

Bibliography

Harris, Marvin

1968 *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*.
New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

Hatch, Elvin

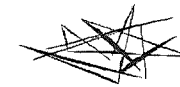
1973 *Theories of Man and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

1983 *Culture and Morality*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer

1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Alfred Kroeber Configurations of Culture



It is tempting to call Alfred Kroeber (1876–1960) the last Renaissance man of anthropology. During his 85-year lifetime, Kroeber lived through and shaped major changes in anthropology, which changed from merely documenting the exotic to concerning itself with the different arenas of human life and developed a holistic view of humans within our cultural and biological contexts. Alfred Kroeber ranged across all those fields; he was the last anthropological generalist.

Since Kroeber's time, the number of anthropologists and the quantity of anthropological research has grown so enormously that it is difficult to keep up with the literature in one field, let alone another. Between 1892 and 1901 a total of *six Ph.Ds* in anthropology were granted by American universities, Kroeber's among them; in 1995, *484 Ph.Ds* in anthropology were awarded (Givens and Jablonski 1996). Although anthropology as a whole, as a communal effort, maintains a holistic, multidimensional perspective, few anthropologists pursue more than a single field; we are social anthropologists or archaeologists or physical anthropologists or linguists. Within such fields we are even further specialized as California archaeologists or Andean archaeologists or linguists specializing in Mayan, Romance or Austronesian languages.

The lack of generalists since Kroeber's time both mirrors an information explosion and the growing emphasis on specialization of all academic disciplines. But Kroeber's breadth was exceptional even for his time and reflects a deeply original, creative mind at work at a time when almost everything in American anthropology was new.

Background

Alfred Kroeber was born in New Jersey in 1876, the year of Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn; much of his research on Native American life and language occurred during the twilight of American Indian independence. Kroeber's family were upper-middle-class German-Americans who insisted on a challenging educational regime of tutors, private schools, and hard work. He entered Columbia College at the age of 16 and majored in English, later receiving an M.A. with a thesis on British plays. Kroeber's early education directly led to his more "humanistic" approach to anthropology. Kroeber drifted into anthropology when he took a seminar in American Indian languages from Franz Boas, a seminar which met around Boas' dining room table (Steward 1973:6). Boas supervised Kroeber's doctoral dissertation on the art of the Arapaho (Kroeber 1901); it was only 28 pages long.

Kroeber's dissertation may have been brief, but he was an extremely prolific writer. In 1936 when he was honored on his 60th birthday, a bibliography of his writings included 175 entries (this seems to have been an underestimate and a subsequent list shows 306 works). In the following 25 years of his life—at a time when most people slow down—Kroeber's writings grew to 532 publications: articles, monographs, reviews, book introductions, essays, and so on (Gibson and Rowe 1961).

A review of these titles indicates Alfred Kroeber's major research interests. First is his work on the native peoples of California (e.g., Kroeber 1904, 1906, 1907a, 1907b, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1925, 1929, 1932). Kroeber was one of the first members of the anthropology department at UC Berkeley. He was hired to study the Indians of California, essentially doing "salvage ethnography" to recover the vestiges of precontact language and society before it was completely wiped out by Euro-American society. Kroeber published some 70 writings on the ethnology of native California, but his magnum opus was the *Handbook of California Indians* (Kroeber 1925). This 1000-page tome summarized Kroeber's investigations of every native group in California. It is a remarkable compendium, including aboriginal population estimates, lists of native toponyms, details of subsistence, cosmology, kinship, and social organization. Kroeber made numerous field trips, interviewed dozens of informants, summarized published sources, and scoured mission registers. It remains an important source of information, in many cases the only source.

Kroeber shared this desire to preserve rapidly disappearing cultural knowledge with other American anthropologists like Boas and Mead and also with British anthropologists (Kuper 1983:5-6). As anthropologists began to conduct fieldwork it quickly became apparent that traditional societies were being destroyed. The Cambridge anthropologist and psychologist W.H.R. Rivers wrote in 1913, "In many parts of the world the death of an old man brings with it the loss of knowledge never to be replaced." In the United States and Great Britain there was a shared sense that major theoretical issues could be addressed only with information that was disappearing daily, and this sparked a concerted effort to gather the available empirical data.

Kroeber's salvage ethnography led to a basic approach of ethnographic analysis: the culture element distribution list (Aginsky 1943; Driver 1937, 1939; Drucker 1950; Stewart 1939; Klimek 1935; Kroeber 1935, 1939; Voeglin 1938; for discussion, see Heizer 1963). He faced a basic set of problems (Kroeber 1939:4-6): 1) How are cultures to be defined? 2) How are their precontact practices to be reconstructed from current knowledge? and 3) How are the interactions between cultures to be measured? In native North America there were some obvious differences in the geographical distribution of cultural practices: Indians in the American Southwest and east of the Mississippi grew maize; Indians of the Plains and Great Basin did not. But such rough classifications failed to capture more subtle variations within particular cultural areas, nor did they account for the blurred edges of all such areas, and they assumed that certain aspects of culture—for example, agriculture—were more important than others. As Kroeber worked within California, it became obvious that there were significant differences among California Indians; for example, native Californians had the highest linguistic diversity of any region in North America, leading one scholar to call it "the Babel of ancient America" (Moratto 1984:530). Such cultural diversity had to be measured and explained, and Kroeber designed the cultural element lists to deal with this problem. Kroeber often approached the analysis of cultures as a natural historian, specifically like a Linnean taxonomist interested in classifying species rather than a modern evolutionary taxonomist concerned with variations in a population. The cultural element survey reflects this approach.

Kroeber divided culture into minimal units which could be characterized qualitatively. For example, did a specific group practice "polyandry" or "cremation," did they use a "sinew-backed bow" or "beaver-teeth dice," "eat acorn mush" or did their young men drink a

dangerous hallucinogenic made from jimson weed? These lists were prepared and graduate students were sent out to interview native informants and check off the elements; the results were tabulated and published. Julian Steward (1961:1057), one of Kroeber's graduate students, wrote:

Kroeber obtained funds for an ambitious four-year field project of element list surveys which was carried out by 13 field workers and included 254 tribes and tribal subdivisions west of the Rocky Mountains. The lists ranged from 3,000 to more than 6,000 elements, the presence and absence of which were recorded for each local group.

The element surveys were plotted in space in an attempt to understand the boundaries of particular cultures, and that led to the issue of interaction between cultures. Steward (1961:1057) continues:

The territorial plotting of element distributions raised questions about the mechanism of diffusion of each element, which had usually been conceived of as a fairly simple process through which one society transmitted cultural features to another merely because of contiguity. Kroeber modified this concept . . . by showing that cultural products may be imitated by peoples who had no direct contact with their originators.

In hindsight, the element survey approach has a number of flaws. First, it atomizes culture into bits and pieces, and considers each element to be of equal significance (certainly the use of beaver teeth dice and the practice of polyandry have different levels of importance). Second, the approach assumes that the presence of that cultural element in one society is equivalent to the presence of that cultural element in another. For example, the swastika was used in native North America, India, Nazi Germany, and is used in the United States today. Even though the swastika is found in all these places, it clearly has several different meanings. Third, the cultural element survey created a static, synchronic view of a society, implying that the only mechanisms of cultural change were invention (an individual's creation of a new cultural trait), migration (the movement of a society with new cultural traits into a new area), and diffusion (the spread of cultural traits without migration). But for all its flaws, the cultural elements survey met one important goal: it produced systematic information on societies which were being destroyed.

Culture and Configurations

Kroeber was not interested in mere minutiae; he was also concerned with the broad patterns of culture that characterized entire societies or what he referred to as major styles that marked particular cultural configurations. Analogous to Benedict's concept discussed in Chapter 6, Kroeber states that "Patterns are those arrangements or systems of internal relationship which give to any culture its coherence or plan, and keep it from being a mere accumulation of random bits" (Kroeber 1948:131). Such patterns ". . . or configurations or Gestalts," Kroeber (1952a:5) wrote, "are what seem to me to be most productive to distinguish or formulate in culture."

Kroeber drew a sharp definitional boundary between culture and society. Society occurs whenever there is group life—including among social insects like bees and ants—but culture consists of learned and shared elements of custom and belief (Kroeber 1952b:118–19). Further, Kroeber believed that such customs and beliefs existed independently of the individuals who held such beliefs. In a brief after-dinner talk in 1946 to a group of anthropologists, Kroeber outlined his position. Culture is transmitted by human interactions, "not by the genetic mechanism of heredity but by the interconditioning of zygotes." Regardless of its origins, "culture quickly tends to become supra-personal and anonymous," falling "into patterns, or regularities of form and style and significance." And finally, Kroeber (1952c:104) argued that culture "embodies values, which may be formulated (overtly as mores) or felt (implicitly, as in folkways) by the society carrying the culture, and which it is part of the business of the anthropologist to characterize and define." Thus Kroeber's basic definition of culture is that it is learned, shared, patterned, and meaningful.

Kroeber tried to steer his analysis between two extremes that dominated early-20th-century ways of thinking about humans: racial determinism and the Great Man Theory. Very early in his career (1917)—and clearly showing Boas' influence (see pp. 47–48)—Kroeber attacked the notion that different races have different innate properties. He questioned a number of assumptions linking genetic background to behavior such as that the Eskimo innately desires blubber or the French are inherently facile with language, and also the tendency to equate "race" and "civilization."

At the time, Kroeber argued against the Great Man Theory, contending that even geniuses did not so much shape their cultures as represent them. Kroeber found repeated examples of multiple geniuses—like the

independent invention of calculus by Leibnitz in 1684 and Newton in 1687, the development of the theory of natural selection by Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, and the invention of the steamboat by Robert Fulton and at least four other contemporary inventors. "The history of inventions," Kroeber (1952d:45) wrote, "is a chain of parallel instances." The co-occurrence of such inventions, he concluded, was evidence that something larger was at work, some force greater than either genetic inheritance or genius. That force was greater than the organism—it was *superorganic*:

The reason why mental heredity has so little if anything to do with civilization, is that civilization is not mental action but a body or stream of products of mental exercise. [And] The social or cultural . . . is in its essence non-individual. Civilization as such begins only where the individual ends; and whoever does not in some measure perceive this fact . . . can find no meaning in civilization, and history for him must be only a wearying jumble, or an opportunity for the exercise of art [i.e., making things up]. [Kroeber 1952d:40]

For Kroeber, that organizing force was culture—nongenetic, shared, anonymous, and patterned knowledge.

The configurations of culture are produced by the history of a particular set of cultural values. Kroeber noted (1952a:4) ". . . that it is of the nature of culture to be heavily conditioned by its own cumulative past, so that the most fruitful approach to its understanding is a historical one." The historical approach showed broader and broader connections between cultural elements as they were expressed in space and time (Kroeber 1952a:5). Placing these elements in this manner, one could identify configurations and their development, prominence, decline and replacement. That, Kroeber felt, was the nature of explanation.

Kroeber turned his attention to scores of topics—Peruvian archaeology, American Indian linguistics, and so on—but arguably his most intriguing analysis was of a subject that might seem strange: changes in women's dress. It was a topic that Kroeber wrote about at least twice, first in 1919 and then again in 1940. Kroeber was drawn to study women's fashion because it reflected "pure" style and because changes in fashion could be dated by studying historic Parisian fashion magazines. By the time of the second study, Kroeber had data ranging from 1787 to 1936. Kroeber measured a range of variables, such as dress length and dress width, and then conducted a statistical and time series analysis. What he found was that certain major fluctuations had different periodicities; i.e., dress length was greatest in the 18th century and the mid- and late-19th century with shorter dresses most common

at about 1815 and 1931. Further, Kroeber found some interesting style variation patterns. Most years, variation from the central trend was minor, whether the tendency was for long dresses or short dresses, but in some periods there was a great degree of variation before the central tendency was reasserted. Kroeber considered a variety of historical causes—e.g., did periods of political instability cause greater variation in hem length?—and failed to find any causes for such patterns other than the simple, superorganic fluctuation of style.

The primary factor [for such fashion changes] would seem to be adherence to or departure from an ideal though unconscious pattern for formal clothing in women. The consistent conformity of variability to certain magnitudes of proportion—mostly a conformity of low variabilities to high magnitudes [i.e. when skirts are shortest, everyone's skirts are short]—leaves little room for any other conclusion. [Richardson and Kroeber 1952:368]

In sum, Kroeber studied women's fashion because it exemplified his conception of what culture was. Clearly nongenetic, fashion was obviously free of the influences of heredity. Obviously shared, fashion was more than the idiosyncratic exercise of genius. Reducible to elements, fashion traits could be plotted in time; in this case space was held constant by considering only *Parisian* fashion. Clearly patterned, fashion underwent long-term systematic fluctuations. And finally, his explanation was historical because changes in fashion could not be understood by appeal to outside factors but only explained within their specific cultural configuration. And thus Kroeber's analysis of this unlikely topic captured the basic characteristics of his approach to culture.

Kroeber attempted to repeat his microcosmic analysis in the narrow field of Parisian fashion in a parallel, enormous study of world civilization, *Configurations of Culture Growth* (1944). During his cultural element distribution studies, Kroeber had developed the notion of culture climax. A culture climax is when "historically known cultural growths . . . show a virtual coincidence of florescence in the several faces of culture" (Kroeber 1939:5). Since Kroeber had long argued that cultural innovations were not the products of "Great Men" but rather of "parallel instances," then a study of superior inventions documents "the frequent habit of societies to develop their cultures to their highest levels spasmodically: especially in their intellectual and aesthetic aspects, but also in more material and practical aspects" (Kroeber 1944:5). If genius were simply the result of genetics, then superior innovations should occur randomly; that they do not indicates "the causal participation of a cultural factor, the intervention of a superpersonal

element in the personal activity of genius" (Kroeber 1944:13). And yet Kroeber (1944:761) found "no evidence of any true law in the phenomena dealt with; nothing cyclical, regularly repetitive, or necessary." If anything, this simply strengthened Kroeber's idea of the irreducibility of culture.

For Kroeber, culture was a mental construct completely distinct from other phenomena. Culture, he wrote (1948:254), "is superorganic and superindividual in that, although carried, participated in and produced by organic individuals, it is acquired; and it is acquired by learning." Culture cannot be explained by organic individual needs as Malinowski claimed (Kroeber 1948:309–310; on Malinowski, see pp. 132–135), and it cannot be treated as equivalent to "society" (Kroeber 1948:847–849). Cultural patterns can be understood only within a historical approach which emphasizes change through time, the cultural antecedents of new cultural patterns, and the importance of understanding cultural phenomena within particular configurations (Kroeber 1957, 1963a, 1963b; see Hatch 1973:94–95 for discussion).

Conclusion

Kroeber's broad contributions to anthropology make any brief summary of his career nearly impossible, but Steward's (1961) obituary captures many of Kroeber's basic ideas. Kroeber believed "that culture derived from culture" and that psychological, adaptational, or organic explanations were indefensible. His historical approach was "superorganic and supra-individual" and two-fold, first characterizing cultures "by the minutiae of their content" while also seeking "major styles, philosophies, and values" (Steward 1961:1050).

Kroeber's contribution to American anthropology has a mixed legacy. There is little question of his substantive contributions to ethnology, ethnography, linguistics, and archaeology, but in contrast there is little current enthusiasm for Kroeber's concerns with the superorganic, the style and patterns of civilization, or the anonymity of culture. As a theoretician, Kroeber's position is more frequently argued against than embraced (Benedict 1934:231; Harris 1968:320–337). And yet, Kroeber's attempt to find the unifying basis of culture was a central problem faced by many of his contemporaries, including Benedict, Sapir, and Mead. ♦

Bibliography

- Aginsky, Bernard
1943 Culture Element Distributions XXIV: Central Sierra. *Anthropological Records* 8(4). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Driver, Harold
1937 Culture Element Distributions VI: Southern Sierra Nevada. *Anthropological Records* 1:53–154. Berkeley: University of California Press.
1939 Culture Element Distributions X: Northwest California. *Anthropological Records*, 1(6):297–433. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Drucker, Philip
1950 Culture Element Distributions XXVI: Northwest Coast. *Anthropological Records* 9(3). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibson, Anne and John Rowe
1961 A Bibliography of the Publications of Alfred Louis Kroeber. *American Anthropologist* 63:1060–1087.
- Givens, Douglas and Timothy Jablonski
1996 Degrees, FYI. *Anthropology Newsletter* 37(5):7.
- Hatch, Elvin
1973 *Theories of Man and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Heizer, Robert
1963 Foreword. In *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*, 4th ed. A. L. Kroeber. Berkeley: University of California Press. [Originally published 1939.]
- Klimek, Stanislaw
1935 Culture Element Distributions I: The Structure of California Indian Culture. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 37:12–70.
- Kroeber, Alfred
1901 Decorative Symbolism of the Arapaho. *American Anthropologist* 3:308–336.
1904 The Languages of the Coast of California South of San Francisco. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 2(2):29–80.
1906 The Dialect Divisions of the Moquelumnan Family in Relation to the Internal Differentiation of other Linguistic Families of California. *American Anthropologist* 8:652–663.
1907a The Washo Language of East Central California and Nevada. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 4(5):251–317.
1907b The Yokuts Language of South Central California. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 2(5):163–377.
1909 Some Notes on the Shoshonean Dialects of Southern California. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 8(5):235–269.
1910 The Chumash and Costanoan Languages. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 9:237–271.

- 1911 *The Languages of the Coast of California North of San Francisco*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 9(3):37-271.
- 1920 *California Culture Provinces*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 17(2):151-170.
- 1925 *Handbook of the Indians of California*. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- 1929 *The Valley Nisenan*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 24(4):253-290.
- 1932 *The Patwin and their Neighbors*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 29 (4):253-423.
- 1935 Preface. *In Culture Element Distributions I: The Structure of California Indian Culture*. By S. Klimek. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 37:1-11.
- 1939 *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 38:1-240.
- 1944 *Configurations of Culture Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1948 *Anthropology: Race, Language, Culture, Psychology, Prehistory*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- 1952a Introduction. *In The Nature of Culture*. Pp. 3-11. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1952b The Concept of Culture in Science. *In The Nature of Culture*. Pp. 118-135. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1952c Culture, Events, and Individuals. *In The Nature of Culture*. Pp. 104-106. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1952d The Superorganic. *In The Nature of Culture*. Pp. 22-51. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Originally published 1917.]
- 1957 *Style and Civilizations*. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- 1963a *History and Anthropology in the Study of Civilizations*. *In An Anthropologist Looks at History*. Theodora Kroeber, ed. Pp. 160-171. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1963b *An Anthropologist Looks at History*. *In An Anthropologist Looks at History*, Theodora Kroeber, ed. Pp. 152-159. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kuper, Adam
1983 *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Moratto, Michael
1984 *California Archaeology*. New York: Academic Press.
- Steward, Julian
1961 Alfred Louis Kroeber 1876-1960. *American Anthropologist* 63:1038-1087.
1973 Alfred Kroeber. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ruth Benedict

Patterns of Culture



Ironically, interest in Ruth Benedict's life story overshadows her ideas as an anthropologist, which focused on the relationship between the individual and society. Benedict is the subject of three biographies (Caffrey 1989; Mead 1974; Modell 1983). Benedict is a captivating subject for biographers because she was not only a brilliant anthropologist, but a brilliant woman who was an anthropologist. Benedict was one of the first women to attain prominence as a social scientist, and her life exemplifies the difficult, often conflicting choices that women face in American society. The trajectories of her life and career in anthropology were shaped by that fact.

Background

Ruth Benedict (née Fulton) was educated at Vassar College, which was established in the 1880s with the goal of educating women on an equal plane with men. Although women's university education had existed for 20 years when Ruth Benedict enrolled in 1905, it was still sufficiently new that *Ladies Home Journal* in October 1905 published an article titled, "Madcap Frolics of College Girls," followed in the November issue by the riveting article, "What College Girls Eat" (Caffrey 1989:43). Ruth Benedict studied literature and poetry and later in her life she published poems in poetry magazines and journals. But her exposure to critical analysis, even more than to poetry, was to impact on her anthropology. At Vassar she was exposed to a wide range of Progressive political issues and Modernist artistic trends, and to a challenging body