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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 30, No. 116 (Apr. - Jun., 1917), pp. 161-167

Published by: American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/534336>

Accessed: 31-08-2017 19:43 UTC

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THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

VOL. XXX.—APRIL-JUNE, 1917.—No. CXVI.

ORAL TRADITION AND HISTORY.¹

BY ROBERT H. LOWIE.

A LITTLE over a year ago I protested against the acceptance of oral traditions as historical records.² I held then, as I do now, that those who attach an historical value to oral traditions are in the position of the circle-squarers and inventors of perpetual-motion machines, who are still found besieging the portals of learned institutions. The discussion precipitated by my remarks in the journal mentioned,³ and still more a great many private debates with fellow-students, have not shaken my confidence in the soundness of the views previously voiced; but they have shown conclusively that I had misconceived the psychology of the situation. Instead of being a high-priest hurling anathemas against the unregenerate heathen, I found myself a prophet preaching in the wilderness, a dangerous heretic, only secretly aided and abetted by such fellow-iconoclasts as Drs. P. E. Goddard and B. Laufer. I cannot regard it as a healthy condition of affairs in science when the adherents of antagonistic views see no virtue whatsoever in each other's position. Perchance there is some hidden source of misunderstanding that only need be revealed to make co-existence, if not amity, in the same logical universe, possible. I therefore avail myself of the present opportunity to present without primarily polemical intent the logical issues as they present themselves from my angle of vision.

In the first place, it may not be unnecessary to state that in denying to oral traditions of primitive tribes their face value, we are not denying to them *all* value whatsoever. On the contrary, it is clear that even the wildest and manifestly impossible tales may be of the utmost importance as revelations of the cultural status of the people who cherish them, whether as annals of incidents that once occurred

¹ Address of the retiring President, delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society in New York, Dec. 27, 1916.

² *American Anthropologist*, N.S., 17: 596-599.

³ *Ibid.*, 599-600, 763-764.

or as purely literary products of the imagination. In addition to this willingly granted psychological significance of such narratives, we may also admit a genuinely historical value, though not of the kind associated with this term in the present discussion. Traditions share with archæological specimens, social usages, religious phenomena, and what not, the characteristic that likeness in distinct tribes calls for interpretation. Such interpretation may in many instances reveal beyond cavil, or at least indicate in a tentative way, an historical nexus otherwise unsuspected; and in such cases we are justified in speaking of an historical value of traditions, not in the sense that the traditions themselves embody truths which the ethnologist or folklorist must accept, but in the sense in which the same type of divination ritual, the same type of age-society, the same type of stone-axe, in different regions, may have an historical bearing. I will not abate one jot from this minimum historical estimation of tradition, nor will I concede an additional iota. Let us examine on what grounds such additional claims can be advanced.

Against the sceptical attitude advocated by myself a very interesting argument has been advanced, which takes us directly into the heart of the problem. "Because some traditions are manifestly unhistorical," I have been reproached, "you rashly infer that no tradition has historical validity." With some claim to credence, I may plead that the rather elementary logical considerations here advanced are not entirely beyond my ken. They have nothing to do with the case, however, for this rests not on a necessarily imperfect induction, but on more general logical, psychological, and methodological principles.

That sum-total of lore which corresponds in primitive communities to what in our own culture we embrace under the headings of science and philosophy also comprises elements, in varying degrees of systematization, which are in native consciousness equivalent to what *we* call history. My general attitude towards these elements is simply this: If we do not accept aboriginal pathology as contributions to *our* pathology, if we do not accept aboriginal astronomy, biology, or physics, why should we place primitive history alone on a quite exceptional pedestal, and exalt it to a rank co-ordinate with that of our own historical science? This is the, to my mind, absolutely conclusive argument, which is independent of, though strengthened by, the number of cases, really tremendous, in which the glaring disparity between primitive history and our conception of the physical universe renders acceptance of tradition impossible.

The really interesting problem to me is, not what degree of importance shall be attached to so-called historical traditions, but what psychological bias could conceivably make scholars attach greater weight to aboriginal tales of migration than to aboriginal beliefs as

to levitation or the origin of species. While in the nature of the case demonstration is impossible, I have a very strong suspicion that lurking behind the readiness to accept primitive for real history is the naïve unconscious assumption that somehow it is no more than fair to suppose that people know best about themselves. This assumption, of course, need only be brought up into consciousness to stand revealed in its monstrous nakedness. The psychologist does not *ask* his victim for his reaction-time, but subjects him to experimental conditions that render the required determination possible. The palæontologist does not interrogate calculating circus-horses to ascertain their phylogeny. How can the historian beguile himself into the belief that he need only question the natives of a tribe to get at its history?

It may be objected that primitive astronomy and natural history *do* coincide in some measure with our equivalent branches of learning, and that consequently there is a presumption in favor of the view that primitive and civilized history also overlap. To urge this is to ignore a vital aspect of the situation. We accept primitive observations of the stars or on the fauna or flora of a country as correct in so far as they conform to what we independently ascertain by our own methods. However, we neither derive the least increment of knowledge from this primitive science nor are we in the slightest measure strengthened in our convictions by such coincidence. Exactly the same principle applies to the domain of history. When a Crow tells me that his tribe and the Hidatsa have sprung from a common stock, this is correct but purely superfluous information, for I arrive at this result with absolute certainty from a linguistic comparison. In history, as everywhere else, our duty is to determine the facts objectively; if primitive notions tally with ours, so much the better for them, not for ours.

As a matter of fact, the case for primitive history is very much weaker than for primitive natural science. Natural phenomena are not only under the savage's constant observation, but a knowledge of them is of distinct importance to his material welfare. It is not strange, that, say, the Plains Indians knew the habits of the buffalo, or should be conversant with the topography of their habitat. On the other hand, the facts of history are definitely removed from the sphere of observation when they have once taken place. More than that, the facts of what *we* call history are, as a rule, not facts which fall under primitive observation at all, but transcend it by their complexity and the great spans of time involved. It is as though we expected primitive man not merely to note the particular effects of rain on a hillside, but to form a conception of erosive processes on the modelling of the earth. This leads us to a point of fundamental importance.

There is all the difference in the world between correct statements of fact and historical truths. That my neighbor's cat had kittens last night may be an undeniable fact, but as a contribution to our knowledge of present-day political and social progress it is a failure. That Tom Brown moved south has one meaning when it suggests that he transferred his baggage from the Borough of the Bronx to a Harlem flat, and a very different one when the implication is that he, with thousands of his followers, migrated from Greenland to Patagonia. Now, my contention is briefly this: that the facts which we want to ascertain as historians are mainly of the latter order, while the facts recollected (so far as they *are* recollected) by primitive men are of the neighbor's-cat's-kittens order. In other words, I deny utterly that primitive man is endowed with historical sense or perspective: the picture he is able to give of events is like the picture of the European war as it is mirrored in the mind of an illiterate peasant reduced solely to his direct observations.

I will illustrate my contention by actual illustrations. If we examine an account by natives of events so recent that their authenticity need not be questioned, we discover what is already known to us from other fields of inquiry; viz., that the aboriginal sense of values differs fundamentally from ours. Nothing is more erroneous than to accept uncritically, say, a native statement that the ceremony of a neighboring tribe is either akin to or different from one of his own people. A trifling difference in dress may lead to an assertion of complete diversity, while a superficial resemblance may lead to a far-reaching identification. If we glance through calendar counts and Indian traditions as to actual events, nothing is more striking than the extraordinary importance assigned to trivial incidents. Such things may be absolutely true, but from none of them is the fabric of history made. On the other hand, if we turn to occurrences of tremendous cultural and historical significance, the natives ignore them or present us with a wholly misleading picture of them. Since I cannot at the present moment go through the entire literature of the subject, I will select a few instances that may fairly be taken not only as representative, but as constituting an argument *a fortiori*.

There are few events that can be regarded as equalling in importance the introduction of the horse into America; moreover, this took place within so recent a period, that trustworthy accounts of what happened might reasonably be expected. Nevertheless we find that the Nez Percé give a perfectly matter-of-fact but wholly erroneous account of the case,¹ while the Assiniboine connect the creation of the horse with a cosmogonic hero-myth.² If we turn from the origin of the

¹ Spinden, *JAF* 21 (1908) : 158.

² Lowie, *The Assiniboine* (PaAM 4 : 101).

horse to the correlated phenomenon of the first appearance of the whites, corresponding facts stare us in the face. An Assiniboine gives a tale not in the least improbable of the first meeting with whites; only the leader of the Indians at the time is said to be the culture-hero.¹ Among the Lemhi Shoshone I failed to find any recollection of Lewis and Clark's visit, but secured a purely mythical story about a contest between Wolf (or Coyote) as the father of the Indians, and Iron-Man, the father of the Whites.² Do we fare any better when we turn from these representatives of a cruder culture to peoples who have attained the highest status north of Mexico? Zuñi oral tradition has it that the village at which Niza's negro guide Estevan lost his life, and which Niza himself observed from a distance, was K'iakima. In a masterly paper Mr. F. W. Hodge has torn into shreds the arguments advanced on behalf of the aboriginal view. He establishes the fact that the village in question was Hawikuh, and that "Zuñi traditional accounts of events which occurred over three centuries ago are not worthy of consideration as historical or scientific evidence."³

The general conclusion is obvious: Indian tradition is historically worthless, because the occurrences, possibly real, which it retains, are of no historical significance; and because it fails to record, or to record accurately, the most momentous happenings.

This conclusion is, I am perfectly well aware, an as yet imperfect induction. To examine its ultimate validity, a special inquiry is necessary, for which I should like to outline the guiding principles.

The historical sense of primitive peoples can be tested only by a scrutiny of *unselected* samples of their historical lore. It will not do, as some of our colleagues are wont, to reject manifestly absurd tales and to retain those which do not contravene our notions of physical possibility; for by this process we get, in the first place, a selected series of cases, and, secondly, already prejudice the whole matter by assuming that what is not ridiculously false is historically true. We must rather embrace in our survey every single statement which, whether miraculous or not from *our* point of view, is to the native psychology a matter of history. To this mass of material we must then apply our canons of trustworthiness; and from a comparison of the cases in which objective evidence supports the native statements with those in which such evidence is contradictory we may arrive at a statistically tenable attitude as to the general probability of their accuracy. Had such a test been made on unselected material, one of my critics would not have dared assert a probability of nine-tenths for native statements as to the direction from which a tribe

¹ Lowie, *The Assiniboine* (PaAM 2 : 231).

² Lowie, *The Northern Shoshone* (PaAM 2 : 251 f.).

³ F. W. Hodge, "The First Discovered City of Cibola" (AA 8 [1895] : 142-152).

came. In such a test as I propose, aboriginal statements that a certain tribe originated in the very spot in which it now lives must be considered exactly on the same plane as any other tradition. Similarly, all statements of a heavenly or underground origin are of equal importance, for our purpose, with any other migration legends. The fact that they are regarded as historical by the natives, is decisive as to their inclusion on equal terms in any such survey as I here suggest. Now, we know that very few of our Indians could have descended from the skies or climbed from an underground world within the period of tribal differentiation of the American race; and we also know that very few of them could have arisen in the territory they now occupy, or could have occupied it for very long periods. The Yuchi, for example, have no migration legend, and consider themselves the original inhabitants of eastern Georgia and South Carolina;¹ but we have recently been reminded that while the English colonists of 1670 refer to them as a very powerful nation, the earlier Spanish explorers between 1539 and 1567 mention no such tribe.² The assumption, consequently, is that they moved into their later habitat about the latter part of the sixteenth century. This case may be taken as typical. If events dating back three hundred years are no longer recollected, we must discount the evidence of such traditional lore, and cannot accept absence of migration stories as proof of long-continued occupancy.

What, however, of the cases in which native traditions agree with objective results? The fact is simply this. The number of cardinal directions is four, or, if we include heaven and earth, six. The probability that a tribe will, in a purely mythical way, ascribe its origin to any particular one of these directions, is therefore one-fourth or one-sixth. Pending the statistical inquiries I have suggested, I wish to record emphatically the impression gained from years of experience with Indian mythology, that the proportion of historically correct statements will not be found to exceed that to be expected on the doctrine of chances.

My position, then, towards oral tradition, may be summarized as follows: It is not based, in the first instance, on a universal negative unjustifiably derived from a necessarily limited number of instances, but on the conviction that aboriginal history is only a part of that hodgepodge of aboriginal lore which embraces primitive theories of the universe generally, and that its *a priori* claims to greater respect on our part are *nil*. Such claims must be established empirically, if at all; but, so far as my experience extends, the empirical facts are diametrically opposed to such claims. The primitive tribes I know

¹ Speck, *Ethnology of the Yuchi Indians* (U Penn 1 [No. 1] : 8).

² Swanton and Dixon, "Primitive American History" (*American Anthropologist*, N.S. 16 : 383).

have no historical sense; and from this point of view the question whether they retain the memory of actual events, while interesting in itself, is of no moment for our present problem. The point is, not whether they recollect happenings, but whether they recollect the happenings that are historically significant. Otherwise a perfectly true statement may be as dangerous as a wholly false one. If the correct description of an excursion to a northern hunting-ground by part of a tribe is interpreted as the account of a permanent northern migration by the entire population, the result is wholly destructive of history.

This leads us from the field of academic discussion to that of practical work. The question that confronts the ethnological practitioner is not whether primitive history in general is trustworthy, but whether a particular aboriginal statement is correct or not. Now, what are the criteria by which its accuracy can be established? The only criterion that has ever been applied, to my knowledge, is that of physical possibility. But, as our Nez Percé illustration shows, this test is worthless: we simply shift, to use Tylor's expressive phrase, from untrue impossibilities to untrue possibilities. We know now that even trifling stories of war and quarrels are often not records of actual occurrences, but part and parcel of folk-lore, as their geographical distribution clearly shows.¹ We know the force of the human tendency to mingle fancy with fact, to introduce rationalistic after-thoughts, to ignore the essential and apotheosize the trivial, not only from ethnological literature, but from a study of our civilization. Our own historical perspective is only a slowly and painfully acquired product of recent years. That like other sciences it developed ultimately from a prescientific interest in past events, that in this purely genetic sense our history is an outgrowth of primitive tradition, is beyond doubt; but, as we cannot substitute folk-etymology for philology, so we cannot substitute primitive tradition for scientific history. Our historical problems can be solved only by the objective methods of comparative ethnology, archæology, linguistics, and physical anthropology.

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¹ Boas, *The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay* (BAM 15 : 362).