



## Rethinking the Concept "Primitive"

Francis L. K. Hsu

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# Rethinking the Concept "Primitive"

by Francis L. K. Hsu

IF THERE IS one term which is consistently identified with anthropology it is "primitive," an adjective used to describe the data found by anthropologists all over the world: primitive science, primitive religion, primitive economics, primitive mentality, primitive peoples, primitive societies and cultures. According to Webster, the term "primitive" is defined as "pertaining to the beginning or origin or to early times, or characterized by the style, simplicity, rudeness, etc., of early times; old-fashioned, as, *primitive tools*." There is no doubt that the idea of being "inferior" was what E. B. Tylor, the first major anthropologist in the world, had in mind when he spoke of the three stages of cultural evolution in his *Anthropology* (1881), first published just 10 years after his *Primitive Culture* (1871): (1) a "savage" stage, characterized by subsistence on wild plants and animals and the utilization of stone age implements; (2) a "barbaric" stage characterized by agriculture,

metal work, and some form of community life in villages and towns; and (3) a "civilized" stage which began when men acquired the art of writing (Tylor 1881:1-18).

Alexander Goldenweiser has perhaps given the most concise and explicit definition of the term "primitive" in his *Early Civilization* (1922:117-18). Although he speaks of "primitive" as being small, isolated, etc., there seems to be no doubt that he also equates it with "inferior." For in a later work, *Anthropology: An Introduction to Primitive Culture* (1937), he expresses himself as follows:

People in general, and primitives in particular, do not think or analyze their culture—they live it. It never occurs to them to synthesize what they live or reduce it to a common denominator, as it were.

Or again:

A sad commentary on the psychological limits of diffusion is presented by the disheartening failure of White civilization to either leave primitives alone or pull them *up* to its own level (1937:47 and 490) (*Italics mine*).

Over the years the connotation of inferiority and other difficulties have often troubled many scholars. For this reason there have been attempts at reform along two lines. On the one hand some scholars have suggested other kinds of dichotomies to take the place of the primitive-civilized one. Sapir's (1925) Genuine versus Spurious cultures as well as Redfield's (1941) Folk-Urban continuum are notable examples of this trend.

Herskovits explicitly suggested substituting the term "non-literate" for the term "primitive," the first such need eloquently voiced. After showing that all those called "primitives" or "savages" are much more diverse in their cultural characteristics than the groups which are called "civilized," he says:

In anthropological works, the words "primitive" or "savage"—the latter being used mainly as a synonym for "primitive" by English writers—do not have the connotation they possess in such a work as Toynbee's, or in other non-anthropological writings. As for the word "barbaric," most anthropologists do not employ it at all. Anthropologists merely use the word "primitive" or "savage" to denote peoples outside the stream of Euro-American culture, who do not possess written languages. By reiterating this meaning, it was hoped that all other connotations might be

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Hsu's main theoretical publications are on family, religion, national character, and culture and personality (psychological anthropology); and his major geographical areas of study are China, India, and the United States. He is particularly known for his comparative studies of large and literate societies. His books include *Under the Ancestors' Shadow* (1948), *Religion, Science and Human Crises* (1952), *Americans and Chinese: Two Ways of Life* (1953), *Psychological Anthropology: Approaches to Culture and Personality* (editor and contributor) (1961), and *Clan, Caste and Club* (1963). The last book is a comparative study of the psycho-cultural orientations of Chinese, Hindus, and modern Americans, each group seen through its most characteristic secondary groupings. He is scheduled to carry out a field project in the Kyoto-Kobe area of Japan in 1964.

Hsu's paper is the eighth and last in a series, edited by himself and Alan P. Merriam, especially prepared to honor Melville J. Herskovits. The entire series constitutes a new type of *Festschrift* (CA 4:92).

sloughed off, and that it would no longer convey such meanings as simple, or naive, or serve as a catch-all to describe, except in the single matter of absence of writing, such differing civilizations as those of the Siberian reindeer herders or the Lunda empire of the Congo (1958:75).

He then goes on to suggest the use of the term "non-literate" for "primitive" because the former is "colorless, conveys its meaning unambiguously, and is readily applicable to the data it seeks to delimit, [and] is thus to be preferred to all the other terms we have considered" (1948:75).

On the other hand, some scholars are determined to search for greater precision in the use of the term. In this regard Radin (1953) has contributed greatly, but lately Stanley Diamond (1963) has done more than others in finding what he calls "a positive definition" of the term primitive by observing that:

all primitive peoples are marginal to the mainstream of modern history, primarily because of "accidents" of habitat. In the sense already noted, contemporary primitives can be roughly perceived as our contemporary, pre-civilized ancestors (Diamond 1963:79).

Diamond then proceeds to enumerate 10 characteristics of the "primitive," from "communalistic economic base" to the role of "ritual drama" as "a culturally comprehensive vehicle for group and individual expression at critical junctures in the social round or personal life cycle..." The overall purpose of Diamond's redefinition is perhaps indicated by his tenth characteristic which is: "if the fulfillment and delineation of the human person within a social, natural and supernatural (self-transcendent) setting, is a universally valid measure for the evaluation of culture, primitive societies are our primitive superiors," and by his plea that "we cannot abandon the primitive; we can only outgrow it by letting it grow within us" (Diamond 1963:103 and 111).

A few years ago Sol Tax sounded the bugle against

use of the term "primitive" (1960:441). His objections to it were supported by a "Memorandum on the Use of *Primitive*" by a research assistant Lois Mednick (1960:441-45) which shows how the term has been used by a variety of scholars, primarily anthropologists. The many enthusiastic responses to these two pieces (CA 2:396-97 and 3:206) reflect fairly the above-mentioned division of opinion in our profession today. Some, including Sol Tax himself, are opposed to its continuation except to "men who have been extinct since the late Pleistocene," while a majority seem to prefer either redefining it or substituting it with some other terms such as "primary," "peripheral," "ethnological" or even "anthropological."

The thesis of the present paper is that a dichotomy of the world's peoples and cultures into two varieties, no matter under what disguise, presents large difficulties. In particular the primitive-civilized dichotomy is replete with undesirable psychological connotations and scientific consequences which cannot be avoided by redefinition even of the most positive kind. Furthermore, by his plea that we not "abandon" the primitive but let it "grow within us," Diamond has distinctly left the path of science and entered the door of charity, for the problem is neither one of turning the tables (by stressing that the primitives are our "superiors") nor of permitting or wishing the nurture of the primitive in us.

Lois Mednick's "Memorandum on the Use of *Primitive*" (1960) referred to before already provides us with an excellent panorama of the "ambiguous and inconsistent" way in which the term "primitive" is used. But in order to ascertain the extent to which this state of affairs exists in anthropological works of a general nature, especially introductory texts, Nancy Schmidt, a research assistant, and I examined a total of 30 books published in the last 10 years (except for Murdock 1949, Evans-Pritchard 1951, Kroeber 1952 and Levy 1952).

The following table summarizes the results:

#### THE USE OF THE TERM "PRIMITIVE" in TEXTS ON ANTHROPOLOGY (IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE BUT EXCLUDING PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY) PUBLISHED IN THE YEARS 1953-63.

*Explanation of Table:* When the word "primitive" is italicized, the author has used it himself; whereas, when it is not italicized, he has used it in reference to the way it has been used by someone else. Most of the definitions following the word "primitive" are paraphrases, or else were obtained from the general context in which the word appears. Only when the definitions appear in quotation marks are they the authors' exact definitions. The page numbers indicate the pages on which the meaning of the word "primitive" is found; they do not in all cases correspond to the pages on which the word "primitive" itself appears. There is no correlation between the number of pages following a category and the frequency with which the word "primitive" occurs in the text. The word that the author uses the most or prefers is marked with an asterisk (\*); or when the word "primitive" is rarely used, this is noted.

(BEALS and HOIJER 1959)

\*non-literate peoples: those studied by ethnologists, formerly called primitives (2)

primitive people: calendars of (2)

primitive culture: subject matter of ethnologists (2), in references to Tylor's work (15-16)

primitive art: art forms of non-literate people (598-99)

(BOHANNAN 1963)

\*most often uses *folk* (11, 51, 284, 263)

primitive peoples: those into whose languages the Bible was translated (42 ff.), those whose political systems are studied by anthropologists, in reference to Lévy-Bruhl's comparisons of mentality (321, 322)

primitive society: in reference to Lowie's theory of non-kinship groups (147-48), in reference to Tylor's theory of magic (319)

primitive economics: economic analyses by anthropologists (233)

"primitive" warfare: as conducted by warriors in contest, not by whole societies (305)

primitive culture: in discussing works of Tylor and other early anthropologists (311)

primitive man: in reference to Lévy-Bruhl's and others' works on mentality (321)

primitive religion: rejects the traditional study of animatism, fetishism, and totemism (313 ff.)

(COON 1962)

primitive culture: culture of men before modern times (appears in title, definition based on context, not specific citation)

primitive people (of today): simple, not civilized (1)

primitive arts: skills of living primitive peoples (93 ff.)

\**primitive society*: small in scale in terms of numbers, territory, and social contacts, have simple technology and little specialization of social functions, often have no literature (8) used throughout book, anthropological concern with (8–10), manner of studying (15–18), philosopher's consideration of (25 ff.), study of religion in (90)

\**primitive peoples*: institutions of (39), role of ethnologist in studying (48 ff.), functional study of (55)

*primitive science*  
*primitive art*  
*primitive technology* } specialized studies  
 of anthropology (14)

*primitive family*: in reference to theories of Bachofen (29)

*primitive institutions*: not related to mentality (35)

*primitive society*: Durkheim's contribution to theories of (51 ff.)

*primitive man*: speculations about (65 ff.)

*primitive languages*: need for anthropologists to learn (79–80)

(FIRTH 1956)

\**primitive*: used extensively in the following ways:

*primitive people*: those who retain tribal ways of life, distinguished from peasants, those in simple societies, savage tribes (39)

*primitive communities*: have comparatively simple material equipment that is not integrated into industrial organization (71), lack wide intercommunication with each other (72), not part of world market (72)

*primitive economics*: study of technology, arts and crafts, and basic principles that control the work and wealth of "native societies" (72)

*primitive group*: as distinguished from purely individual activity (73)

*primitive transaction*: "the equivalent of buying and selling on a non-price level" (80)

*primitive distributive system*: gives reward for social advantages of participating in production (81)

*primitive money*: objects other than coins, with a relatively standard value, used in exchange (92)

*primitive society*  
*primitive culture*  
*primitive tribe* } used as synonym for primitive  
 people (93, 97, 47)

*primitive behavior*: as regulated by custom (132)

*primitive law*: rules expected to be obeyed, and normally kept through some means for insuring obedience (137)

*primitive thinking*: used in discussion of Lévy-Bruhl's theory (152)

*primitive life*: in reference to the role of dreams in lives of primitive people (174)

*primitive religion*: beliefs of (171 ff.), rites of (182–85)

(GLEASON 1961)

not used, distinctions between written and unwritten languages, the specific language referred to is usually named

(GOLDSCHMIDT 1959)

\**primitives*: contrast to moderns (223, 224), comparative not absolute term (223, 224), uses by anthropologists (224), circumlocutions for (223, 224), in reference to historical theories (43)

*primitive man*: in reference to work of Radin (223)

*primitive people*: means of social control among (153), in reference to works of Herskovits (223)

*primitive cultures*: in reference to Boas' works (39)

*primitive state systems*: discussion of Steward's criteria (208)

*living primitives*: in reference to data collecting (43), evolution (153)

*primitive level of social systems*: contrasted to civilized systems (155–57)

*primitive conditions*: of social forms (153)

(GOLDSCHMIDT 1960)

[Analysis only of articles by Goldschmidt]

\**primitive*: contrasted to modern, all people outside Western civilization, is a comparative, not absolute, term, "preliterate" not an adequate term (664, 665)

*primitive people*: those with technology fundamentally like those of prehistoric times (122, 123, 125)

*primitive*: contrasted to civilized (172)

*primitive society*: division of labor in (173), affiliations in (268, 275), child-training practices in (177)

*primitive people*: residence patterns of (223), spatial groupings of (275, 419), clans in (225, 277), status relations among (317), government an extension of kinship (266 ff.), religion among (475 ff.), moral rules of (529 ff.), private property of (545)

*primitive level*: of family development (277, 279, 280)

*primitive tribes*: lack of government in (368), comparative ethics of (544 ff.)

*primitive man*: religious rituals of (476 ff.)

*primitive art*: contrasted to European art (586)

(HAWKES 1954)

*primitive*: contrasted to civilized (17, 103), used very seldom, the book is historical and specific names are usually used

(HERSKOVITS 1955)

\**non-literate* used throughout book, not defined, but a substitute for primitive (123, 363, 522, 367–68)

*primitive culture*: as opposed to civilized (358, 359), contrasted to folk culture (521), synonym for primeval (435), synonym for savagry and barbarism (360), problem of defining (360, 362), rejection of term (363)

*primitive people*: simple people (360), those traditionally studied by anthropology (368–69)

*primitive society*: in discussing *Kulturkreis* (464, 465)

*primitive man*: synonym for contemporary ancestor (358, 359), in discussing theories of culture change (448 ff.), in reference to works of Tylor and Morgan (434–36)

(HILL 1958)

*primitive* not used: refers to *speech communities* (4)

(HOCKETT 1958)

not used: occasional reference to savages (4) and aboriginals or aboriginal times (8, 479)

(HOEBEL 1960)

\**primitive*: preliterate or non-literate (defined 657), used throughout book in all contexts

*primitive man*: use of caves by (202), husband-wife relations of (334–36), weapons of (512), religion of (526 ff.)

*primitives*: hunting techniques of (185), traps used by (202), marriage among (301 ff.), kin terms of (357 ff.), divorce among (314 ff.), polygyny among (325)

*primitive peoples*: domestic animals of (196), houses of (206), stone tools of (217), effect of culture contact on (590), status among (357), stock ownership of (445)

*primitive communism*: in reference to the theories of Morgan (201)

*primitive art*: art of primitive peoples, not crude art (253 ff.)

*primitive society*: marriage in (301 ff.), women's groups in (402), classes in (415 ff.), slavery in (425 ff.)

*primitive world*: role of the aged in (391–92), inheritance in (460)

*primitive law*: contrast to European (468–69), systems of (471 ff.)

*primitive warfare*: tactical operations of (511–12)

*primitive mythology*: stable core of (539)

(HONIGMANN 1959)

\*most often uses *culture* without any adjectives (25)

*primitive ancestors*: reference to concern of early anthropologists (23)

*primitive stage of human existence*: reference to the fallacy of such labels (24)

*primitive cultures*: isolated ways of life investigated by anthropologists traditionally (23 ff.)

*primitives*: as used by Lévy-Bruhl (679)

(HONIGMANN 1963)

\*"small scale" used throughout book (25, 28, 94, 202)

*primitives*: in reference to current disuse of the term (21)

(KEESING 1958)

*primitive*, \**non-literate*, \**simpler*: distinguishable from civilization, not survivals from an earlier time (45–46)

*primitive societies*: most today are nearly peasant societies or well on the way (46), in reference to evolutionary theories (139 ff.), in reference to psychic unity of mankind and comparative method (141, 142), in reference to historicalism and *kulturkreise* (146), in reference to works of Durkheim (153), organization of life cycle in (247 ff.)

*primitive law*: in reference to theories about non-codified law systems (305–6)

primitive culture: in reference to theories of religion (325 ff.)  
primitive science: in reference to Frazer (332)  
primitive arts: difference from civilized arts (348)

(KROEBER 1952)

The term "primitive" is not used much. In the 50 essays, the word appears in the title of 1; most essays are of a general theoretical nature.

primitive culture: contrasted to European culture (47, 49), in reference to works of Tylor *et al.* (19 ff., 144 ff.), in reference to work of Roheim and Freud (303, 304)

primitives: contrasted to civilized (219 ff.), in reference to theories of Morgan (169, 170), psychoses of (310 ff.)

primitive life: social organization of simple peoples (219 ff.)

folk culture: occasionally used as synonym for primitive (310)

primitive man: less civilized peoples with important kinship organization (219, 224)

(LÉVY 1952)

\*usually uses *society* or *social system* (6 ff., 18 ff., 111 ff.), contrast between industrialized and *non-industrialized societies* (97), contrast between *traditional* and modern societies (131, 320 ff.), "primitive," *non-literate* compared to modern societies (132), a self-sufficient social system (132), contrast between "simple" and modern societies (166)

"primitive" society: in reference to prerational nature of (376)

(LINTON 1955)

\*usually uses culture prefixed by a place name (African culture) (431) or occupation (dairying culture) (438)

primitive languages: unwritten languages (9)

primitive cultures: in reference to theories of arrested development (41)

primitive women: those who have simple cultures, like those in the Stone Age (71)

modern "primitives": people with simple culture, esp. simple tools (84)

primitive pattern of life: in reference to Neolithic (174)

"primitive" areas: those inhabited by simple people esp. in reference to Polynesia (183)

primitive group: simple tribes, esp. reference to Indian influence in Southeast Asia (187)

primitive art: an inaccurate designation when applied to African sculpture (438)

primitive man: prehistoric man (593)

(MEAD and CALAS 1953)

Mead (1953) savages, non-literate (xvii ff.)

primitive peoples: savages (xix ff.)

Nicholas Calas (1953) unknown peoples (xxvi ff.)

Engels (1884) barbarians: as opposed to civilization (14–15)

T. Reik (1919) *primitive peoples*: those who practice the couvade (26)

E. Crawley (1902) *primitive culture* } characterized by homo-  
*primitive society* } geneity (29–30)

R. Marett (1911) *primitive* [appears in title, but not defined (32)]

L. Lévy-Bruhl *primitives*: those who regard artificial likenesses as real (33), natives (34), those who regard their names as concrete, real, and sometimes sacred (37), uncivilized races (41)

primitive peoples: in reference to Hill Tout's work on Salish (38)

E. B. Tylor (1871) *primitive culture*: that of tribes "low on the scale of humanity" (49)

savages (primitives): distinguished from civilized men (50–51)

D. Lee (1949) *primitive society*: those among whom being is identical with the objects (53 ff.) (selection refers to Trobriands)

R. Benedict (1932) *primitive peoples* } homogenous groups as dif-  
*primitive tribes* } ferentiated from modern  
stratified groups (80 ff.)

P. Radin (1927) *primitive man*: one endowed with overpowering sense of reality (258)

primitive community: where everyday facts have religious and ritual covering (259)

G. T. Emmons (1911) *primitive people*: those who endow all nature with spirit life.

(MURDOCK 1959)

\*usually uses *society* or *social unit* without adjectives, makes comparisons by saying "our society—other societies" (56)

primitive society: (occasional use, not defined) in reference to adjustment of co-wives (31)

primitive man: in reference to 19th century theories of evolution (58)

primitive times: in reference to theory of matriliney (185)

(NADEL 1957)

primitive society: (not used often, not defined, but apparently synonym for tribal), different number of roles in (61 ff.), linkage of roles in (65 ff.), coherence of role systems in (72 ff.), current work of anthropologists in (146)

(PIDDINGTON 1950/1957)

Vol. 1

Primitive is used with great frequency, but only a few examples are given for each category

\**primitive communities*: usually literate, have small social groups, low level of technical achievement, social relations based on kinship most important, lack of economic specialization, but not sharply divided from civilized communities (5), social status in (189), political authority in (190), voluntary associations in (216), land tenure in (287)

\**primitive culture*: "material and spiritual or social" culture of primitive communities (14), need for functional analysis of (45), discussion of theoretical approaches to (14–17), emphasis on variety of (31–33), past and present study of (26), in Asia (60), in India (65), in Pacific (71)

\**primitive society*: groups with primitive culture (272), production in (267), economic exchange in (271), idea of property in (282), social structure of (107 ff.), place of women in (169 ff.), initiation ceremonies in (175), education in (179 ff.), law and customs in (319 ff.), hunger and famine in (257), belief in immortality in (375), taboos in (379)

\**primitive people*: members of primitive societies, cultures and communities (11), descent systems of (151), local groups among (167), totemic groups of (200), mythology of (370)

primitive communism: all property belongs to the community (270–71), reference to use by Engles (267), fallacy of the term's application (287), questionnaire to test peoples' view of its meaning (416–19)

primitive economics: material production of primitive societies (266 ff.), applicability of modern economic concepts to (267)

primitive education: conditions of (187)

primitive law: the whole normative system of a primitive community (351), compared to modern law (355)

primitive promiscuity: in reference to Engle's theory of social development (315)

primitive religion: magico-religious institutions of primitives (356), ethical implications of (381)

primitive man: in reference to idea of the noble savage (393)

Vol. 2

primitive art: artistic embellishment of objects with social utility or significance (516), meaning associated with (518), difference from our own (520)

primitive trade: examples of (459)

primitive ceremonial: importance of feasting and food distribution in (470)

primitive technology: reasons for primitiveness (485), why advance occurs (486)

(RADCLIFFE-BROWN 1952)

\**primitive society*: living, non-literate societies that can be studied only by direct observation and contact, have no historical records, contrasted to advanced (used very frequently), preliterate (2, 3, 18, 25)

primitive people: those with very important kinship relations (15, 2, 153)

primitive myth and ritual: in reference to totemism (130)

primitive times: in reference to Robertson Smith's religious theories (156)

primitive law: social control by application of force among primitives (212 ff.)

(RADCLIFFE-BROWN 1957)

\*usually uses *society* or *human society*

primitive people: early distinctions between primitive and civilized (33–34)

savage tribes: territorially delimited groups studied by anthropologists (60)

"primitive": use of word in typing societies (74 ff.)

primitive society: simple society, gift giving in (114 ff.), ritual pollution in (135)

- \**primitive civilization*: aboriginal civilization in which is respect for the individual, amazing degree of political and social organization, and strong concept of personal security (ix ff., 184 ff., 260 ff., 286)
- \**primitive*: and aboriginal are used interchangeably throughout the book (4, 5), contrasted to civilization (7, 8)
- primitive man* (ix): must be studied in terms of positive achievements (x), life permeated by magic and religion (26), analysis of Ego by (57), knowledge of legal principle (114 ff.), philosophizing of (233)
- primitive people*: have efficient tools (32), the thinker among (43), economic structure of (105 ff.), anti-social behavior of (120), puberty ceremonies of (168–69)
- primitive man*: in reference to theories of Lévy-Bruhl (49)
- primitive religion* (103–4)
- primitive communities*: in reference to Malinowski's theory of reciprocity (111)
- primitive economics*: characterized by intricate transfers (117)
- primitive tribes*: inadequate description of religion of (138), localized authority among (232)
- primitive societies*: change in (192), real authority in (245)
- primitive tribal lore*: in reference to theory of Jung (309)

## (THOMPSON 1961)

- \**mankind*: all men, all human phenomena of all times and places (xxvi), anthropological study of (xxiii ff.) used throughout book
- non-literate people { in reference to ethnographic survey (5–6)
- primitive culture {
- primitive economics: in reference to early theories (27–28)
- aboriginal community: synonym for primitive or non-literate (112 ff.), more frequently uses *human community* (126, 28 ff., 156 ff.)
- primitive peoples: in reference to works of Mead (137)
- primitive and folk communities*: contrasted to civilized communities (201 ff.)

## (TITIEV 1959)

- \**primitive peoples*: aim of anthropologists to understand their customs (19), distinguished from non-primitive (used throughout book)
- \**primitive society*: in reference to Neolithic society (209), in reference to societies before acculturation (387), relatively isolated group of racially similar people that work together for common goals, usually has relatively uniform language and religion, usually non-literate (208–9) (used throughout book)
- primitive customs { use of analogies to in archaeological
- primitive religions { interpretation (118, 131)
- primitive community*: members of a primitive society living in one area (208, 333)
- primitive world*: all primitive societies (332)
- primitive kinship*: prime importance of in understanding (283–85)
- primitive law: used as Hoebel does (208 ff.)
- primitive religion: different definitions and functions (333 ff.)

It is clear from this table that the term “primitive” enjoys wide currency in introductory and general works and the meanings attached to it are as “ambiguous and inconsistent” as Lois Mednick found them to be in her briefer survey. In general the following meanings are attached to it:

non-literate, lower, simple, simple tools, not civilized, pertaining to technology fundamentally like that of pre-historic times, small-scale, isolated, arrested in development, folk, all peoples outside western civilization, less civilized, lacking in historical records, low level of technical achievement, pertaining to societies in which social relations are based primarily on kinship, distinguished from non-primitive, aboriginal, non-industrialized, savage, contrasted to civilized, law contrasted to European system, lacking in literature, relatively homogeneous, non-urban and tribal, general lack of abstract time reckoning, below the general level of the state of civilization, with all pervasive religion, money-less, peasant, traditional, lack

*primitive folk*: non-literate folk (272)

*primitive personage*: in reference to seeking supernatural aid (339 ff.)

## (TITIEV 1963)

- primitive*: “non-literate, . . . relatively small in numbers, relatively isolated, comparatively homogeneous in culture, and racially and linguistically alike” (386)
- primitive society*: preliterates studied by archaeologists (5), desire for children in (442), plural marriage in (454), mother-in-law taboo in (458), cross-cousin marriage in (461), institutionalized friendship in (472), classificatory terms in (478), model for national character study (498), sacred songs in (548), connection between dancing and verbal arts in (557)
- primitive contemporaries*: groups studied by early anthropologists (3)
- primitives*: cultures used for archaeological analogy (196)
- primitive people*: interest of anthropologists in (387), differentiation among religions in (463), linguists' concern with (539), art of (553–554), games of (569)
- primitive tribe* { interests of anthropologists in (387)
- primitive life* {
- primitive group*: relation of subsistence to religion in (278), ethnologists' contact with (389), kinship in (458)
- primitive folk*: difficulty in making contact with (388), accumulated knowledge of (516)
- primitive culture*: personal reports of (391)
- primitive law*: as Hoebel uses it (464 ff.)
- primitive religion*: sociocultural aspects of (501 ff.)
- primitive man*: beliefs in the supernatural of (511), knowledge of the seasons among (525)
- primitive customs*: study of in relation to our own mores (576)

## (WHITE 1954)

- \**primitive man*: native societies, uncivilized, non-urban, savages (10–11) (used throughout), anthropological study of small, compact groups of (13)
- primitive man*: size of communities compared to those of man-apes (47), synonym for early man (48)
- primitive tribesman*: senses of (83)
- primitive mind: theories of (83 ff.)
- primitive community*: characteristics of (94–95), stages in development of (118 ff.)
- primitive world*: life in early times before there were many inventions (101–2)
- primitive people*: cultural environment of (108)
- primitive economy*: those without money and price system (119 ff.)
- primitive life*: communistic traits of (125 ff.)
- primitive population* { traits of (129 ff.)
- primitive family* {
- primitive marriage* { kinds of (134 ff.)
- primitive social structure* {

of economic specialization, one endowed with over-powering sense of reality, where everyday facts have religious and ritual covering, those who endow all nature with spirit life, civilization with respect for the individual, amazing degree of political and social organization, strong concept of personal security, isolated, society in which cooperation for common goals frequent, language and religion uniform, all human phenomena of all times and places.

Several things emerge from this tabulation. First, although a few speak of salutary characteristics like “strong concept of personal security,” or “frequent cooperation for common goals,” or of neutral ones like “social relations . . . based primarily on kinship,” or “relatively homogeneous,” a majority give the term the meanings of simpleness, antiquity, undesirability, and undisguised inferiority.

Second, many of the meanings attached are not

only multifarious and uncoordinated, but generally slapdash and conflicting.

Third, some seem to use the term through force of habit as when Thompson (1961) refers to all men and all human phenomena of all times and places which she deals with in her book as "primitive."

Fourth, even though some do not use the term "primitive" for categorizing their own data, they make no attempt to evaluate its use in other works which they quote or to which they refer.

Lastly, in particular the use of the term "primitive" does not seem to have any significant intellectual or analytic advantage. It cannot be shown from these surveys how the use of the term has given us any noticeable advantages in theory-building. On the contrary, I think it can be shown that its continued use may be an effective bottleneck against further advances in our discipline.

In the science of man, as in all sciences, terms or concepts are essentially means of classifying data or points of reference around which the data may be organized so as to achieve an empirically descriptive picture to enable one to grope for some theoretically based insights into the data. The major criterion for the introduction or the continuance of a concept should be, therefore, that it has empirical validity (e.g., when we employ terms to designate categories used by the natives themselves) or theoretical utility (e.g., when we describe one system of economy as characterized by barter and another by money, using this contrast to reveal the different extents to which kinship or other ties affect economic transactions). My contention is that the concept "primitive," as it has been and is used in a majority of anthropological works, has neither empirical validity nor theoretical utility, and that this is why our use of this term has been so miscellaneous and intellectually unproductive.

The concept of "primitive" is scientifically applicable to prehistorical phenomena, and was functional during the early stages of development of our science, but it is now like a worn out old shoe, to which we are still attached seemingly for sentimental reasons or from sheer inertia, but which will do no more for us than clutter up our anthropological closet and catch dust. There is no longer an empirically or theoretically defensible ground for dichotomizing all cultures or societies into the two broad categories "primitive" and "civilized."

First let us look at the empirical picture. There are small societies that are very highly urbanized in Europe. There are predominantly rural societies of enormous scale such as China. The kinship system of the Americans of the highly complex industrialized society of the United States is extremely simple but the kinship system of the Australian aborigines, whose main tools for production are the digging sticks and the boomerang, must be rated in general among the most complex in the world. There are societies with highly organized political structures such as that of Uganda and Dahomey which share the lack of written language with others with no trace of centralized government whatsoever such as those of various branches of Eskimos or Kaska Indians. Barter as the main form of trading is found among the Toda with their polyandry and among diverse other peoples including Chuckchee of Siberia, Congo pygmies,

Bantus, Melanesians, and many Indians of the New World. As for the importance of the sense of personal security and cohesiveness of communal life, compare such peoples as Dobuans and Alorese, on the one hand, and Zuni and Fox Indians, on the other. Religion and religious rituals are far more homogeneous and important among Catholics in the world as a whole than among the widely divided and various Protestants as a whole. This contrast holds true whether we compare them intrasocietally or intersocietally. Who among us have observed that Catholics are therefore more primitive than Protestants? Even the criteria of abstract thinking versus concrete thinking are not foolproof for differentiating the primitive from the civilized. Is the Arunta or Murngin type of social organization less abstract than the Arab or Chinese traders' profit calculations?

The most troublesome meaning of the term "primitive" is that connected with various shades of inferiority. Sometimes we can unquestionably determine that some single items or usages of a culture are more inferior or less inferior than others in the same culture or in other cultures. In this sense, we can describe hand-pushed carts as more primitive than horsecarts and horsecarts as more primitive than automobiles. We are not likely to run into serious disputes here. In the same sense we can speak of a more primitive way of crime detection and a less primitive one, a more primitive way of transmitting messages and a less primitive one, a more primitive teaching aid and a less primitive one. But the primitiveness of other single items is by no means so easy to settle. For example, is the custom of sending children to boarding school or to summer camp more or less primitive than that of continuous parental supervision of the children at home? Is a totalitarian system of government more or less primitive than tribal rule or benevolent despotism? Is a religious system based upon monotheism with a history of heresy persecution, witch hunting, and holy crusades more or less primitive than another with a *laissez faire* attitude toward different creeds and ritual practices? Is the custom of taking care of aged parents at home more primitive than that of leaving them to themselves or in institutions?

Though satisfactory answers to such questions are difficult to come by, our difficulties become much greater when we attempt to determine the inferiority or superiority of whole societies or cultures. Why, despite the scientific indefensibility of applying the concept "primitive" to contemporary cultures and societies, have so many anthropologists tolerated such lack of precision? In a previous paragraph I alluded to sentiment or inertia. But I think there are more complicated factors at work.

First, there is probably a reluctance on the part of some scientists to subject their own cultures to the same kind of scrutiny applied to those not their own. As long as they are analyzing the strange and the exotic they can be emotionally uninvolved. But the same type of analysis applied to their own ways of life may be too painful, especially if such analyses threaten to turn up customs and practices and thought patterns which may not only be unsalutary but even similar to those they have, for whatever reason, labelled "primitive" with its many inferiority connotations.

In this connection it is interesting to note that,



though some of Margaret Mead's works are referred to in almost every general book on anthropology, her study of the American family, child-rearing practices, psychological orientation, etc., namely *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942), is not usually mentioned. As a matter of fact it is only barely referred to in 3 of the books we have examined (Hoebel 1958, Honigmann 1959, and Keesing 1958) and quoted in a short selection in only one of them (Goldschmidt 1960). Mead's credentials as an expert on American culture are at least as good as hers on the Manus, Arapesh, and Mundugumor, or Lowie's (1935) on the Crow Indians. Yet while Mead's work on the South Seas is among anthropological classics, her work on the United States enjoys no such esteem among her colleagues.

Another phenomenon is also worth noting in this connection. We have many studies on acculturation. But whether in general works on the subject dealing with theories of acculturation built on facts from many cultures (Herskovits 1938), or in more limited works dealing with the acculturative processes of single societies (Linton 1940 or Hallowell 1955), we usually obtain a one-sided picture. We read about which tribes or which sections of a tribe are more acculturated; we also know something about the effects of acculturation on tribal culture and personality; but we find only sporadic or passing mention rather than serious and systematic analysis of the cultures to which the tribes under scrutiny are acculturating. Yet acculturation is certainly a two-sided affair. If we are analysing the impact of acculturation among the Ojibwa or the Menomoni, we should have systematic treatments of the White American cultures as much as of the Indian cultures. For example, many are the statements that the social acceptance of the Negro depends upon the extent of his acculturation. Sociologists of the importance of Hauser continue to make statements such as: "But as the Negro becomes acculturated he will become acceptable and will be accepted" (Moore 1964). But how many social scientists have actually attempted to harmonize the contradictory nature of many reasons given for discrimination against minority groups by considering the possibility that there is an inherent need for prejudice on the part of many self-reliant Whites irrespective of the professed reasons (Hsu 1961a:216-29)? Fred Gearing's work on the Fox in Iowa (in a yet unpublished manuscript) is the only study on Indian-White contact I know of so far which has attempted seriously and systematically to analyse the White image of the Indian as much as the Indian image of the White (Gearing n.d.). For both affect Indian acculturation.

All this, it seems, is not accidental. There is perhaps an aversion on the part of anthropologists to study their own cultures. How deepseated is this aversion may perhaps be gauged in the attitude expressed by A. L. Kroeber, dean of American anthropologists, in connection with irrational taboos and beliefs:

Quite likely our civilization has its share of counterparts, which we cannot segregate off from the more practical remainder of the business of living because we are engulfed in this civilization of ours as we are in the air we breathe. Some centuries may be needed before the full recognition of our own non-rational couvades and totems and taboos become possible (1948:307).

There are many obvious flaws in this statement, but only two need be dealt with here. On the one hand, if "some centuries" are needed to understand the Western cultures, the same or similar length of time will evidently be required to understand many non-Western cultures. In that case a majority of non-literate cultures must be left unstudied, for few of them have a historical depth of even 100 years.

On the other hand, fortunately we do not have to wait for "some centuries" to study any culture. For the essential contribution of anthropology to the science of man lies in its cross-cultural perspective. The Melanesians, the Africans, the Hindus, and all other non-Western peoples are understandably too "engulfed" each in their own particular civilization as they are in the air they breathe, but anthropologists (a majority of whom have been Westerners so far) who are not so "engulfed" have been able to achieve relatively more objective views of these non-Western ways of life. Does it not logically follow that non-Western anthropologists could also conceivably scrutinize the non-rational couvades, totems and taboos in the Western ways of life in a more objective light than native Westerners without waiting for some centuries to come? In fact, the study of Western cultures by non-Western anthropologists is a methodological necessity. It is inconceivable that a scientist of Kroeber's stature should fail to see this point. The only explanation for his statement would seem to be that he was unwilling to subject his own culture to the same kind of scrutiny that he has applied to others—at least not for "some centuries" yet.

The second reason why anthropologists have been unwilling to forego the unsatisfactory concept of "primitive" to designate a conglomeration of diverse cultures and societies is a methodological one. Here the difficulties are real and the main problem is coverage.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties are not obscure. In dealing with materials from the so-called "primitive" societies possessing no written histories, the researcher can usually obtain relatively complete coverage of the data. Thus if he is comparing the political systems of sub-Saharan Africa, he can usually be fairly sure of having examined all the significant ethnographic reports concerning the societies in his study. None of these societies has great historical depth, and the writings on each are highlighted by the major works of one or a few authorities. Even if he wants to compare these African systems with the political systems in Polynesia, he can still proceed on the same basis and with the same assurance of reasonable coverage.

However, suppose the researcher wants to compare the African and the Polynesian systems with those of China and Japan or of India. The problem of coverage at once seems overwhelming, for these literate and historical societies have been studied and written about by specialists in diverse fields for many generations, and the anthropologist is immediately

<sup>1</sup> In assessing these difficulties I have greatly benefited from a discussion with my colleague, Dr. Raoul Naroll.



confronted with mountains of material, the study of a small part of which tends to become a lifetime work for many a scholar. Under such circumstances what part of this mountain of material is the comparative scholar going to use without being attacked left and right by the many sinologists or indologists, not to say historians and art specialists, who have spent their lives on one limited phase of life or culture of one of these large societies?

This is an aspect of the methodological problem for which we have at present indeed no completely satisfactory answer. But our ability and determination to solve this problem will have a most significant bearing on the future of theoretical anthropology. And the prevailing state of affairs in which the students who study the historical and literate societies and the students who study the non-literate societies generally go their separate ways is certainly not bringing us nearer its solution.

In this situation we can proceed by letting the methodological difficulties dictate our theoretical direction, or we can devote some time and energy toward overcoming the methodological difficulties in order to attain our theoretical goal. I have no doubt that if we decide upon the former course we shall be allowing the tail to wag the dog. For there is no scientific justification whatsoever for confining ourselves to one kind of society and not all societies. Physical anthropology and linguistics have never been confined to data among "primitive" peoples. Physical anthropologists deal with the physical characteristics of all branches of mankind just as linguists deal with all types of languages. These are, of course, as they should be. No zoologist deserving of his title can confine his deliberations to horses and cows or lizards and fish. Any science of society and culture must similarly be based on the data found in all mankind wherever they occur.

Given this major premise, we shall note that the difficulties in the path of those students who wish to compare all peoples with no regard to whether they do or do not possess historical depth are far from insurmountable. For one thing, some groundwork has been laid by anthologies such as *Societies Around the World* (Sanders et al. 1953) and cooperative field projects an specific aspects of culture such as *Six Cultures: Studies of Child Rearing* (Whiting 1963). The works of Chapple and Coon (1942) and Homans (1950) are valiant attempts to construct theory on the basis of data from all types of societies without fitting them into the primitive-civilized categories or other forms of dichotomy. The technical problems of such comparative studies are real and probably will not be solved to anyone's satisfaction for a long time. But this is simply one area where more anthropologists will have to make more intensive efforts, unless we insist that adequate theories of man's ways can be derived from a particular variety of mankind.

However, over and above the empirical and theoretical reasons just outlined, there is a practical necessity today for pause before using the term "primitive" in describing cultures and societies. There was a time when anthropologists from a Western society could write about the "primitive" Bantu or the Maori without the fear of being challenged. The peoples who were objects of study could not read the ethnographic

reports nor were they in any position to challenge them even had they read them. Today many of these once voiceless peoples have become members of independent nations taking their places as equals with their most powerful brothers in the international arena. To a majority or to all of them we have sent ambassadors, and we receive their ambassadors. Among every one of these newly independent peoples the zeal for national pride runs high. None of them will regard with delight the designation of "primitive" applied to any aspect of their culture, far less to their way of life as a whole, no matter how the concept is defined. The overall psychological and political climate of the world today is simply unfavorable to the continued application of this term to any people who have a voice. We need only recall the incident involving the American girl serving as a Peace Corps member in Nigeria who wrote a postcard to one of her friends at home deploring the conditions in which she found herself. The Nigerian students' reaction was prompt and explosive. One can almost say with certainty that similar incidents will occur in many parts of the world with similar or other kinds of provocation. On the other hand, one can also say with certainty that such incidents were not likely to have occurred before World War II.

For this reason even the more descriptive term "non-literate" proposed by Herskovits (1948) is not going to be useful for long. For as national states emerge from among previously non-literate peoples, the leaders of each new state will be anxious to adopt or create a written language suited to their particular circumstances. Ghana has adopted English as its *lingua franca*. Tanganyika has adopted Swahili as its *lingua franca*. Indonesia has adopted Bahasa based on Malay spoken in Sumatra and some Pidgin Dutch. Other new nations are either adopting existing languages or creating their own with the aid of some Indo-European alphabet. Judging from historical examples from the Japanese and the Manchus to the Russians and the Mongols, this transformation of a people without a written language into one with a written language is well within the grasp of any organized society so determined. It will not be long before a majority or all of the presently non-literate peoples become literate. Then the term "non-literate" as distinguished from "literate" will be meaningless unless it is used with qualifications such as "non-literate until 1961."

Nor will interesting efforts such as that of Stanley Diamond (1963), already discussed, appreciably help to restore the concept of primitive to the central place it once unquestionably occupied in anthropology. Diamond's work in this connection embodies and may even be regarded as a synthesis of three lines of antecedental thought in our discipline. One is that represented by Goldenweisser (1922:117-18), in attempting clearly to formulate criteria of primitiveness as contrasted to civilizedness, and by others of the folk-urban dichotomy sort. A second line is represented by Herskovits (1958:61-78) in his formulation of cultural relativism, the central theme of which is the need for avoiding judgment of one culture by the standards of another. A third line is both older and younger than either of the two already noted. This is the idea of the noble savage prevalent in the West

years and even centuries ago, tarnished by later discovery of savage inferiority and the White Man's burden, but, in more recent years, gaining importance once again because of the stress on racial equality and the dignity of the individual.

Diamond's effort has not restored the concept of "primitive" to its former greatness but has, instead, I believe, clearly shown how incompatible the "superior" characteristics of his "primitive" are with modern developments such as industrialization and the building of political states motivated by nationalism. Industrialization and nationalism are today the twin goals that most or all peoples want to achieve, either by their own bootstraps or through some form of aid from capitalistic or communistic sources. But these goals are not possible unless peasants are willing to leave the security of their small plots of land to work in mass-producing factories, unless believers are willing to ignore the dictates of gods and oracles to accept the verdicts of market analyses and scientific medicine, and unless most natives are willing to forget or suppress their kinship obligations and replace them by impersonal and cold-blooded considerations such as efficiency and capacity to produce. Finally, when Diamond pleads for letting the "primitive grow in us," he has left behind most of the characteristics of the "primitive" as he has defined them and concentrated on the *community* aspect of it as an antidote to the increasing alienation of men from each other which, according to him, accompanies civilizational development. Diamond has pointed out a wish, a desirable wish, but how he proposes to reach that end, or whether it is feasible, is not at all clear from his writings on the subject (Diamond 1960; 1963; and 1964). My view is that as long as Western men and the rest of the world pursue the objectives they do now, Diamond's wish will remain a beautiful wish. Glorification of the concept "primitive," or some phases of it, is likely to be unattractive to mankind, most of all to those whose behavior patterns exemplify the "primitive." For whether we assume the "inferiority" of the "primitive" vis-a-vis the "civilized" or protest the "superiority" of the "primitive" vis-a-vis the "civilized," the anthropologists will be dichotomizing the world's societies and cultures with little or no allowance for other historical cultures and societies but with their own Western variety of societies and cultures as the central point of reference (unless they wish to make the unconvincing and unlikely claim that their central point of reference is the "primitive"). This suggests the very kind of ethnocentrism which anthropology as a profession has been trying to eliminate or at least reduce.

Above all, however, we must not allow the tremendously wide spectrum of differences among the societies and cultures to be concealed by the concept "primitive." These differences are crucial not only from the point of view of scientific curiosity but also in terms of their dissimilar reactions and adjustments to the impact of the modern industrial and nationalistic West. Anthropologists, after painting themselves to a corner by their unwillingness to discard the concept "primitive," have no alternative to using it in so many differing, imprecise, conflicting, or meaningless ways because it is a grab bag. Even Diamond, after defining this concept by a list of 10 specific

characteristics, if forced to resort to such vague and scientifically useless statements as "primitives possess ... the immediate and ramifying sense of the person ..." and that "primitive society at its most positive, exemplifies an essential humanity" (Diamond 1963:111), when he tries to show what it is that his "primitive" can offer to his "civilized."

The grab bag nature of the concept "primitive" makes this inevitable. Each user must either impute some particular meanings to it without regard to what other students do, or resort to statements about it too general to be scientifically usable. Continued elaboration of and preoccupation with this concept can only obscure rather than clarify what we hope to analyse, and seriously hamper our endeavors in building a science of man.

In this paper my purpose is to show the empirical, theoretical and practical obsolescence of the concept "primitive" except in some most restricted sense referring to specific items of culture or to certain pre-historical forms of development. But I do not deny the need for classification of man and his works in other ways. In fact, classification is essential to all sciences, but the usefulness of the classificatory categories is dependent upon the extent to which they do or do not correspond to the facts or yield significant insights into the facts so classified.

We must be flexible enough with our classificatory categories at any one time so that they will serve primarily as convenient tools to shift and tie facts together but not as invariable points of reference so that our thinking is molded and predetermined by them. As our knowledge increases we must refine our classificatory categories to suit the new developments. I firmly believe that we have come to a time when we must go beyond the concepts of "primitive" and "civilized," or other forms of simple dichotomy, and move to more refined modes of classification.

There are already many such new modes of classification at our disposal. For example, different kinds of descent, inheritance, and succession provide us with one basis for classification. Different varieties of economic practices and organizations provide us with another basis for classification. We can classify societies according to the extent to which they exhibit the characteristics of an organized state as distinguished from those which are stateless. We can classify them into those which, to borrow David Riesman's terms (1950), are predominantly tradition-directed, inner-directed, or other-directed, or, to use my terms (Hsu 1963), according to patterns of interpersonal interaction, into those which are characterized by mutual dependence, unilateral dependence, or self-reliance. Societies could be classified on the basis of a few precise traits, such as language, territorial contiguity, and political organization, into Hopi, Flathead, Aztec, and Tarascan types (Naroll 1964). Or they could be classified according to what I designate as the dominant attributes in the kinship content, which serve as keys to their wider psycho-cultural orientations (Hsu 1959; 1961*b*; 1964).

Each of these modes of classification may, of course, only elicit particular kinds of results which may not be entirely relevant to those elicited by

others. As the science of man moves forward, the scientifically less productive classificatory schemes will be replaced by scientifically more meaningful ones. We will also have to find means of integrating some of them or relating them to each other. But to stagnate at the level of a "primitive" versus "civilized" dichotomy and its substitutes is to block our paths to progress.

## Abstract

This article shows the empirical, theoretical, and practical, and practical obsolescence of the concept "primitive" except in some most restricted sense, such as application to peoples and cultures in prehistorical

times. A survey of 30 basic books in anthropology written during the last 10 years reveals that the concept still enjoys a high degree of currency in an ambiguous, inconsistent, or scientifically meaningless way.

The reasons for this insistent use of the concept by anthropologists despite its obsolescence are discussed. One of these reasons is the seeming reluctance of anthropologists to examine their own societies and cultures. Another is the difficulty in comparing large societies with extensive historical records and relatively small ones with shallow pasts. But whatever the reason, the continued use of and preoccupation with the concept "primitive" (through such efforts as redefinition or substitution), will hamper the further progress of our science.

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