VI. THE UNIVERSALITY OF CULTURAL TRAITS

THERE remains one question to be discussed; namely, whether some tribes represent a lower cultural stage when looked at from an evolutionary point of view.

Our previous discussion has shown that almost all attempts to characterize the mind of primitive man do not take into account racial affiliations, but only stages of culture, and the results of our efforts to determine characteristic racial differences have been of doubtful value. It appears, therefore, that modern anthropologists not only proceed on the assumption of the generic unity of the mind of man, but tacitly disregard quantitative differences which may very well occur. We may therefore base our further considerations on the theory of the similarity of mental functions in all races.

Observation has shown, however, that not only emotions, intellect, and will-power of man are alike everywhere, but that much more detailed similarities in thought and action occur among the most diverse peoples.

These similarities are apparently so detailed and far-reaching, that Bastian was led to speak of the appalling monotony of the fundamental ideas of mankind all over the globe.

Thus it has been found that the metaphysical notions of man may be reduced to a few types which are of universal distribution. The same is the case in regard to the forms of society, laws, and inventions.

Furthermore, the most intricate and apparently illogical ideas, and the most curious and complex customs, appear among a few tribes here and there in such a manner that the assumption of a common historical origin is excluded. When studying the culture of any one tribe, more or less close analogues of single traits of its culture may be found among a great diversity of peoples. Instances of such analogues have been collected to a vast extent by Tylor, Spencer, Frazer, Bastian, Andree, Post, and many others, so that it is not necessary to give here any detailed proof of this fact. A few examples will suffice. Among the more general ideas, I may mention the belief in a land of the souls of the deceased, located in the west, and reached by crossing a river, — known to all of us from Greek mythology, but well known also among the native tribes of America and Polynesia. Another

example is the idea of a multiplicity of worlds, — one or more spanned over us, others stretching under us, the central one the home of man; the upper or lower, the home of the gods and happy souls; the other, the home of the unhappy, — an idea familiar to us from the positions of heaven and hell, but no less developed in India, Siberia, and arctic America. The idea of the ability of man to acquire protecting guardian spirits offers another example. Another domain of mental life furnishes equally striking instances. The universal knowledge of the art of producing fire by friction, the boiling of food, the knowledge of the drill, illustrate the universality of certain inventions. Still other phenomena of this class are furnished by certain elementary features of grammatical structure, like the use of expressions for the three persons of the pronoun, — namely, the speaker, the person addressed, and the person spoken of, — or the frequent distinction of singularity and plurality.

Special curious analogues that occur in regions far apart may be exemplified by such beliefs as the possibility of foretelling the future by the cracking of burnt bones (Andree), the occurrence of the Phaëton legend in Greece and northwest America (Boas), the bleeding of animals by the use of a small bow and arrow (Heger), the

development of astrology in the Old World and the New, the similarity of basketry technique and design in Africa and America (Dixon), the invention of the blow-gun in America and Malaysia.

These examples will suggest the classes of phenomena to which I refer. It follows from these observations that when we find analogues of single traits of culture among distinct peoples, the presumption is, not that there has been a common historical source, but that they have arisen independently; and the theory suggests itself that a common cause accounts for the constant recurrence of these phenomena among the most varied members of mankind, no matter to what race they may belong.

Further investigation shows that these customs are not quite evenly distributed, but that certain more or less intimate associations exist between the industrial development, social organization, and religious beliefs of the peoples of the world; so that, among people with simple industries, thoughts are found that differ somewhat from those of people who have advanced further in the development of material culture. It has also been noticed that a relation exists between the ethnic life of a people and the geographical environment that favors or hinders their material development.

The common cause for this similarity of actions and beliefs of peoples and tribes widely separated, belonging to different races, and being on certain stages of cultural development, has been looked for in several ways.

Some investigators — like Ratzel, and in older times Karl Ritter and Guyot — have laid particular stress upon the influence of geographical environment upon the life of man, and emphasize those similarities which appear in similar types of environment.

Others believe that many of the customs, beliefs, and inventions common to people who live in regions far apart are an old heritage derived from the earliest times, when mankind was still confined to a small part of the earth's surface.

Still others have tried to isolate the most generalized forms of similar ethnic phenomena. Bastian, the most important representative of this group of investigators, has called these forms "elementary ideas," and has tried to show that they are unexplainable.

Psychologists finally have endeavored to explain the similarities by an analysis of mental processes.

It seems necessary to discuss these four methods of approach a little more fully.

It is not difficult to illustrate the important influence

of geographical environment upon forms of inventions. The variety of habitations used by tribes of different areas offer an example of its influence. The snow house of the Eskimo, the bark wigwam of the Indian, the cave dwelling of the tribes of the desert, may serve as illustrations of the way in which protection against exposure is attained, in accordance with the available materials. Other examples may be found in the forms of more special inventions: as in the complex bows of the Eskimo, which seem to be due to the lack of long elastic material for bow-staves; and in the devices for securing elasticity of the bow where elastic wood is difficult to obtain, or where greater strength of the bow is required; and in the skin receptacles and baskets which often serve as substitutes for pottery among tribes without permanent habitation. We may also mention the dependence of the location of villages upon the food-supply, and of communication upon available trails or upon the facility of communication by water. Environmental influences appear in the territorial limits of certain tribes or peoples, as well as in the distribution and density of population. Even in the more complex forms of the mental life, the influence of environment may be found; as in nature myths explaining the activity of volcanoes or the presence of curi-

ous land forms, or in beliefs and customs relating to the local characterization of the seasons.

When, in our theories, we lay stress alone on observations which show that man is dependent upon geographical environment, and upon the assumption of a sameness or similarity of the mind in all races of mankind, we are necessarily led to the conclusion that the same environment will produce the same cultural results everywhere.

This is obviously not true, for the forms of culture of peoples living in the same kind of environment show often marked differences. I do not need to illustrate this by comparing the American settler with the North American Indian, or the successive races of people that have settled in England, and have developed from the Stone Age to the modern English. It may, however, be desirable to show that even among primitive tribes, geographical environment alone does not by any means determine the type of culture. Proof of this fact may be found in the mode of life of the hunting and fishing Eskimo and the reindeer-breeding Chukchee (Bogoras); the African pastoral Hottentot and the hunting Bushmen in their older, wider distribution (Schultze); the Negrito and the Malay of southeastern Asia (Martin).

A second and more important element to be considered

is the social status of each people, and it would seem that environment is important only in so far as it limits or favors the activities that belong to any particular group. It may even be shown that old customs, that may have been in harmony with a certain type of environment, tend to survive under new conditions, where they are of disadvantage rather than of advantage to the people. An example of this kind, taken from our own civilization, is our failure to utilize unfamiliar kinds of food that may be found in newly settled countries. Another example is presented by the reindeer-breeding Chukchee, who carry about in their nomadic life a tent of most complicated structure, which corresponds in its type to the older permanent house of the coast dwellers, and which contrasts in the most marked way with the simplicity and light weight of the Eskimo tent (Bogoras). Even among the Eskimo, who have so marvellously well succeeded in adapting themselves to their geographical environment, we may recognize customs that prevent the fullest use of the opportunities offered by the country, an example of which is the law forbidding the promiscuous use of caribou-meat and of seal-meat (Boas).

Thus it would seem that environment has an important effect upon the customs and beliefs of man, but only in so

far as it helps to determine the special forms of customs and beliefs. These are, however, based primarily on cultural conditions, which in themselves are due to historical causes.

At this point the students of anthropo-geography who attempt to explain the whole cultural development on the basis of geographical environmental conditions are wont to claim that these historical causes themselves are founded on older conditions, in which they have originated under the stress of environment. It seems to my mind that this claim is inadmissible as long as the investigation of every single cultural feature demonstrates that the influence of environment brings about a certain degree of adjustment between environment and social life, but that a complete explanation of the prevailing conditions, based on the action of environment alone, is never possible. We must remember, that, no matter how great an influence we may ascribe to environment, that influence can become active only by being exerted upon the mind; so that the characteristics of the mind must enter into the resultant forms of social activity. It is just as little conceivable that mental life can be explained satisfactorily by environment alone, as that environment can be explained by the influence of the people upon nature, which, as we

all know, has brought about changes of water-courses, the destruction of forests, and changes of fauna. In other words, it seems entirely arbitrary to disregard the part that psychical elements play in determining the forms of activities and beliefs which occur with great frequency all over the world.

The second theory that has been advanced to explain the sameness of a number of fundamental ideas and inventions is based on the assumption that they represent old cultural achievements belonging to a period previous to the general dispersion of the human race.

This theory is based on the universal distribution of certain cultural elements. Obviously it can apply only to features that occur the world over; for, if we should admit the loss of some of them in the course of historical development, the door would be open to the most fanciful conclusions. A few ethnological data seem to favor this theory, and make us inclined to believe that some of the universal traits of culture may go back to a very early time before that dispersion of mankind which is demanded on biological grounds. Most important among these is perhaps the occurrence of the dog as a domesticated animal in practically all parts of the world. It is true that in all probability native wild dogs constitute the

principal ancestry of the dogs of the various continents; but nevertheless, it seems plausible that the living-together of man and dog developed in the earliest period of human history, before the races of northern Asia and America separated from those of southeastern Asia. The introduction of the dingo (the native dog) into Australia seems to be most easily explained when we assume that it accompanied man to that remote continent.

Other very simple activities may perhaps be derived from achievements of the earliest ancestors of man. The art of fire-making, of drilling, cutting, sawing, work in stone, belonged probably to this early age, and may have been the heritage on which each people built up its own individual type of culture (Weule). If archæological investigations should show that implements and other evidences of human achievement are found in a geological period during which mankind had not attained its present world-wide distribution, we should have to infer that these represent the early cultural possessions of man, which he carried with him all over the world. In this lies the great and fundamental importance of the eolithic finds that have been discussed so extensively during the last few years. Language is also a trait common to all mankind, and one that therefore may have its roots in earliest times.

The activities of the higher apes seem to favor the assumption that certain arts may have belonged to man before his dispersion. Their habit of making nests, that is, habitations, the use of sticks and stones, point in this direction.

All this makes it plausible that certain cultural achievements date back to the origin of mankind. The defenders of this theory, like Weule and Graebner, also believe that a sporadic occurrence of certain inventions like the boomerang, among races that are held to be akin in descent, may have originated before the differentiation and dispersion of these races.

In the case of many of the phenomena which may be explained from these points of view, it is quite impossible to give incontrovertible arguments which would prove that these customs are not due to parallel and independent development rather than to community of origin: the decision of this problem will be found largely in the results of prehistoric archæology on the one hand, and in those of animal psychology on the other.

The problem is made still more difficult by the dissemination of cultural elements from tribe to tribe, from people to people, and from continent to continent, which can be proved to have existed from the earliest times on.

As an instance of the rapidity with which cultural achievements are transmitted may be mentioned the modern history of some cultivated plants. Tobacco and cassava were introduced into Africa after the discovery of America, and it took little time for these plants to spread over the whole continent; so that at present they enter so deeply into the whole culture of the negro, that nobody would suspect their foreign origin (Hahn). We find in the same way that the use of the banana has pervaded almost the whole of South America (Von den Steinen); and the history of Indian-corn is another example of the incredible rapidity with which a useful cultural acquisition may spread over the whole world. It is mentioned as known in Europe in 1539, and, according to Dr. Laufer, had reached China by way of Tibet between 1540 and 1570.

It is easy to show that similar conditions prevailed in earlier times. Victor Hehn's investigations show the gradual and continuous increase of the number of domesticated animals and cultivated plants, due to their importation from Asia. The same process was going on in prehistoric times. The gradual spread of the Asiatic horse, which was first used as a draught animal, later on for riding, the spread of cattle over Africa and Europe, the

development of European grains, may serve as illustrations. The area over which these additions to the stock of human culture were spread is very large. We see most of them travel westward until they reach the Atlantic coast, and eastward to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. They also penetrated the African Continent. It may be that the use of milk was disseminated in a similar way; for when the people of the world enter into our historic knowledge, we find milk used all over Europe, Africa, and the western part of Asia.

Perhaps the best proof of transmission is contained in the folk-lore of the tribes of the world. Nothing seems to travel as readily as fanciful tales. We know of certain complex tales, which cannot possibly have been invented twice, that are told by the Berbers in Morocco, by the Italians, the Russians, in the jungles of India, in the highlands of Tibet, on the tundras of Siberia, and on the prairies of North America; so that perhaps the only parts of the world not reached by them are South Africa, Australia, Polynesia, and South America. The examples of such transmission are quite numerous, and we begin to see that the early inter-relation of the races of man was almost world-wide.

It follows from this observation that the culture of any

given tribe, no matter how primitive it may be, can be fully explained only when we take into consideration its inner growth as well as its relation to the culture of its near and distant neighbors, and the effect that they may have exerted.

It may be well to indicate here that there seem to have been two enormously large areas of extended diffusion. Our brief remarks on the distribution of cultivated plants and domesticated animals prove the existence of interrelations between Europe, Asia, and North Africa, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Other cultural traits corroborate this conclusion. The gradual spread of bronze from Central Asia westward and eastward, all over Europe and over China, the area in which the wheel is used, where agriculture with plough and with the help of domesticated animals is practised, show the same type of distribution (Hahn). We may recognize the sameness of characteristic traits in this area also in other respects. Oath and ordeal are highly developed in Europe, Africa, and Asia excepting the northeastern part of Siberia, while in America they are hardly known (Laasch). Other common features of the cultural types of the Old World appear also most clearly by contrast with conditions in America. One of these features is the impor-

tance of formal judicial procedure in the Old World, and its almost entire absence among all the tribes of North and South America, who, in their general cultural development, might well be compared with the African negroes. In the domain of folk-lore I would mention the frequency of the riddle, the proverb, and the moralizing fable, which are so characteristic of an enormous part of the Old World, while they are lacking in northeastern Siberia and in America. In all these features, Europe, a large part of Africa, and Asia except in its extreme northeastern part, and its island connection east of the Malay Archipelago, form a unit.

In a similar manner we may trace certain very general traits over a large part of America. Most convincing among these is the use of Indian-corn all over that part of America in which agriculture is practised; but we might also mention the development of a peculiar type of ceremonialism and of decorative art. It would seem as though the middle parts of America had played a rôle similar to that of Central Asia in the Old World, in so far as many of the most characteristic traits of civilization may have had their home here before the higher type of Central American and South American civilizations were developed.

The third point of view is represented by Bastian, who recognizes the great importance of geographical environment in modifying the analogous ethnic phenomena, but does not ascribe to them creative power. To him the sameness of the forms of thought found in regions wide apart suggested the existence of certain definite types of thought, no matter in what surroundings man may live, and what may be his social and psychical relations. These fundamental forms of thought, "that develop with iron necessity wherever man lives," were called by him "elementary ideas." He denies that it is possible to discover the ultimate sources of inventions, ideas, customs, and beliefs, which are of universal occurrence. They may be indigenous, they may be imported, they may have arisen from a variety of sources, but they are there. The human mind is so formed that it invents them spontaneously, or accepts them whenever they are offered to it. Bastian's theory of the permanence of these forms of thought seems to me related to Dilthey's conception of the limitation of possible types of philosophy; and the similarity of lines of thought of these two men appears also clearly in Bastian's constant references to the theories of philosophers as compared to the views held by primitive man. The important phenomenon in

Bastian's mind was the fundamental sameness of forms of human thought in all forms of culture, no matter whether they were advanced or primitive.

In the views as propounded by him, a certain kind of mysticism may be recognized, in so far as the elementary ideas are to his mind intangible entities. No further thought can possibly unravel their origin, because we ourselves are compelled to think in the forms of these elementary ideas.

To a certain extent a clear enunciation of the elementary idea gives us the psychological reason for its existence. To exemplify: The fact that the land of shadows is so often placed in the west suggests its localization at the place where the sun and the stars vanish. The mere statement that primitive man considers the animals as gifted with all the qualities of man shows that the analogy between many of the qualities of animals and human qualities has led to the view that all the qualities of animals are human. In other cases the causes are not so self-evident; for example, in the instance of widespread customs of restrictions of marriage which have puzzled many investigators. The difficulty of this problem is proved by the multitude of hypotheses that have been invented to explain it in all its varied phases.

The problem of the origin of elementary ideas has, however, been discussed from a psychological point of view; and the elaborate attempt by Wundt to work out a theory of folk-psychology, as well as the studies of psychological sociologists, indicate lines of attack of the problem. To illustrate this point, I may mention the general discussion of the function of association in the beliefs of primitive people, given by Wundt, or the study of suggestion and hypnotism in primitive life, made by Stoll. A more detailed discussion of this method of treatment of the common elementary ideas may be deferred until a later time (see Chapter VIII).