably been most rigidly developed in the United States. I illustrated this method in 1891 by a study of the distribution of folk tales in North America¹ and it has become more and more the method of analytical study of cultural forms.

Its very fruitfulness, however, has led to extremes in its application that should be guarded against. I pointed out, in print in 1911 and often before and since that time in speaking, that there is a certain homology between universal distribution of cultural facts and their antiquity. The fundamental principle involved in this assumption was fully discussed by Georg Gerland in 1875,² although we are hardly ready to accept his conclusions. The data of prehistoric archaeology prove that some of these universal achievements go back to paleolithic times. Stone implements, fire and ornaments are found in that period. Pottery and agriculture, which are less universally distributed, appear later. Metals, the use of which is still more limited in space, are found still later.

Recent attempts have been made to raise to a general principle this point of view which, with due caution, may be applied here

¹ *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. IV, pp. 13—20; also *Science*, Vol. XII (1888), pp. 194—196.

² *Anthropologische Beiträge*, Halle a/S, pp. 401 et seq.

and there. Herbert Spinden in his reconstruction of American prehistoric chronology, Alfred Kroeber in his analysis of cultural forms of the Pacific Coast, and quite recently Clark Wissler have built up, founded on this principle a system of historic sequences that appear to me as quite untenable. That widely distributed cultural traits develop special forms in each particular area is a truism that does not require any proof. That these local developments may be arranged in a chronological series, that those of the most limited distribution are the youngest, is only partially true. It is not difficult to find phenomena that center in a certain region and dwindle down at the outskirts, but it is not true that these invariably arise on an ancient substratum. The converse is often true, that an idea emanating from a center is diffused over a wide area. Neither may the origin always be looked for in the area of the strongest development. In the same way as we find animals surviving and flourishing in regions far distant from the locality in which they developed, so cultural traits may be transferred and find their highest expression in regions far away from their origin. The bronze castings of Benin; the wood carvings of New Zealand; the bronze work of ancient Scandinavia; the giant stone work of Easter Island; the early cultural development of Ireland and its influences over Europe are examples of this kind.

Equally unsafe are the methods used by Fritz Graebner and Pater W. Schmidt who claim the stability of certain very old and, as I fear, fictitious correlations between cultural traits.

It is probably not necessary to point out the utter inadequacy of Elliott Smith's attempt to reduce all ethnological phenomena to a single, and anthropologically speaking, late source and to assume a permanence of cultural forms that exists nowhere.

It has often been observed that cultural traits are exceedingly tenacious and that features of hoary antiquity survive until the present day. This has led to the impression that primitive culture is almost stable and has remained what it is for many centuries. This does not correspond to the facts. Wherever we have detailed

information we see forms of objects and customs in constant flux, sometimes stable for a period, then undergoing rapid changes. Through this process elements that at one time belonged together as cultural units are torn apart. Some survive, others die, and so far as objective traits are concerned, the cultural form may become a kaleidoscopic picture of miscellaneous traits that, however, are remodelled according to the changing spiritual background that pervades the culture and that transforms the mosaic into an organic whole. The better the integration of the elements the more valuable appears to us the culture. I believe that it may be said that the coherent survival of cultural features that are not organically connected is exceedingly rare, while single detached elements may possess marvellous longevity.

In the present book the problem of growth of individual art styles will be touched upon only incidentally. Our object is rather an attempt to determine the dynamic conditions under which art styles grow up. The specific historical problem requires much fuller material than what we now possess. There are very few parts of the world in which we can trace, by archaeological or comparative geographical study, the growth of art styles. Prehistoric archaeology in Europe, Asia, and America shows, however, that, as general cultural traits are in a constant state of flux, so also do art styles change and the breaks in the artistic life of the people are often surprisingly sudden. It remains to be seen whether it is possible to derive generally valid laws that control the growth of specific art styles, such as Adama van Scheltema has tried to derive for North European art.¹ With increasing technical skill and perfection of tools, changes are bound to occur. Their course is determined by the general cultural history of the people. We are not in a position to say that the same tendencies, modified by local historical happenings, reappear in the course of art development everywhere.

¹ Die altnordische Kunst, Berlin, 1923.

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