

HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY

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History and ethnology by W. H. R. Rivers

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HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY

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HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY*

It is the aim of this essay to show the importance of ethnology, and especially of recent developments of that science, to history. During the last ten years there has been in progress, rudely hindered but not stopped by the war, a movement which has brought the two disciplines into much closer relationship than would have been possible under the conditions which guided the study of ethnology twenty or thirty years ago. At this more remote period anthropology—I use the term anthropology advisedly—was wholly under the dominance of a crude evolutionary standpoint. The aim of the anthropologist was to work out a scheme of human progress according to which language, social organisation, religion, and material arts had developed through the action of certain principles or laws. It was assumed that the manifold peoples of the earth represented stages in this process of evolution, and it was supposed that by the comparative study of the culture of these different peoples it would be possible to formulate the laws by which the process of evolution had been directed and governed. It was

* This essay originally appeared in *History* for July, 1920, and has been reproduced by kind permission of the Editor. It embodies a few subsequent corrections and additions by the Author.

assumed that the time-order of different elements of culture had been everywhere the same; that if matrilineal institutions preceded patrilineal in Europe and Asia, this must also have been the case in Oceania and America; that if cremation is later than inhumation in India, it has also been later everywhere else. This assumption was fortified by attempts to show that there were reasons, usually psychological in nature, according to which there was something in the universal constitution of the human mind, or in some condition of the environment, or inherent in the constitution of human society, which made it necessary that patrilineal institutions should have grown out of matrilineal, and that inhumation should be earlier than cremation. Moreover, it was assumed as an essential part of the general framework of the science that, after the original dispersal of mankind, or possibly owing to the independent evolution of different main varieties of Man, large portions of the earth had been cut off from intercourse with others, so that the process of evolution had taken place in them independently. When similarities, even in minute points of detail, were found in these regions, supposed to have been wholly isolated from one another, it was held that they were due to the uniformity in the constitution of the human mind which, working on similar lines, had brought forth similar products, whether in social organisation, religion, or material culture.

The adherents of the recent movement to which I have referred regard the whole of this construction with its main supports of mental uniformity

and orderly sequence as built upon the sand. It is claimed that there has been no such isolation of one part of the earth from another as has been assumed by the advocates of independent evolution, but that the means of navigation have been capable, for far longer periods than has been supposed, of carrying Man to any part of the earth. The widespread similarities of culture are, it is held, due in the main, if not wholly, to the spread of customs and institutions from some centre in which local conditions especially favoured their development.

THE HISTORICAL SCHOOL OF ETHNOLOGY.

If there has been such spread of culture, it is evident that the process of development must have been far more complicated than is supposed by the advocates of the older evolutionary view. There is reason to believe, indeed, that the process has been exceedingly complex: that when customs are carried from their original home to other parts of the world, few of them survive unchanged, but suffer profound modification, some in the direction of progress, some in the direction of degeneration, and some in a direction which can hardly be described in terms either of progress or decay. We of this movement believe that many customs which were once supposed to be the products of a simple process of evolution among an isolated people have in fact behind them a long and tortuous history. It is held that the first task of the ethnologist is to unravel this history, and in consequence the name we have chosen for our school

and for our methods is that of "historical." We speak of the movement as belonging to the historical school of ethnology, and of our method as the historical method, in place of the older school and method, which are often styled evolutionary. This latter term is not satisfactory, for it is far from necessary that a follower of the historical method should be an opponent of evolution. The German historical school are such opponents of evolution, but this is very far from the position of English ethnologists. Our quarrel with the older school is that it regarded as simple what is very complex, and tried to reach by a short cut a goal which will only be attained when we have learnt the mutual interrelations of a vast number of separate paths along which Man and his culture have travelled. Put briefly, we believe that it is necessary to determine what has happened before we proceed to the task of trying to discover how it has happened and to formulate the laws which have determined the course which the social activity of Man has followed. The relations between "the what" and "the how" are often complex, and speculations about "the how" may often be useful in deciding "what" has happened, but the adherents of the new movement style their method historical because the discovery of what has happened in the past to the various peoples of the earth is their primary aim and a necessary preliminary to the further task of discovering the laws, and especially the psychological laws, by which the historical process has been directed.

I propose in this paper to illustrate the kind of

process by which the ethnologist is trying to determine what has happened in the past to the rude peoples he studies and to raise the question whether he is justified in his presumption that his method is worthy of being regarded as a method of history.

The first point to notice is that, as a rule, the ethnologist has to discover the past history of peoples who have no written documents of any kind, and whose oral traditions are so blended with features obviously mythical in character that it needs a special discipline to distinguish the degree of their historicity, or, indeed, in many cases to decide whether they have any historical value at all. It is already being found that, where native traditions seem to record historical events, the conclusions drawn from them are in agreement with those reached through other lines of evidence; but it is better as a method of investigation to ignore tradition at first and base preliminary conclusions on evidence of other kinds. The problem, therefore, with which the ethnologist is confronted is whether it is possible to discover the past history of a people who have no written documents of any sort and whose oral traditions are of such a kind that at present it is safest to ignore them.

THE METHOD OF ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS.

I shall now sketch briefly the general lines upon which I believe the problem can be solved. The chief instrument is one which I have elsewhere*

* Rep. Brit. Assoc., Portsmouth (1911), p. 490, or *Nature* (1911), vol. lxxxvii., p. 856.