

REINTERPRETATION AND THE MECHANISMS OF CULTURE CHANGE¹

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For the past twenty years or more, acculturation studies have been taking an ever more prominent place in anthropological field research, and understandably so. The more we turn toward the contemporary condition of primitives and others, the more we find ourselves involved in a discussion of the contact situation, its effects and its consequences. However, although we have a great deal of data available concerning the results of acculturation, as Hallowell (1952) has pointed out, we still know very little indeed about the complex mechanisms involved in the formation of a new cultural amalgam. Nor is concern with such mechanisms merely a matter of academic interest, since application of anthropological principles to practical problems rests heavily on an understanding of the processes involved precisely in situations of contact, whatever their specific nature may be.

Various psychological tools have been applied to the problems of acculturation. Hallowell (1945) and Gillin (1945) have, each in a different way, attempted to utilize concepts of learning theory, speaking of rewards and incentives implied in the acceptance of a new item of culture. Recently, Barnett (1952) has approached acculturation under the larger heading of innovation, with the help of Gestalt principles of perception. In terms of learning theory, then, we may assume with Hallowell (1945), that no learning takes place when there are no incentives for learning, that no borrowing takes place when there are no incentives for such borrowing. In other words, culture contact in and of itself is not sufficient to account for the transfer of cultural materials from one group to another. Furthermore, the incentives for the learning of the new cultural materials must already exist among the potential borrowers. That is to say, the items to be borrowed must satisfy the people's own culturally acquired drives. In order for an item of culture to be borrowed, it must have potential meaning for those who would adopt it. However, we may push the matter a step further and ask what happens to the material once it is borrowed. What occurs in the interaction between a functioning culture and a borrowed item introduced into it?

In order to pursue these questions, we would like to add here a social-psychological dimension to the concepts *retention*, *reinterpretation* and *syncretism*. These concepts have been used by Herskovits (1945, 1948) in the analysis of Afro-american materials. These concepts, we feel, carry an implicit social-psychological dimension which is to be developed, although Herskovits himself handles them exclusively on the phenomenological level.

When, as a result of contact, a new cultural amalgam develops, some material may be carried over unchanged from the period prior to contact. The term *retention* refers to such a maintenance of a feature of the old culture in a changed context: an object, a belief, a behavior pattern. In order to be able to identify such retentions, however, we must have knowledge of the culture in question at a period prior to contact. In other words, we must be able to establish what Hallowell (1946, 1952) has called a "baseline" of cultural change, and it is in the establishing

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of such a baseline, that ethnohistory makes its most important contribution to the student of acculturation.

Retentions may be maintained in various forms: either unchanged, or with certain internal modification. In Haiti today, for instance, quite a few retentions of West African cultural materials may be found: in the way women carry loads on their heads, in the preparation of certain foods and their names (e.g., the dish called *akasá*). As to the modified retentions, they present a somewhat different category, one of the group of phenomena termed *reinterpretations*.

Reinterpretations may be defined as the retaining, or adopting, of an element from one culture into another, with change of function, meaning, use and even partial form. We may distinguish between two types of reinterpretation. On the one hand, there are those cases, where retentions from a previous period are modified in some way for greater coherence with changed patterns. The making of birch bark objects by the Ojibwa Indians of Wisconsin, for the tourist trade, would be an example of this. On the other hand, we find the somewhat more complex case of those reinterpretations which are based on material borrowed from a foreign culture. Here we would do well to keep in mind Sapir's discussion of the conditions under which cultural "lending" takes place. One such condition, says Sapir, is:

. . . that the culture element in question be capable of detachment from its context and comprehensible as such. There is no doubt that different cultural elements are thus detachable or, what amounts to the same thing, capable of conscious formulation by the native in quite different degrees. We have here a continuous gamut, ranging from the zero, or almost such, of a vocalic or consonantic change to indicate some subtle grammatical notion up to the maximum of what we may awkwardly term "conceptual detachability" of a type of implement of clearcut form, material, and use. Obviously, culture elements are transmissible, roughly speaking, with an ease that is proportionate to their "conceptual detachability." Thus, we expect a ceremonial dance as such to be much more readily transmitted than any notions there may be as to its function; a myth plot more readily than, let us say, the cosmogonic ideas which serve as its frame; an element of decorative design than the precise mechanical technique in which it is executed or its style of artistic treatment in a particular tribe; a definite social custom, say the mother-in-law taboo, than the exact range of meaning covered by a relationship term. (Sapir, 1949, p. 415)

Lack of "conceptual detachability" may thus be seen to function as one possible barrier to cross-cultural interchanges, while cultural lending may be said to be facilitated by such "detachability." However, for actual borrowing to take place, there must also be a potential meaning present for the borrowers in the element in question. That is to say, two groups independently meeting the same detachable element in a contact situation, might make a different choice in borrowing, depending on the resonance awakened in terms of their own cultural background. The fact that West Africans proved able workers in the sugar fields of the West Indies, where the local Indian groups had not, might be cited as a case in point.

Given conceptual detachability, and the imputation of significance to a given cultural element by a group in the contact situation, what happens to the elements borrowed? As we have mentioned, one of the things that may happen is the phenomenon termed "reinterpretation." That is to say, a conceptually detachable element may be modified in some way in order to be incorporated into the way of life of the borrowing group. It is this phenomenon that we wish to examine in greater detail.

Barnett (1942) has shown that in culture change—and acculturation is only a subform of such change—function, meaning, use and form of a given element need not all change at once. It is precisely the independence of these aspects which makes it possible for continuity to exist in change. Now the notion of "continuity in change" may present a problem if we consider it from the point of view of the two cultures that are, presumably, involved in the contact situation. However, if we cease to think of cultures as reified entities, but rather think of human

beings enculturated to one way of life or another, the complexion of the problem changes altogether. At its roots, reinterpretation appears to be a psychological process, and must therefore be attacked on that level, as well as on that of ethnography.

Let us consider an individual reared in a given culture. Unless we assume certain innate, or biologically derived attitudes, we must admit that his attitudes and orientations spring from his own past experience. This itself is largely culturally determined, since no individual may be said to live in a world of "naked" realities, but rather in a culturally constituted universe, something that permits us even to go so far as to say that people in different cultures do not live in quite the same world, do not experience the same "realities." Seen from this perspective, we shall find it not only natural, but indeed quite unavoidable that, faced with previously unknown situations, the individual will attempt to deal with them in terms of what he knows, in terms of the past, thus in terms of his own culture. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, since no "reality" can be experienced without being culturally interpreted. Thus, each culture represents a total "behavioral" world" (Hallowell, 1942, pp.1-8), a perceptual organization of the universe.

It may seem that cases of reinterpretation are numerous and easy at hand. The transplanted African interpreted the teachings of Christianity in terms of his own African view of the world. Similarly, the Europeans when faced with African modes of behavior, interpreted them in the only way they knew how, their own way. For although, as we have seen above, culture molds reality for us, this is not a fact readily grasped, especially by the participant. It is in no way evident to him that he is not dealing with actuality (with that which *is*), instead of seeing that he is dealing with that which is as interpreted for him by his own particular experience, and the experience of his group; in a word, by his enculturation. Thus Père Labat (1724, vol. 1, p.458), describing cases of African spirit possession which he witnessed in Martinique, tells us that these people are so obsessed and so horrified by the devil, that when the devil appears to them they fall into convulsions as though they were epileptics. Similarly, Father Le Jeune (as quoted in Hallowell, 1942, p. 82) thought Ojibwa conjurers to have contact with the devil. In contemporary Haiti, Protestant converts hold that people who smoke will become *zombies*.

If we wish to account for these examples, we must think in terms of the individual's enculturation to a given way of life. The only hypothesis possible for us, then, will be one phrased in terms of the interpretation of new phenomena in the framework of one's pre-existing patterns. Enculturation to a given way of life provides the individual only with those choices or alternatives available within it, or within that of its subdivision, in which the given individual is reared. It does not include the great range of possible solutions to a given problem which would be present, were the solutions of *all* cultures to be considered. Such a possibility is indeed nonsense. In many instances the alternatives would be mutually exclusive, either because contradictory or because inconceivable. Each culture may be seen as a particular mode of adjustment, providing a limited range of alternatives, or problem solution. In a culture where children are carried on the mother's hip, carrying them on the back, tied in a cloth, may be excluded as a possibility. Alternatives outside the context of a particular culture will not be understood by those who live in terms of it. It is this limitation of alternatives, this basic cultural provincialism, which makes it at all possible for people to function. Without it, culture could not exist, children could not be trained, personalities could not develop. There would be no certainty of what to expect, no ability to anticipate reactions, no possibility of predicating the behavior of others. All situations would require detailed investigations, and no routine choices could be made. Only in extreme neuroses do we find anything even remotely approaching such a situation.

Let us return however, to the problem at hand and to the instances of re-

interpretation cited above. The first two, those of Père Labat and Father Le Jeune represent pseudo—rather than actual reinterpretations. They are more nearly cases of what we might call “cross-cultural misinterpretation.” The Protestant belief in *zombies*, however, and the identification of African gods with the saints of the Catholic Church, on the other hand, are closer to the concept we have in mind. Perhaps even better examples are the use of a bell and of the sign of the cross in Haitian *vodun* worship, or the use of a printed prayer, sold in the Port-au-Prince market place, as an amulet, worn on a string around the neck. We must, then, distinguish between two phenomena that are functionally quite different: the misunderstanding of the behavior of persons of foreign cultures in terms of the known on the part of individuals whose own background is quite different, and reinterpretation as such. The first case leads to an unwarranted idiosyncratic view, which is in no ways meaningful to the actual actors in the situation. Thus, Père Labat and Father Le Jeune are passive observers in a situation where individuals of other cultures are the actors. On the other hand, for true reinterpretation to take place, it must be patterned and become a part of a culture which results from a contact of two or more different ways of life, and which in turn is different from any previously existing. The reinterpretation might be something which involves the active participation of the group, such as the use of certain objects in a novel way. This is exemplified by the French water faucets used as sword handles in Madagascar, as cited by Linton, or the European use of Chinese explosives for purposes of warfare. It is also exemplified in the previously cited illustrations of the *vodun* use of the bell, the sign of the cross and the printed prayer. However, reinterpretation may also be a matter of folk-ethnology: that is, more or less standardized interpretations of the behavior of another group in terms of one's own belief and attitudes—a culturally patterned form of projection. An example might be cited from Haiti, where some informants were firmly convinced of the widespread existence of *vodun* abroad, citing among other reasons for such belief the fact that many upper class persons had gone abroad to be cured and had returned to visit Haitian *hungans*, priests of the *vodun* cult.

As suggested above, phenomena of reinterpretation are to be divided into two subcategories. On the one hand, we find those which derive their content from the old culture, i.e., modified retentions. With reference to Haiti, this means elements derived from the African past of the population. Secondly, we find those reinterpretations which derive from the culture (or cultures) with which contact is established. The example of the Haitian Protestants seems to include both these facets. Here the older Haitian belief in *zombies*, present at the time when Protestantism was introduced, is reinterpreted to fit the Protestant concept of punishment after death. On the other hand, the Protestant taboo on smoking is reinterpreted to fit the Haitian belief in *zombies*, which has persisted in the context of a changed pattern.

Here we have a case of two-way reinterpretation. This is in many ways similar to the process of *syncretism*. That term, however, has been reserved for a special type of two-way reinterpretation, one in which the two or more elements fuse. Thus in the example just cited, the two elements—one from Haitian belief, the other from Protestantism—are tied together to make one argument. In the more typical case of syncretism, an individual, for instance, might be known by two names—or more characteristically, the identity of two supernatural beings, derived from two cultural contexts, might be mingled. This is true of Catholic saints and African gods in most of the Catholic Afroamerican area (cf. e. g. Herskovits, 1937). Similarly, in the development of Christianity in Europe, Christian and pre-Christian elements fused. Pilgrimages in Yucatan may be traced to both Maya and Catholic European sources. Examples of this phenomenon, derived from various acculturative situations and various parts of the world, and a variety of time periods, may be easily multiplied.

The process of retention, syncretism, and reinterpretation as a matter of fact, seem to be universal in the dynamics of acculturation. In so far as diffusion studies, on the basis of distribution maps and archaeological reconstructions, attempt to get at the results of contacts that have taken place in the past and which we cannot fully document, to that extent these social-psychological concepts are relevant there too. Sapir, after all, spoke of the conditions of cultural lending and cultural borrowing with reference not to ongoing contact situations and processes of acculturation. Rather, he was concerned with reconstruction of past events on the basis of contemporary psychological and cultural phenomena, which may be projected backwards in time. Thus the concepts discussed here are thought to be useful not only for the student of acculturation, but to those concerned with culture change in general.

In speaking of the mechanisms of retention, reinterpretation, and syncretism, we may perhaps go even so far as to say that only in so far as these mechanisms do occur in a given situation, can we speak of acculturation. As Hallowell (1945), has pointed out although contact is a necessary precondition for acculturation, this fact alone is not sufficient, in the absence of other factors, to produce cultural interchange. A number of studies have shown that culture contact may occur, may indeed lead to specific symbiotic relationships, without resulting in acculturation. One of the factors in such a situation may of course be that of the prevailing power relationships; where one group is obviously dominant, the policy of that group may be a further factor to be considered. Nonetheless, these rather striking features do not alone determine the outcome of the contact situation. Where barriers to acculturation exist, the processes of reinterpretation and syncretism may be impossible and one of two outcomes may be brought about. Either retentions will occur in an unchanged context and acculturation, *ex hypothesi*, will not take place. Or, as has been the case with some of the Eastern American Indian tribes, there may be an apparent loss of interest in the old culture and what appears to be total adoption of white ways. This is the case among the Ojibwa Indians of Wisconsin. Here is a group that appears completely acculturated. As Hallowell (1952), has shown however in psychological terms these people are much more similar to the less acculturated Ojibwa Indians of Canada than was to be anticipated from observation of overt cultural features alone. Thus, apparent total cultural abdication may, in psychological terms, not be very far removed from total imperviousness to any external contributions.

This would indicate a serious caution against concluding on the dynamics of acculturation merely on the basis of an inventory of cultural content, without taking into consideration the effect of a changing culture on the personality integration of those who live in terms of that culture.

While admittedly fragmentary, it is hoped that the present analysis may be applicable to part processes of culture change in general, not only to acculturation, since in a sense it becomes irrelevant whether changes are introduced from without, by contact, or from within, by invention and discovery, or indeed by spread from one class to another. (cf., Wolf, 1953). The primary value, then, of the concepts of retention, reinterpretation, and syncretism may be that they permit us some further insight into actual mechanisms of change, and thus give us a greater understanding of the apparent paradox of cultural stability and cultural dynamics.

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