

Savage Minds Occasional Papers No. 10

**The Science of Culture: The Bearing of Anthropology
on Contemporary Thought**

By Ruth Benedict

Edited and with an introduction by Alex Golub

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Savage Minds Occasional Papers

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Introduction

In this SMOPS I'm very pleased to present "The Science of Culture," an essay that Ruth Benedict published in 1929 and has languished unread since then. "Science of Culture" was significantly revised to become the first chapter of *Patterns of Culture*, so readers will be familiar with the ideas expressed in it. However, this original version is significantly different from that chapter, and works better as a standalone essay. It seems that every decade or so, anthropologists feel the need to write an essay to tell a general audience what our discipline's main findings and beliefs are. This article, like Kroeber's "The Superorganic" published 12 years earlier, is Benedict's version of a popular account of the anthropological credo.

In this essay Benedict lays out the main arguments of anthropology: It is the study of 'custom' (or culture, as we might say today), not the study of 'primitives.' It is necessary because we are too socialized into our own customs to recognize them at work, and also because the spread of Western culture has made it harder and harder for Americans (and others) to encounter cultural difference. Humans are unique because our customs are learned rather than biologically inherited. There are no natural stages of evolution that all societies pass through, and it is not useful to argue that a custom exists in society because it fulfills a utilitarian need that society has. This is true in a trivial sense, but the specific features culture traits are shaped by cultural patterns which shape behavior. There is no one true religion or spirituality, and cultures all explore different facets of a species-wide spiritual experience. The results of these realizations is a greater ability to view one's culture objectively, a more tolerance for other ways of life, and a greater ability to appreciate the lives we build together as humans. Anthropology, then, helps humans live flourishing lives because it educates our faculties and gives us the ability to live emotional and mental lives that are flexible and have wide horizons.

Eighty five years later, most of Benedict's conclusions stand intact. Of course, additional research has led us to revise some of her conclusions: we now know humans are much more like other animals, and that other animals are lot more like us. We are less confident that there is a universal experience of 'the divine' or 'spirituality' than Benedict was. And we know there is no necessary relationship between recognition between liberal values of tolerance and recognition of the arbitrary and conventional nature of our cultures. We are also less willing to pain indigenous people as caught in the grip of an unknown cultural pattern, obsessively elaborating it. Benedict overstates her case here (and also provides no scholarly references to back up her ethnographic claims!) and in doing so, makes indigenous people sound almost mentally ill.

These quibbles aside, however, it is striking how contemporary Benedict's work feels. It is for this reason that I hope a contemporary readership will enjoy it.



This version of "The Science of Culture" is presented unaltered from the original article, which is reproduced in full. The bracketed numbers in the text indicate the pages of the original article. This is the first paper in the SMOPS which has reprinted a work that was originally under copyright but whose copyright has elapsed and was not renewed. These works, produced between 1923 and 1963, are central to the history of anthropology and I am excited to present more of them to you. I thank the special collection division of the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa for help in locating the original version of "The Science of

Culture” and Project Gutenberg for providing the full text of the U.S. Copyright Office’s copyright renewal records which were used to confirm the copyright status of this work.

I hope that this paper, like the others in this series, will help present anthropological theory in a form that is accessible to everyone. There is today a tremendous amount of material which is open access, but it is difficult to find, inconvenient to read, and many people do not know where to start looking for it. By curating a selection of important open access work, I hope to make open access resources better known and to raise awareness of the actual history of anthropological theory.

-R
27 Jan 2014
Honolulu

The Science of Custom: The Bearing of Anthropology on Contemporary Thought

by Ruth Benedict

Anthropology is the study of primitive peoples -- a statement which helps us to understand its bearing on contemporary thought as little as if, in the time of Copernicus, we had defined astronomy as the study of the stars, or biology in the time of Darwin, as the science of bugs. It was not facts about stars that made astronomy suddenly of first-class importance, but that -- quite casually, as it were -- the Copernical scheme placed the earth, this planetary scene of human life, in a perspective of such infinitesimal insignificance. In much the same way the significance of anthropology or modern thought does not lie in any secrets that the primitive has saved for us from a simpler world, with which to solve the perplexities of this existence. Anthropology is not a search for the philosopher's stone in a vanished and golden age. What anthropologists find in the study of primitive people is a natural and well-nigh inexhaustible laboratory of custom, a great workshop in which to explore the major role it has played in the life history of the world.

Now custom has not been commonly regarded as a subject of any great moment. It is not like the inner workings of our own brains, which we feel to be uniquely worthy of investigation. 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 behavior more astonishing than any one person can ever evolve in personal acts no matter how aberrant. Yet that is a rather trivial aspect of the matter. The fact of first-rate importance is the predominant role that custom plays in experience and in belief. 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 the structure of his particular traditional customs. John Dewey has said in all seriousness that the part played by custom in shaping the behavior of the individual as over against any way [642] 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. There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than that of the role of custom in our total life. Until we are intelligent as to the laws and the varieties of customs, the main complicating facts of human life will remain to us an unintelligible book.

The first concern of the anthropologists is always for an understanding of this affair of custom: how each society comes to be possessed of whole systems of it, how it is stabilized, cross-fertilized, how it is inculcated into all the members of the group among whom it flourishes. In other words, the business of the anthropologist is with the great ideational systems of language, social organization and religion of which every people on earth finds itself possessed, and which are passed on to every child as it is born into the group, but of which no child born in any other territory could ever achieve the thousandth part.

This matter of culture, to give it its anthropological term -- that complex whole which includes all the habits acquired by man as a member of society -- has been late in claiming scientific attention. There are excellent reasons for this. Any scientific study requires first of all that there be no preferential weighting of one or another of the items in the series it selects for its consideration. Anthropology was therefore by definition impossible as long as those old distinctions between ourselves and the barbarians, ourselves and the pagan, held sway over people's minds. It was necessary first to arrive at that degree of sophistication where one no longer set his belief over against his neighbor's superstition, and it is worth considering that it is barely one hundred years ago that any one took his superstitious neighbors seriously enough to include them in any general purview of serious belief.

In the second place, custom did not challenge the attention of social theorists, because it was the very stuff of their own thinking. We do not see the lens through which we look. Precisely in proportion as it was fundamental, it was automatic, and had its existence outside the field of conscious attention. The custom of greeting a guest by an array of weeping women who sit in his lap and embrace him, may not need more or less psychological elucidation than the handshake, but it communicates the necessary shock, and the subject of the handshake will remain unexplored long after we have mustered our efforts toward the understand of the tears-greeting. We have only to admit alien customs to the same rank in regulating human nature that our customs have for us, and we are perpetually galvanized into attention.

It is not fair to lay our blindness to custom whole to the fact that it is closer to us than breathing. Primitive people are sometimes far more conscious of the role of cultural traits than we are, and for good reason. They have had intimate experience of different cultures, and we have not. White civilization has standardized itself over most of the [643] globe. We have never seen an outsider unless he is already Europeanized. The uniformity of custom, of outlook, seems convincing enough, and conceals from us the fact that it is after all an historical accident. All our observation reinforces that testimony of our easy assent to the familiar, and we accept without any ado the equivalence of human nature and of our own cultural standards. But many primitives have a different experience. They have seen their religion go down before the white man's, their economic system, their marriage prohibitions. They have laid down the one and taken up the other, and area quite clear and sophisticated about variant arrangements of human life. If they talk about human nature, they do it in plurals, not in the absolute singular, and they will derive dominant characteristics of the white man from his commercial institutions, or from his conventions of warfare, very much after the fashion of the anthropologist. If civilized Europeans have been especially dense to the scientific implications of custom, it has been not only because their own customs were too familiar to be discernible, and because they resisted the implication that their culture belonged to a series that included the customs of lesser people, but also because the standardization of their own culture over the globe has given an illusion of a world-wide uniform human behavior.



What is it that anthropologists have to say about this matter of custom? In the first place, it is man's distinguishing mark in the animal kingdom. Man is the culture-making animal. It is not that insects, for instance, do not have complex cultural traits like the domestication of plants and

animals, political organization, division of labor. But the mechanism of transmission makes them contrast sharply with man's particular contribution to traditionally *learned* behavior. Insect society takes no chances; the pattern of the entire social structure is carried in the cell structure of each individual ant, so that one isolated individual can automatically reproduce the entire social order of its own colony just as it reproduces the shape of antennae or of abdomen. For better or worse, man's solution has been at the opposite pole. Not one item of his tribal social organization, of language, of his local religion, is carried in his germ-cell. His whole centuries-evolved civilization is at the mercy of an accident of time and space. If he is taken at birth to another continent, it will be the entire set of cultural traits of the adopted society that he will learn, and the set that was his by heredity will play no part. More than this, whole peoples in one generation have shaken off their patterns, retaining hardly a vestige, and have put on the customs of an alien group.

What is lost in nature's guarantee of safety, is made up in the advantage of greater plasticity. The human animal does not, like the bear, have to wait to grow himself a polar coat before he can adapt himself to the arctic; he learns to sew himself a coat and puts up a snow house. It is a direct corollary of this difference in the mechanism of human culture that, as Professor W.M. Wheeler tells us, ant societies have been stable [644] for sixty-five million years, and human societies are never to-morrow what they are to-day.

Anthropology has no encouragement to offer to those who would trust our spiritual achievements to the automatic perpetuation of any selected hereditary germ-plasms. Culture, it insists, is not carrier in that fashion for the human race. We cannot trust any program of racial purity. It is a significant fact that no anthropologist has ever taught, along with so many popular theorists, that high civilization is bound up with the biological homogeneity of its carriers. Race is a classification based on bodily form, and the particular cultural behavior of any group is strikingly independent of its racial affiliations. We must accept all the implications of our human inheritance, one of the most important of which is the small scope of biologically transmitted behavior, and the enormous role of the cultural process of the transmission of tradition.



There is another analogy with the animal world which has to be laid aside in the study of culture: no less than the idea of evolution. The modern anthropologist at this point is only throwing in his lot with the psychologist and the historian, emphasizing the fact that the order of events in which they all deal in common is best studied without the complications of any attempted evolutionary arrangement. The psychologist is not able to demonstrate any evolutionary series in the sensory or emotional reactions of the individuals he studies, and the historian is not helped in the reconstruction of Plantagenet England by any concept of the evolution of government; just as superfluous for him also, the anthropologist insists, is any scheme of cultures arranged according to an ascending scale of evolution.

Since the science of anthropology took shape in the years when the "Origins of Species" was still new, it was inevitable that there should have been this attempt to arrange human societies from this point of view. It was simplicity itself. At the summit of the ascent was placed our own culture, to give meaning and plan to all that had preceded; to the lowest rungs was relegated by

hypothesis all that was most different from this consummation; and the intermediate steps were arranged as these two fixed points suggested. It is important to insist that there was never any argument from actual chronology; even in cases where it could have been ascertained, it was not considered of such importance that it could compete with the *a priori* hypothesis. In this way the development of art, religion and marriage institutions was classically charted. It is a monument to the force of a theory that asked no proof other than its own conviction.

Now if there is no positive correlation between culture and an evolutionary scheme, is there any order and arrangement of any kind in the diversity of human customs? To answer this question it is necessary to go back to fundamentals, to man's equipment of basic responses to environment. These responses, as anthropologists see them, are mere rough sketches, a list of bare facts; but they are hints that may be illimitably fertile. They are focal centers [646] which any peoples may ignore, or which they may make the starting points of their most elaborated concepts. Let us take, for instance, the example of adolescence. Adolescence is a necessary biological fact for man and for his animal forebears, but man has used it as a spring-board. It may be made the occasion for the major part of the ritual the group practises; it may be ignored as completely as Margaret Mead has recently shown that it is in Samoa. It may be seen, as among the African Masai, as one item of an elaborate crisis ceremonialism that institutionalizes not only adolescence but provides, for instance, a ceremony for putting the father on the shelf after his son has attained young manhood. It may be, on the other hand, a magic occasion that will, in after life, give back as from a mirror every technique that is practised at this time. So a girl will pick a needle carefully from a pine-tree that she may be industrious, or a boy will race a stone down the mountain that he may be swift of foot. The rites may be limited to the young girls, or it may be, to the boys; the period may be marked with horror and with torture, it may be a consecration to the gods. It is obvious that the physical fact of adolescence is only the touch to the ball of custom, which then follows grooves of thought not implied in the original impetus.

What these grooves are we can sometimes account for out of the cultural history of a people; more often we can only record the facts. We know that traits that have once found themselves in company are likely to maintain that association quite apart from any intrinsic fitness in their nature. So bone head-scratchers and the pursuit of a supernatural vision may go hand in hand over a continent, and the absence of foot-gear may coincide with carved door-posts.

What we do know is that there is no one of the bare reactions of the human animal that may not be selected by some people for a position in the very forefront of its attention and be elaborated past belief. It may be that the economic facts of life, as for instance the buffalo herds of the Todas of India, may be singled out, and the whole life of the people may turn on the ritual of perpetuating and renewing the sacred *pep*, the sacred milk saved by the Todas from day to day as the continuum of their culture, and used to hasten the next day's souring. The dairymen are priests, anointed and sacrosanct, the holy of holies is the sacred cow bell. Most of the taboos of the people have to do with the infinite sacredness of the milk.

Or a culture may, instead, elaborate an item of the social organization. All people over the earth recognize some forbidden degrees within which marriage may not take place. These are alike only in the common idea of incest; the degrees themselves differ entirely. In a large part of

the world you may marry only one variety of own cousin, say your mother's brother's daughter, and it is incest to marry the other variety, say your father's sister's daughter. But however unreasonable the distinctions may seem from out point of view, some concept of forbidden degrees all men have, and animals, it seems, have not. Now this idea has [646] been taken up by the aborigines of Australia and made the basis of a social system that knows no restraint in the elaboration of its favorite pattern. Not satisfied with stipulating one cousin group within which, and no other, one must find a mate, certain of these tribes have heaped the incest taboos on lien ages, on local groups, on all who participate with them in certain ceremonies, until even in the specified cousin group there is no one who is not touched by some one of the taboos. Quite in keeping with the violence of their obsession with this detail of social organization, they are accustomed to visit death upon any one who transgresses the fantastic rules. Do they pull themselves together before they have reached the point of tribal suicide and reject their overgrown anti-social rulings? No, they get by with a subterfuge. Young men and women may escape together to an island which is regarded as asylum. If they succeed in remaining in seclusion until the birth of a child, they may return with no more than a formalized drubbing. So the tribe is enabled to maintain its ethics without acknowledged revision, and still avoid extinction.



But it need not be incest that has run away with itself in the culture of a group; it may be some trick of ritualism, or love of display, or passion of acquisitiveness. It may be fish-hooks. In a certain island of Oceania fish-hooks are currency, and to have large fish-hooks came gradually to be the outward sign of the possession of great wealth. Fish-hooks therefore are made very nearly as large as a man. They will no longer catch fish, of course. In proportion as they have lost their usefulness they are supremely coveted.

After a long experience of such cultural facts anthropologists have made up their minds on two points. In the first place, it is usually beside the point to argue from its important place in behavior, the social usefulness of a custom. Man can get by with a mammoth load of useless lumber, and he has a passion for extremes. Once his attention is engaged upon one trait of behavior, he will juggle his customs till they perforce accommodate themselves to the outward manifestations of his obsession. After all, man has a fairly wide margin of safety, and he will not be forced to the wall even with a pitiful handicap. Our own civilization carries its burden of warfare, of the dissatisfaction and frustration of wage-earners, of the overdevelopment of acquisitiveness. It will continue to bear them. The point is that it is more in line with the evidence to regard them as our equivalents of the fish-hooks or of the Australian marriage rules, and to give over the effort to provide their natural social utility.

For every people will always justify their own folkways. Warfare, as long as we have it, will be for our moralists the essential school in which justice and valor are to be learned; the desire for possessions similarly will be the one motive power to which it is safe to trust the progress of the world. In the same way, China relied upon reverence for one's ancestors. There are too many of these folkways. They cannot all be the *sine qua non* of existence, and we shall do better to concentrate [647] our attention upon an objective appreciation of different schemes, and to give our enthusiasms to those special values we can always discern in the most diverse civilizations.

The second point on which anthropologists have made up their minds in this connection -- and this holds true for all customs whether or not they have been carried to extremes -- is that in any study of behavior it is these cultural patternings that turn out to be compulsive, not any original instincts with which we are born equipped. Even the basic emotions of fear and love and rage by the time they have been shaped over the different cultural lasts are well-nigh unrecognizable. Is there a jealousy of the mate innate in our sexual organization? Perhaps, but it will not dictate behavior except accounting to a cultural permit. Over a large part of the world, the woman is aggrieved if her husband does not take other wives -- it may be to aid her in the duties of the household, or to relieve her of child-bearing, or to make plain her husband's social importance. And in other parts of the world, the male's virtues of generosity and dignity are chiefly summed up in his practice of sharing his wife, and his calm acceptance of her desertion. Is there a maternal instinct? It will always be operative according to the conventions of the group. If there is great emphasis upon rank, women may voluntarily kill their children to raise their own status, as among the Natchez, or the Polynesian Tonga. If there is a pattern of seemingly meaningless adoption, most families will place their infants in other households, sometimes assigning them before birth. And how often have different apologists tried to give reasons for infanticide, when all the reasons they list are just as operative outside as within the region where this cultural compulsion rests upon the women.

Man evolves always elaborate traditional ways of doing things, great superstructures of the most varying design, and without very striking correlations with the underpinnings on which they must each and all eventually rest. It is only in a fundamental and non-spectacular sense that these superstructures are conditioned by their foundation in man's original endowment. And it is the superstructure in which man lives, not the foundation. The compulsion of folkways in a well-knit culture is just as strong as the compulsion of a style in architecture, Gothic, or Renaissance, or Egyptian. It fashions as it will the instincts of the people who live within it, remaking them in conformity with its own requirements. So it is that the cultural patterns are themselves creative; they take the raw material of experience and mold it into fifty different shapes among fifty different peoples. The traditional patterns of behavior set the mold and human nature flows into it.

It follows that man's established folkways are also his morals. Judgments of right and wrong and of the glory of God grow up within the field of group behavior and attach themselves to those traits that have become automatic in the group. Interference with automatic behavior is always unpleasant, and it is rationalized as evil. No people have any truly empirical ethics; they uphold what they find themselves practis-[648]ing. Even our own literature of ethics is far from being a detached survey of different possible solutions; it is a system of apologetics for the well-known scheme of our own culture. It is not that the anthropologist would subtract a jot or tittle from this preference for one's own customs; there are values in any way of living that can be plumbed only by those who have been born and bred in them, and in an ideal world every man would love best his own culture. What the anthropologist would have us add to our understanding is that all cultures have alike grown up blindly, the useful and cumbersome together, and not one of them is so good that it needs no revision, and not one is so bad that it cannot serve, just as our can, the ideal ends of society and the of the individual.



And how is it with regard to religion? All peoples have been religious; it is only what constituted religion that has varied. There is no item of experience, from the orientation of a house, to sleight of hand or foretelling the future, that has not been somewhere, it seems, the distinguishing matter of religion. Surely it is not this heterogenous content of religion that is its essence. the role of religion is its slow and halting exploration of the spiritual life. Often it has wedged itself into blind alleys and wasted generations of experiment. It made a mistake and included within its scope not only its proper field, but also all that area of existence that is better handled in secular fashion. Its special field of the spiritual life is still in the process of delimitation. In that field it shares with art and with abstract thought and with all enthusiastic dedications of the self, the spiritual rewards of life. What the future holds we do not know, but it is not too much to hope that it will include a reinstating and reshaping of the spiritual values of existence that will balance the present immense unfolding of the material values.



What is the upshot of this analysis of custom for our contemporary thinking? Is it subversive? Certainly not, except in the sense in which Copernicus's demonstration of the stellar series to which this earth belonged, was subversive. The culture we are born into, according to anthropology, is also -- as the earth is in the solar scheme -- one of a series of similar phenomena all driven by the same compulsions. What we give up, in accepting this view, is a dogged attachment to absolutes; what we gain is a sense of the intriguing variety of possible forms of behavior, and of the social function that is served by these communal patternings. We become culture-conscious.

We perceive with new force the ties that bind us to those who share our culture. Ways of thinking, ways of acting, goals of effort, that we tend so easily to accept as the order of the universe, become rather the previous and special symbols we share together. Institutions that were massive Juggernauts demanding their toll become instead a world of imagination to which all those of common culture have common access. For the social function of custom is that it makes our acts intelligible to our neighbors. It binds us together with a common symbolism, [649] a common religion, a common set of values to pursue. In the past these groups have been geographical, and there has been little individual difference of choice among the members of a group. In the future there will be less geographical differentiation, more differentiation perhaps of voluntary groups. But though it will change the picture of civilization, it will not change the necessity in every sort of complicated human behavior of the cultural symbol, the framework within which alone our acts have meaning. The most individualistic rebel of us all would play a foolish role stripped of the conventions of his culture. Why should he make wholesale attack upon its institutions? They are the epic of his own people, written not in rime but in stone and currency and merchant marines and city colleges. They are the massive creation of the imaginations of generations, given a local habitation and a name.

We do not stand to lose by this tolerant and objective view of man's institutions and morals and ways of thought. On the one hand we shall value the bold imagination that is written in all great systems of behavior; on the other, we shall not fear for the future of the world because

some item in that system is undergoing contemporary changes. It is one of its claims upon our interest. We hope, a little, that whereas change has hitherto been blind, at the mercy of unconscious patternings, it will be possible gradually, in so far as we become genuinely culture-conscious, that it shall be guided by intelligence.

For what is the meaning of life except that by the discipline of thought and emotion, by living life to its fullest, we shall make of it always a more flexible instrument, accepting new relativities, divesting ourselves of traditional absolutes? To this end we need for our scientific equipment something of the anthropologist's way of looking at human behavior, something of respect for the epic of our own culture, something of fine tolerance for the values that have been elaborated in other cultures than our own.