

IV

Culture, culture, culture

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Edward Sapir introduces the argument of his classic paper “Culture, genuine and spurious” by suggesting that certain terms have a peculiar property. “Ostensibly, they mark off specific concepts, concepts that lay claim to a rigorously objective validity. In practice, they label vague terrains of thought that shift or narrow or widen with the point of view of who makes use of them, embracing within their gamut of significances conceptions that not only do not harmonize but are in part contradictory. An analysis of such terms soon discloses the fact that underneath the clash of varying contents there is a unifying feeling-tone. What makes it possible for so discordant an array of conceptions to answer to the same call is, indeed, precisely this relatively constant halo that surrounds them.... These labels – perhaps we had better call them empty thrones – are enemies of mankind, yet we have no recourse but to make peace with them. We do this by seating our favorite pretenders. The rival pretenders war to the death; the thrones to which they aspire remain serenely splendid in gold.”¹

“Culture” is one of these terms. Raymond Williams characterizes it as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”, partly because of its intricate historical development in several languages but “mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought”.² Yet, as the topic that brings us together testifies, it retains a siren-like ability to attract scholars with widely varying interests. Whatever culture is, we all know that it is a good thing. But how, then, are we to deal with the mob of competing meanings? In 1952 A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn attempted to catalogue and classify all

1 Edward Sapir, “Culture, genuine and spurious,” in: David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality* (Berkeley 1951), 308.

2 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York 1983, revised edition), 87.

the definitions proposed by anthropologists, sociologists, and social psychologists. They turned up 169 definitions exemplifying a dozen distinct conceptual approaches.³ By now the paradigmatic revolutions mounted by postmodernists on the one hand and evolutionary psychologists on the other have probably doubled these numbers. No wonder that Raymond Williams most recent thought on “culture” is: “I don’t know how many times I’ve wished that I’d never heard the damned word”.⁴

It is, I think, time to disperse the mob by dismantling the throne. It is time to declare that however contradictory it may feel to those of us raised under its halo, culture is not a good thing. It is just a splendid cover for a conceptual mess. It is probably too late to reform the intellectual habits of my generation, but it is not too late to see that the next generation does not develop the same debilitating addiction. My contribution here will be to examine critically the culture concepts advocated by five American anthropologists. The culture concept originated in Germany in the writings of J. G. Herder, Wilhelm Humboldt, and Gustav Klemm,⁵ but I will confine my critique to the work my fellow countrymen because they bear primary responsibility for the mess I want cleared away.

I will begin in 1917 with a paper by A.L. Kroeber that, despite sharp criticism then and later, remains a locus classicus for American anthropologists. The paper’s title, “The superorganic”, must be taken seriously. For Kroeber the defining characteristic of culture (which he also called “civilization”) was that it was extrasomatic and thereby “superorganic”.

What he meant is neatly expressed by what he thought would happen if unhatched ants and unsocialized human infants were isolated from adults of their species. Given “a little attention, as regards warmth, moisture, protection, and food,” the ants would hatch and the hatchlings would reproduce “the whole of ant society”. “Every one of the abilities, powers, accomplishments, and activities of the species, each ‘thought’ that it [had] ever had, [would] be reproduced, and reproduced without diminution ... “. But even if they came from “the best stock” and were provided with “the necessary incubation and nourishment,” the human infants would not reproduce “the civilization from which they were torn.” “Not one tenth of it. No, not one fraction.” All we would have is a “troop of mutes, without arts, knowledge, fire, without order or religion. Civilization would be wiped out

3 A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, no. 1 (Cambridge 1952).

4 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London 1979), 87.

5 For a recent and thorough account see Matti Bunzl, “Franz Boas and the Humboldtian tradition: From *volksgeist* and *Nationalcharakter* to an anthropological concept of culture”, in: George W. Stocking jr., ed., *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic* (Madison 1996), 1778.

within these confines; not disintegrated, not cut to the quick, but obliterated in one sweep".⁶

Kroeber's superorganic bears a close resemblance to what Karl Popper was later to call "world 3" which he initially defined as the world of objective thought or "statements - in- themselves" and later expanded to include "all the products of the human mind, such as tools, institutions, and art". Popper argued that while world 3 is a product of human activity, it acts as an independent aspect of our environment. "It is we who create world 3 objects". But once created, these objects "have their own inherent or autonomous laws which create unintended and unforeseeable consequences".⁷ Similarly, Kroeber argued that while "all civilization in a sense exists only in the mind", civilization is "not mental action itself; it is carried by men, without being in them". What is passed along are "ideas in the Platonic sense", It is true that "the social [equivalent here to civilization, culture, and the superorganic] exists only after mentality of a certain kind is in action", but it is a great mistake to identify the two. The dawn of culture was "not a step in a path, but a leap to another plane". Kroeber likened it "to the first occurrence of life in a hitherto lifeless universe". It involved "an addition of something new in kind, an initiation of that which was to run its own course".⁸

The second pretender I will take notice of was nominated by Ruth Benedict in 1940 in *Race: Science and Politics*. In *Patterns of Culture* she seemed to equate culture with Wilhelm Dilthey's *Lebensstimmungen* and Oswald Spengler's "destiny ideas"⁹, but in *Race* she opted for a more prosaic candidate. Culture, she argued, "is the sociological term for learned behavior, behavior which in man is not given at birth, which is not, determined by his germ cells as is the behavior of wasps or the social ants, but must be learned anew from grown people by each new generation". Aggressiveness, she suggested, was an innate, biologically transmitted trait in leopards, but a learned, culturally transmitted trait in human beings. The leopard will "always be found stalking the jungle for his prey. But in man the great aggressors of yesterday become the mild peace-lovers of today. In the ninth century Scandinavians were the feared aggressive Vikings of the sea; in the present generation they are the peaceful nonaggressive exponents of co-operatives and the 'middle way' ".¹⁰

6 A. L. Kroeber, "The superorganic", in: *American Anthropologist* vol. 19 (1917), 163-213. Republished with stylistic revisions by the Sociological Press of Hanover, New Hampshire in 1929. Reprinted in A. L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture* (Chicago 1951), 22-51.

7 See Karl Popper, *Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (La Salle 1974) 180-187.

8 A. L. Kroeber, "The superorganic," 49.

9 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York 1934) 52-43.

10 Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York 1940) 13.

Benedict's contrast of what is and is not given at birth parallels Kroeber's organic and superorganic, but there is a profound difference between the two definitions. Kroeber's culture is a stream of ideas and values that is supra-individual. It is a body of knowledge that exists regardless of who knows it and what use, if any, is made of it. Benedict's culture is only an attribute of the behavior – or an aspect of the minds – of particular people. In descending from Kroeber's lofty superorganic she set foot on a slippery slope. The theories we call physics and chemistry were put in danger of being replaced by what little most people know about them. The teachings of the church were exposed to the possibility of being replaced by the beliefs of the congregation. One can imagine Mathew Arnold's accepting, albeit reluctantly, Kroeber's nominee for the culture throne. At least it included a place, perhaps even a prominent place, for the standards he admired. But one cannot imagine Arnold's accepting Benedict's nominee. A definition that admitted everything people learned, however objectionable, and rejected everything they failed to learn, however admirable, could, for Arnold, only lead to anarchy.

The third pretender I will acknowledge before turning to some more general observations is the candidate Clifford Geertz nominated in 1966 in an essay entitled "The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man". Like Kroeber, Geertz insisted that human beings need culture, but in his formulation the need is far more desperate than in Kroeber's. For Geertz, cultureless human beings would "be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect: mental basket cases". This is because "our central nervous system -and most particularly its crowning curse and glory, the neocortex-grew up in interaction with culture" and "is incapable of directing our behavior or organizing our experiences without the guidance provided by significant symbols". We are, in Geertz's view, "incomplete or unfinished animals who complete ourselves through culture". Thus "culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns –custom, usages, traditions, habit clusters– as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms (what computer engineers call 'programs'), for the governing of behavior".¹¹

One wonders if anyone would think of seating these ideas together with those of Kroeber and Benedict if they didn't all announce themselves as candidates for the same throne. All the three authors seem to agree on is that human beings are very different than ants.^{12, 13} Kroeber and Geertz go a step further together in insisting

11 Clifford Geertz, "The impact of the concept of culture on the concept of man," in: *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York 1973) 44-49.

12 Geertz doesn't actually mention ants. By the 1960's the trope Kroeber invented had lost its cachet. But they are present implicitly in his insistence that we need culture because we have no "usefull instincts".

13 No wonder anthropologists were so upset when E.O. Wilson announced that in many respects human beings *were* just like ants. It was the only thing that anthropologists could agree that humans *were not* like.

that we need culture to survive, but they give radically different reasons in explaining why culture is necessary. For Kroeber, culture is necessary because it is an archive of values and ideas, an accumulation of solutions to the problems posed by living together and making a living. For Geertz, culture is necessary because it is part of our mental constitution, an extra-somatic substitute for the instincts we lack. It is helpful to exaggerate and say that for one author culture is in the library while for the other it consists of metaphysical neurotransmitters inserted between the synapses to make the mind work.

The problem with the throne of culture is not just that there is a mob of pretenders. It is also that we don't know what we would get if we seated any one of them. Kroeber claims that we would get language, religion, and social order as well as technology and the arts. The claim is based on his assumption that in the absence of fully socialized adult models human children would grow up as a "troop of mutes, without arts, knowledge, fire, without order and religion". I think we know enough to agree that the children would not grow up speaking Dutch, if that were their parents' language, and that they would not grow up professing the Reform Church, if that were their parents' religion. But do we know enough to conclude that they would not invent a language that was new but recognizably human, and that they would not invent beliefs that, though not Christian, were recognizably religious?

Geertz's claims are even grander than Kroeber's. He promises us that if we seat his candidate, we will get nothing less than our humanity. The promise is based on the assumption that deprived of the guidance provided by a fully developed culture children would grow up "unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect". Geertz makes much of the fact that all human beings have culture and that all cultures are somewhat different, but this does not tell us anything about what human beings would be like in absence of culture. It only tells us that they are inventive. What is the evidence for concluding that our neocortex "is incapable of directing our behavior and organizing our experience"? What justifies characterizing us as "incomplete, or unfinished animals"? Why denigrate human nature in favor of what it creates? Why make so much of the program and so little of the programmer?

Benedict's claims are less pretentious than those of Kroeber and Geertz but no more informative. We still have no idea what we would get if we adopted the definition offered. Culture, she tells us, is "learned behavior". It is behavior that "is not given at birth". The example she offers is aggressiveness, but is this really learned behavior? Does teaching make all the difference? In the early 1960's I participated in a project that undertook to study children's aggression in seven very different societies. What we found is that what parents taught had almost no effect on what children did. They learned to say what they were supposed to do, but they didn't do it. American children were taught to fight back and said they would fight back. Chinese children were taught not to fight back and insisted that

they would never do so no matter how provoked. But observation of their behaviors failed to find any difference between what American and Chinese children actually did. In both societies we found children who always retaliated when attacked and others who never retaliated, but the average retaliatory rate for the two societies was the same, 31.2 percent of the time for the Americans and 34.4 percent of the time for the Chinese.

In 1921 Sapir introduced his seminal *Language* by contrasting speech and walking. “Walking”, he argued, “is an organic, an instinctive function; speech is a non-instinctive, acquired, ‘cultural,’ function”. “Eliminate society and there is every reason to believe that [a human being] will walk, if indeed, he survives at all. But it is just as certain that he will never learn to talk, that is, to communicate ideas according to the traditional system of a particular society”.¹⁴ Noam Chomsky now takes exactly the opposite view. He argues that human speech is a natural, nearly inevitable expression of human nature. Children can only recreate their parents, language out of the fragmentary evidence they are given because they are endowed with “highly restrictive principles that guide the construction of grammar”.¹⁵ In Chomsky’s view, “a grammar is no more learned than, say, the ability to walk is learned”.¹⁶

This is not the place to debate the question of whether or not talking is like walking. My point is only that what is and is not “organic” or “instinctive” or “learned” is not obvious. The result is that most definitions of culture are as empty as the thrones to which they aspire. They are not really definitions at all because they fail to set clear bounds or limits. This is because their real purpose is to stake claims in as yet unexplored territory. Although the concept of culture is German in origin, it did not acquire its modern anthropological meaning until after crossing the Atlantic. The idea that despite being a human creation, culture is autonomous, self-governing, and absolutely indispensable is an American invention. It is a product of the entrepreneurial activity that established American anthropology as an independent discipline. To claim space in the academy Franz Boas and his students (A.L. Kroeber and Ruth Benedict the most prominent among them) had to define a subject matter distinct from that of biology and psychology on the one hand and sociology and history on the other. Thus what was primarily a spiritual concept in Germany was transformed into an irreducible realm of being in the United States. It is not a coincidence that Boas’s “culture” and Durkheim’s “society” bear a family resemblance. They both came into existence to justify buildings and budgets.

14 Edward Sapir, *Language* (New York 1921) 1-2.

15 Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York 1975) 9-11.

16 Noam Chomsky, “The general properties of language”, in: Clark H. Millikan and Frederic L. Darley, ed., *Brain Mechanisms Underlying Speech and Language* (New York 1967) 81.

Anthropology is best thought of as an attempt to address two grand questions. One is the question of how and why the behavior of human beings is different from the behavior of other species, especially other primates and particularly the great apes. The other is the question of how and why the behavior of people in western society differs from the behavior of people in other societies, especially those that lack large-scale industrial production and particularly those that are small. Part of the problem with the concept of culture stems from its being used to answer both sets of questions. Culture is not only what makes us different from the ants and the apes. Culture is also what makes use different from the Aztecs and the Ache. The definitions we have discussed so far were all fashioned to address differences between species. To complete our survey we need to compare these definitions with those formulated to deal with differences between societies.

Again the best place to start is with A.L. Kroeber. In a 1951 paper entitled “Is Western civilization disintegrating or reconstituting?” Kroeber suggested that “it is possible to conceive civilizations [i.e. cultures] as being each constituted to a considerable extent of an assemblage of styles and as being specifically characterized as to their peculiarities by these styles”. “A style”, he argued, “is a self-consistent way of behaving or of doing things. It is selected out of from among alternatively possible ways of doing”. And “it is selective with reference to values; that is, the things that style does and the way it does them are felt by the doers as intrinsically valuable they are good, right, beautiful, pleasing, or desirable in themselves”.¹⁷

Thus when the comparison is between species, culture is superorganic. When the comparison is between societies, it is style. There is nothing logically wrong with the idea of superorganic styles, but it is not superorganic styles that Kroeber is talking about. The content of culture has shifted from the world of the engineer and the economist to the world of the literary critic and the art historian. In his writing on culture as the distinctive attribute of our species Kroeber frequently refers to such things as “gunpowder, textile arts, machinery, laws, and telephones”.¹⁸ In his work on cultures as the distinctive attributes of societies his subjects are women’s dress fashions, sculpture, architecture, and the novel. Anthropologists complain endlessly about the use of “culture” to refer to “a rather conventional ideal of individual refinement”.¹⁹ One reason they have not succeeded in displacing this usage is their own tendency to equate culture with immaterial qualities.

Benedict is no more consistent in her application of the culture concept than Kroeber. In *Race*, where the context is the inherent qualities of our species, culture encompasses all learned behavior. In *Patterns of Culture*, where the context is the

17 “Is Western culture disintegrating or reconstituting?”, in: A.L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture* (Chicago 1951) 402.

18 A. L. Kroeber, “The superorganic”, 38.

19 Edward Sapir, “Culture, genuine and spurious”, 309.

differences between societies, culture is a matter of style in exactly the sense intended by Kroeber. How the Zuni, Kwakiutl, and Dobuans make their living is mentioned only in passing. How they govern themselves is left entirely to the reader's imagination. The book is all about what people believe and how they conduct themselves in formal or ritual settings. It is not surprising to find that Benedict devotes several pages to the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey and Oswald Spengler.²⁰ The culture of *Patterns of Culture* belongs to the same class of things as *Lebensstimungen* and "destiny ideas". It is both superorganic and spiritual.

Only Edward Sapir recognized that anthropologists were using the term "culture" in two, very different, ways. On the one hand, culture was taken to be "coterminus with man himself" and included "the Bushman's method of hunting, the belief of the North American Indian in medicine, the Periclean Athenian's type of tragic drama, and the electric dynamo of modern industrialization"; while on the other, the word was used in a way that treated certain ethnological datum as intrinsically more valuable, more characteristic, more significant in a spiritual sense than the rest." In the second usage "the emphasis is less on what is done and believed by a people as on ... what significance it has for them". "Culture thus becomes nearly synonymous with the 'spirit' or 'genius' of a people".²¹

Sapir's own solution to the problem of what to mean by "culture" was to insist that "the true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meaning which each individual may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions".²² It was a radical solution because it suggested that there may be as many cultures (or sub-cultures) as there are individuals. Sapir admitted to being shocked when, as a student, he read such statements in J.O. Dorsey's "Omaha Sociology" as "Two Crows denies this". How could Two Crows, "a perfectly good and authoritative Indian, presume to rule out of court the very existence of a custom or attitude or belief vouched for by some other Indian, equally good and authoritative"?²³ Sapir responded by making a place for dissenters like Two Crows and in so doing set up a pretender to the culture throne that is committed to abolishing the realm.

The last culture candidate I will recognize is the most fashionable of the lot. I refer, of course, to Clifford Geertz's 1973 espousal of a semiotic conception of culture. "Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of

20 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 52-53.

21 Edward Sapir, "Culture, genuine and spurious", 310.

22 Edward Sapir, "Cultural anthropology and psychiatry", in: David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality* (Berkeley 1951) 515.

23 Edward Sapir, "Why cultural anthropology needs the psychiatrist", in: David G. Mandelbaum, ed., *Selected writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*, (Berkeley 1951) 569-70.

significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs...". These are not webs that any particular man has spun for himself. They are not made of the meanings that individuals like Two Crows may have abstracted out of their experience. And most emphatically, they are not to be found in minds. "The greatest theoretical muddlement in contemporary anthropology is", according to Geertz, "the widely held view that culture is [located] in the minds and hearts of men". Culture, "though ideational ... does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, is not an occult entity". It "is public because meaning is". It is, Geertz explains, "an acted document ... like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid".²⁴

In concluding his famous "Deep play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" Geertz suggests that "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts ... which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong".²⁵ The texts are, it seems safe to assume, performances like cockfights. The procedure is to watch what people do during these performances in order to figure out what they mean. So let's look at Geertz's performances and try to figure out what he means. He observes events but only particular kinds of events like cockfights, initiation rites, trances, coronations, funerals, mock sheep raids, and the like. He largely ignores women going to market, men getting home from work, children quarrelling, and the elderly complaining. Everyday, mundane, unstructured events do not interest him. All that seems to interest him are those staged events that the participants themselves regard as "events". Thus the "acted documents" he reads are a highly selected sample of the documents available in a society's archives. One might even say that they are only the documents put out for reading.

Geertz prefaces the passage in which he introduces his latest candidate for the culture throne by noting that in a chapter, only twenty-seven pages long, Clyde Kluckhohn "managed to define culture in turn as: (1) 'the total way of life of a people'; (2) 'the social legacy the individual acquires from his group'; (3) 'a way of thinking, feeling, and believing'; (4) 'an abstraction from behavior'; (5) 'a theory on the part of anthropologists about the way in which a group of people in fact behave'; (6) 'a storehouse of pooled learning'; (7) 'a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems'; (8) 'learned behavior'; (9) 'a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior'; (10) 'a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men'; (11) 'a precipitate of history, and turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix'".²⁶

24 Clifford Geertz, "Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture", in: *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York 1973) 5-11.

25 Clifford Geertz, "Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight", in: *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York 1973) 452.

26 Clifford Geertz, "Thick description", 4-5.

Geertz argues that this “conceptual morass” is the result of what he variously calls “key-to-the-universe thinking” and “Tylorian *pot-eu-feu* theorizing”. But he presents himself as a reformer, not a revolutionary. He wants to save the culture concept by “cutting it down to size”, by replacing “the most complex whole” concept with “a narrowed, specialized, and, so I imagine, a more theoretically powerful concept”.²⁷ But what is the advantage of “webs” and “acted documents” over “maps,” “sieves,” and “matrices”? Is “meaning” any narrower or more specialized than “learning” or “mechanisms for the normative regulation of behavior”? And, more fundamentally, what is the difference between this new candidate for the culture throne and its similarly incorporeal rivals? Webs of meaning are not superorganic in one obvious sense. The hard stuff humans produce –the tools and the machines– are banished from consideration. But Geertz’s culture is superorganic nonetheless. It is, he insists, not “in the minds and hearts of men.” Thus it can only consist of what Karl Popper calls “world 3 objects”. Or, to paraphrase Popper, meanings-in-themselves. How, then, does Geertzian “culture” differ from Kroeberian “style” and Benedictian “pattern”? What is the principled difference between the meaning he extracts from cockfights and the pattern she extracts from the potlatches?

I do not want to deny all of Geertz’s claims for originality. I am willing to concede that if we look closely enough, we will find differences between his version of culture and its most look-a-like rivals. But I nonetheless maintain that it belongs to the class of definitions formulated to account for societal differences and exhibits all the characteristics of its class. The problems prompted by this class of definitions are how to “explain” or “understand” or “interpret” some (typically exotic) aspect of another society, the Javanese cockfight or the Kwakuit potlatch. The recommended research strategy is to carefully observe performances exemplifying the behavior in question. What people do during these performances and how they do it (and sometimes what they say about what they are doing) enables the researcher to infer the beliefs (or values or attitudes or whatever) responsible for the behavior. Whether he uses what he learns to explain the behavior or just to interpret it is a matter of taste.

One of my teachers was Lauriston Sharp who, in the early 1930’s, lived among and studied an Australian Aborigine people, the Yir Yoront. The Yir Yoront subscribed to a set of beliefs that W. E. H. Stanner called “The Dreaming”.²⁸ The Dreaming was their ontology and divided “time into two great epochs, a distant and sacred period at the beginning of the world, when the earth was peopled by mildly marvellous ancestral beings or culture heroes who in a special sense are the forbears of the clans; and a second period, when the old was succeeded by a new

27 Clifford Geertz, “Thick description”, 4.

28 W.E.H. Stanner, “The Dreaming”, in: T.A.G. Hungerford, ed., *Australian Signpost* (Melbourne 1956) 5165.

order that includes the present". "Originally," Sharp learned, "there was no anticipation of another era supplanting the present; the future would simply be an eternal continuation of the present, which itself had remained unchanged since the epochal revolution of ancestral times".²⁹

Observation taught Sharp that the sacred world of the ancestors was "a detailed reproduction of the present aboriginal world of nature, man, and culture altered by phantasy. In short, the idea system expressed in the mythology regarding the ancestral epoch was directly derived from Yir Yoront behavior patterns-normal and abnormal, actual and ideal, conscious and unconscious". The important thing to note, however, is that "the native believed it was just the other way around, that the present world, as a natural and cultural environment, was and should be simply a detailed reproduction of world of the ancestors". Thus, in the Yir Yoront view, "a man would avoid his mother-in-law, joke with a distant mother's brother, and make spears in a certain way because his ancestors and other people's ancestors did these things. His behavior was outlined for him, and to that extent determined, by a set of ideas concerning the past and the relation of the present to the past.³⁰

My conclusion (*offered with apologies to the Yir Yoront*) is that the concept of culture is an anthropological "Dreaming." Used to explain performances like the Javanese cockfight, the Kwakiut potlatch, or the Japanese tea ceremony, cultural explanations are almost always shallow tautologies. There is no important difference between Kroeber's "style" and Benedict's "patterns" and Geertz's "web of meanings". They are all concepts cut from the same rotten cloth. What exists in this world is taken to be a reproduction of what exists in some other world the essential features of which are inferred from the essential features of this world. It does not matter whether the other world is an ancestral epoch, a realm of extrasomatic ideas, or a kingdom of out-of-the mind meanings. The tautology is as egregious in one case as in the other and is not avoided by arguing that the goal is to interpret rather to explain. A tautologous interpretation is no better than a tautologous explanation. In both cases curiosity has to be satisfied with an answer that says the phenomenon in question exists as it exists because its existence implies the existence of something that would account for it if it existed.

29 Lauriston Sharp, "Steel axes for Stone Age Australians", in: Edward H. Spicer, ed., *Human Problems in Technological Change* (New York 1952) 79.

30 Lauriston Sharp, "Steel axes for Stone Age Australians", 79-80.