

The Culture-Type Approach to Area Studies

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As a student approaches the study of a particular region, to describe it and to define problems within it, he should have an explicit method available. The problem in this case is different from that presented in the study of a single culture, in the study of isolated trait distributions, or in a study where the emphasis is upon defining relationships between aspects of culture regardless of their area orientation.

It has been customary to utilize, either explicitly or implicitly, the culture area construct as at least an initial approach to problems of area orientation. But the culture area as usually conceived is not a valid construct. It assumes that cultures within the same environmental and historical region will be similar in all their aspects, not just in subsistence patterns. The investigations by Woods¹ and Lowie² on North America, and by myself³ with respect to Northern and Western China, show that this assumption is invalid. People living within the same environmental and historical area, even when they have the same subsistence patterns, can vary in other aspects of culture.

Both Kroeber⁴ and Wissler,⁵ two of the men responsible for the elaboration of the culture-area construct, attempted to give the culture area a dynamic historical dimension. This dimension was based either upon the age-area hypothesis, upon indefensible assumptions of an evolutionary nature, or upon a combination of these two approaches. Kroeber himself admitted that the more documented history available, the less value there is to the establishment of culture areas.⁶ It follows then that we gain nothing

in looking to the classical culture area as a means of analyzing the cultures of a particular region. This is not to say that culture areas do not exist. There are cases where some adjacent peoples not only are culturally similar but are dissimilar to other peoples living outside but next to the area of cultural sameness. But the culture area cannot be applied universally as a means of classifying cultures. Until it is established otherwise, we must assume that actual culture areas are rare.

Another way of viewing cultures from an area point of view is by means of the culture cluster. Such a cluster is formed by a group of peoples who believe that their cultures are similar and that they share a common heritage.⁷ Yet another means is the area co-tradition. In this case, people within a particular area have shared through time a common culture or at least elements of a common culture.⁸ For example, China, Japan, and Korea have at one time formed an area co-tradition.⁹ Because neither the culture cluster nor the area co-tradition can be sought for with any certainty, it is not practical to use either of them in an initial approach to an area.

The culture type is generally conceived of as a means of determining significant interrelations within cultures by ascertaining like responses to like stimuli. For example, it is concerned with discovering and defining evolutionary stages, peasant cultures, irrigation civilization, and specific types of sociopolitical structures such as the *Obok*.¹⁰ This type of investigation is, of course, vital to the social sciences, but it is not necessarily concerned with an area orientation. This paper will try to show how the culture type as a general concept can be placed within an area perspective.

This method is simple in its broad outlines. It is to determine cultural similarities between ethnic groups found within a prescribed region. Similarity is sought for its own sake, that is to say, the data is not weighted in terms of special problems such as environmental determinism, historical origins, evolutionary constructs, or other interests which, if injected into a system of classification, lead not to statements of general similarity. Ideally, the region to be studied should be selected arbitrarily by reference to degrees of longitude and latitude, for instance. In this

way we would avoid beginning our research in a culture-area frame of mind. Such terms as the "Middle East," "Far East," and "Southeast Asia" designate assumed culture areas and should be avoided in careful thinking. Actually this structure is too rigorous. Few would find pleasure in such an approach. Perhaps the best method is to choose regions for study that are not culture areas but which nevertheless have an affective appeal for the investigator. In my own case the area of Northern and Western China seemed to fulfill these requirements as it has political reality and yet has not been conceived as a culture area.

Naturally, we should keep the study within the historical present. In Northern and Western China it was possible to use only material which referred to the twentieth century. Since it is usually impossible to provide a complete distribution for every trait, the initial points of departure for generalization are ethnic groups. This means that ethnic units must be ascertained first. This is sometimes difficult but can generally be done. By ethnic group I mean a people who have a common name for themselves, believe they have a common heritage, and maintain a feeling of unity.¹¹

The next step should be simply to enumerate *all* the cultural traits of each ethnic group and then, by comparing the cultures of each of the ethnic groups within the sample with each other, decide which cultures are most similar. However, this seemingly simple approach is fraught with philosophical as well as what might best be termed logistic problems. The most obvious of these is the question of what constitutes a culture trait and in how far traits from different cultures are comparable. The fact that this method was used some twenty years ago at the University of California and then abandoned points to at least an unconscious awareness of these problems by those who used it.¹²

In a culture-type approach one should neither weigh the data in terms of special problems nor approach it from a simply quantitative point of view. That seems to leave us merely in the position of standing at the side lines and intuiting. I do not feel that such is in fact the case. There is another alternative which I will now try to present.

The first step in the culture-type method introduced in this

paper is to establish four broad categories under which it is possible to arrange the cultures of the ethnic units studied. These broad categories encompass nearly all the cultural behavior of man. They are: (1) the relationship between man and the physical environment, (2) the relationship between members of the same ethnic unit, (3) the relationship between different ethnic units, and (4) the relationship between man and the supernatural. Esthetics or art is a legitimate category, independent of the others,¹³ but it has been my experience that it is difficult to find sufficient material to deal with this aspect of culture adequately. With this general frame of reference as a guide one proceeds to study all the cultures involved in terms of these broad categories. These studies do not have to be written up in a formal manner. To do so would be to compile a handbook, not a culture-type study.

The data is then reviewed for the selection of subcategories which can be used as a basis for comparing the cultures of the ethnic groups. These subcategories must apply to each culture. They must be limited in number, otherwise the use of them will open the door to element counting. They must be the result of the general background of the discipline and the data at hand because another technique of selection will reflect too narrow an orientation. They must reflect distributions which, although their final forms will not be known to the investigator, will allow groupings of some inclusiveness. To illustrate this point, let us look at the possibility of using either dress styles or subsistence patterns to represent the major category, "Man and the Physical Environment," for a culture-type study of Northern and Western China. In this area, dress styles, especially those of women, vary so much from ethnic group to ethnic group that it is impossible to achieve a workable distribution pattern if one were to use this as a subcategory. Specific manifestations of subsistence patterns, on the other hand, are often widely shared by different ethnic groups and therefore constitute a workable subcategory.

It is clear that the selection of subcategories is a crucial point in culture-type formulations. Different distributions, and thus different culture types, will result from the selection of different subcategories. Insofar as the orientation in selecting categories

and subcategories is to obtain a general picture of the ethnography of the area, I believe that the method is adequate. There is no purposeful attempt to weigh culture-type formulations in favor of any one aspect of culture but, on the contrary, the division into the major categories insures of at least equal importance being given to four different spheres of culture. Subcategories should reflect the general orientation of the discipline as shaped by the area selected for study.

After the subcategories have been selected, the particular traits or groups of traits by which they are represented in each culture can then be plotted on a map. Other trait distributions, however interesting in their own right, are ignored. There should be four such maps, one for each major category of culture. Finally, a fifth map, the culture-type map, summarizes the material on the other maps. All cultures which are found to contain two or more of the same or similar traits according to the category maps are considered as belonging to the same culture type. Inasmuch as the subcategories are arrived at independently of each other, the culture types should not reflect any particular theoretical orientation. For the same reason, they do not reflect any one logical scheme and therefore can be explained individually.

The use of subcategories will become clearer if we see how they were used in establishing culture types for Northern and Western China. The subcategories under the general heading, "Man and the Physical Environment," are house types and subsistence patterns because many peoples have the same kind of house construction in combination with the same type of subsistence patterns. As a matter of fact, the combination of yurt and pastoral nomadism, for example, seems to form the grounds for the popular concept of the so-called Central Asian way of life. House types and subsistence patterns are an inclusive pair of subcategories because they include many different activities. They refer closely to the main category, the relationship between man and the physical environment, as these peoples depend almost entirely upon the direct exploitation of their habitat, an exploitation made less direct only by their domesticated grains and animals.

To take another example, in the subcategory used under the

main category, the relationships between members of the same ethnic groups, relate to the nature of the primary and secondary groups of each ethnic unit. That is to say, generally speaking, the individual Chinese is responsible initially and for the most part to the stem family and then to the territorial group, the village. In contrast to the Chinese, the Dagors are responsible initially to the extended family and then to the compromise kin group.

I have used this subcategory for several reasons. First, there is general anthropological interest in these groupings although they are not customarily paired for purposes of classification. Second, I have paired primary and secondary groupings instead of using only one grouping because I desired to deal with as inclusive a subcategory as possible, especially in view of the fact that I have relatively inclusive subcategories under which to arrange the data with reference to two other main categories, man and the physical environment, and the relationship between man and the supernatural. Third, these groupings have been relatively permanent in form. With regard to political systems, until recently a newspaper reporter would be better qualified to deal with the ephemeral political situation in China than would an anthropologist. Also, political systems, except in those cases where they compose the secondary group, have not been used for a subcategory for yet another reason: many of the peoples of this area are under the domination of the Chinese and are politically acephalous, therefore, the category does not apply to them.

The subcategories used to represent the relationships between different ethnic units deal primarily with the problems of inter-ethnic trade, population movements, and expressions of a military nature. As such, they point to the state of flux that was in existence during the time that the field work upon which this study of culture types was based was carried out.

Religion is the subcategory utilized to represent the category, "Man and the Supernatural." For most of the ethnic units under review this choice is obvious. We have in this area the existence of well-formulated belief systems with established churches and dogmas, encompassing within their folds almost all aspects of

supernatural life and explanations as well as philosophical inquiry.

As stated above, after each of the subcategories has been plotted on maps, one map to each category, a culture-type map can be compiled. If any ethnic unit shares two or more subcategories with one or any number of other ethnic units, these can then be grouped together to form a culture type.

Since the subcategories used in defining the culture types derive from a study of the particular region under investigation and should not be applied to the study of other regions unless independent research indicates that this is warranted, it follows that it is possible for culture types to vary with any change in the ethnic composition of the sample. Therefore, although culture types are a means of expressing cultural similarity, they should not be wrapped in a holistic mantle or reified. Their function is to introduce one to an area by establishing a series of relationships which because of the explicitness of the method cannot be challenged. It has been my experience that the establishment of culture types immediately gives rise to theoretical problems, merely because an empirical sorting of the data tends to raise questions which demand answers. For example, they point to the existence of actual culture areas, culture clusters, and area cotraditions as well as to more general problems of historical relationships, parallel development, the importance of the environment in relation to other aspects of culture such as political structure, and especially to the importance of inter-ethnic relations as an important cultural covariant.

To recapitulate to some extent, the culture type provides a method for approaching an area which has previously not received systematic treatment. Because it is not holistic and thus its parts can be easily separated one from another, parts can be modified without the abandonment of the entire structure. The scheme can be used to build upon, or can be changed without inconvenience. Because it is especially concerned with one particular area, those problems which are inherent within this area are likely to come to one's attention. It provides an organization which can be used as a point of departure for further discussion. This organization might be limited and inadequate in relation

to the solution of a particular problem, but it is not a holistic statement of relationships as is the case with the classical culture area, but can be built upon or assumed as study concerning a region intensifies. Finally, as long as we continue to give comparisons an area bias, if for no other reason than to counteract the distortion of studying cultures outside of their interethnic and greater geographical context, and to give vent to our affective impulses, a method similar to the culture-type scheme put forth in this paper is necessary. In such schemes, the culture types as such are not important but rather it is the relationships discovered and the problems as well as the answers to which such relationships lead. Whether such a scheme is maintained explicitly or implicitly, formally or informally, is on the whole beside the point. An awareness of method, however, is the distinguishing mark of those who study man scientifically as a social animal and to paraphrase Socrates, an awareness with method enables us to know the difference between knack and science.

NOTES

1. Carter A. Woods, "A Criticism of Wissler's North American Culture Areas," *American Anthropologist*, 36 (1934), 517-23.
2. Robert H. Lowie, "The Culture Area Concept as Applied to North and South America," *Proceedings of the Thirty-Second International Congress of Americanists* (1958), 73-78.
3. Cf. Frank B. Bessac, *Culture Types of Northern and Western China*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Wisconsin, Madison & University Microfilms, Inc., 1963).
4. Cf. Alfred L. Kroeber, "The Culture-Area and Age-Area Concepts of Clark Wissler," in *Methods in Social Science, a Case Book*, S. A. Rice, ed. (Chicago, 1931); "Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America," *University of California Publications in American Archeology and Ethnology*, 38 (1939), 5-6; "Culture Groupings in Asia," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1947), 322-31; "Comments" (on "Gatherers and Farmers in the Greater Southwest" by Paul Kirchhoff), *American Anthropologist*, 56 (1954), 556-60.
5. Cf. Clark Wissler, *The American Indian*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1922).
6. Alfred L. Kroeber, "Culture Groupings in Asia," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1947), 329.
7. Alan P. Merriam with James M. Brouwer, Paula Foster, Grace Ramke, and Kathleen Sparshott, "The Concept of Culture Clusters Applied to the Belgian Congo," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 15 (1959), 373-96.

8. Wendell C. Bennett, "The Peruvian Co-Tradition," in *A Reappraisal of Peruvian Archaeology; Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology*, 4 (1948), 1-7.
9. Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, *East Asia, The Great Tradition* (Boston, 1960), p. 3.
10. Cf. Elizabeth Bacon, *Obok, A Study of Social Structure in Eurasia*, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 25 (1958); Howard Becker, "Current Sacred-Secular Theory and Its Development," in *Modern Sociological Theory in Continuity and Change*, Howard Becker and Alvin Boskoff, eds. (New York, 1957); Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1907); Robert Redfield, *The Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago, 1960); Julian H. Steward, "South American Cultures: An Interpretative Summary," in *Handbook of South American Indians*, vol. 5, Julian H. Steward, ed. (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 143, 1949); *Irrigation Civilizations* (Washington, 1955); *Theory of Culture Change: the Methodology of Multilinear Evolution* (Urbana, Illinois, 1955); Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, vols. 1 and 2 (London, 1871).
11. This concept is in part derived from Ralph Linton, *The Study of Man* (New York and London, 1936), 91-112.
12. Cf. Harold E. Driver and Alfred L. Kroeber, "Quantitative Expression of Cultural Relationships," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 31 (1932), 211-56; Edward W. Gifford and Stanislaw Klimek, "Yana," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 37 (1936), 71-100; Edward W. Gifford and Alfred L. Kroeber, "Culture Element Distributions: IV, Pomo," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 35 (1937), 117-254; Stanislaw Klimek, "Culture Element Distributions: I, The Structure of California Indian Cultures," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 37 (1935), 1-70; Alfred L. Kroeber, "Culture Element Distributions: III, Area and Climax," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 37 (1936), 101-16.
13. Cf. Franz Boas and others, *General Anthropology* (New York, 1938), pp. 4-5.