

Primitive Secret Societies. By HUTTON WEBSTER. New York, The Macmillan Company, 1908.—xiii, 227 pp.

In the present stage of ethnological research a general work on primitive secret societies dealing, as it practically must, with almost every phase of primitive life, is naturally looked upon askance by the student of ethnological details. To present a systematic statement of the data accumulated in the last two decades is both a commendable and necessary task; but even a provisional attempt to interpret the meaning and the psychological causes underlying the most important sides of primitive culture, at a time when our knowledge of even the best known societies is imperfect and when whole continents like Africa and South America are still known only in their barest outlines, seems to me not only premature, but calculated only to encourage the wild generalizations of which ethnology has already had more than its due share. Secret societies, however, present so great an interest in themselves and in the possible bearings they have on societies among the historic nations of the east and west, that from the standpoint of a sociologist, one might plead extenuating circumstances for the work under review.

Professor Webster states in his preface that, "starting with no preconceived notions of the subject, he has endeavored to shape his theories in accordance with his facts and in many instances by abstaining from generalizations to let his facts carry their own significance to the reader's mind."

Let us examine to what extent this resolve has been carried out.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The last one, in the nature of an appendix, deals with the diffusion of initiation ceremonies and is by far the most satisfactory chapter in the book. Starting from the fact, more or less attested, that there is a distinct separation of the sexes into two well marked divisions, we enter into a discussion of that institution which the author considers to be one of the strongest elements for the perpetuation of sexual separation—the men's house. The men's house, according to Webster, is any building used as a council-chamber, town-hall, guest room, bachelor's house or for puberty ceremonies *etc.*, and is distinguished from other houses by the fact that children, women or uninitiated members of the tribe cannot enter it. From this exclusion of uninitiated people is postulated the corollary that "it serves as an effectual restraint upon the sexual proclivities." "In rare instances," the author goes on to say, "these institutions seem to have facilitated sexual communism rather than sexual

separation." I believe that Professor Webster is wrong in thinking that such instances are rare, for, despite the paucity of our present materials, examples can be found among the Masai, the Bororos of Brazil, the Igorots of the Philippines and certain other tribes.

In spite of the author's assurance that he has started with no preconceived notion, we meet with a broad generalization on the very first page, where we are informed that "in a rude state of culture the male members of a tribe are divided into the initiated and uninitiated, in other words a man is not a member of his tribe until he has gone through certain rites of initiation," which are identical or intimately associated with puberty initiation ceremonies. From this "rude state of culture" develop more and more complicated stages, but as there is never a clear-cut division between the stages, vestiges of one grade are found in the succeeding grade. Here we have the old favorite gradation theory, again recently advanced by Professor Breysig in his *Völker des Nordens*. The theory in this instance is based presumably upon cultural conditions found in Australia and parts of the South Seas. Although our Australian data are infinitely richer than those of any other region, with the exception of North America, Professor Webster finds no hesitation in applying conclusions there obtained over all cultural areas. Obstacles are explained away by calling attention to vestiges of particular stages. The author informs us that if there is a variation from this primal division into initiated and uninitiated, or if there is an absence of puberty rites, or a substitution of secret-society puberty institutions for those of the tribe *etc.*, all these constitute merely irregular steps in a progressive evolution. The identification of a stage of culture is as simple as in the days of Morgan; given such and such an institution and you can tell what stage it represents and what its necessary attributes are or ought to be. If you can find no trace of puberty rites among the plains or woodland tribes of North America, you have in their place the initiation rites of the secret societies; the secret societies have replaced the tribal puberty institutions; the clan has replaced the tribal organization and the clan organization has become partially disintegrated to permit the formation of societies where clan membership is no longer a prime requisite of entrance. This bald way of stating Professor Webster's position may seem unjust, but there is warrant for it on every page of his book.

The next subject treated is the puberty institution, which to the author is originally identical with the official entrance into the tribe. As he takes almost all his examples from Australia and Melanesia one can easily understand his division of all male communities into four

rude classes — boys before puberty, unmarried youths, mature men and old men. Here again Professor Webster has generalized in an absolutely unwarranted manner, and he has invested phenomena with a definiteness wholly imaginary outside of a few limited areas. So definite, according to the author, is the passage from one stage to another, that he speaks of puberty ceremonies “serving to complete the transfer of the child from mother-right to father- and tribal-right.” For rites connected with the passage to the higher stages, evidence is adduced from the secret societies like the Duk Duk of the Bismarck Archipelago and the various North American societies.

In this jump from initiation rites of the tribe to those of the secret societies we come to one of the fundamental defects of the work before us—a confusion between tribal and society ceremonials. If examples of gradations are not found in tribal rites, not the least hesitancy is shown in drawing them from the society. Difficulties seem to be surmounted by the theory that “secret societies replace earlier puberty rites.” The fact that it is only in these secret societies that illustrations can be found of any definite ceremonials incidental to the passing from one of the higher stages to the other seems likewise to present no difficulty. Why, if four classes were at all characteristic of any primitive group, ceremonies connected with the three higher grades should be absent, although they appear afterwards in later institutions, is not explained; nor does it seem to have occurred to the author that such divisions may have developed in the society itself.

Chapters iii, iv and v deal with the secret rites connected with puberty, the training of the novice and the power of the elders, and many minor theoretical points are made which space unfortunately forbids us to discuss. It is in chapters vi and vii, dealing with the development and functions of social societies, that Professor Webster's theory is most clearly presented. He says:

The initiation ceremonies discussed have certain clearly marked characteristics. They are all tribal. They are secret, and jealously guarded from the eyes of the uninitiated. They are communal, organized and conducted by the elders, who are the responsible guardians of the state When, under the influence of various conditions there develops in every progressive community a definite centralization of authority, the shifting of social control from the elders to the tribal chiefs renders unnecessary the entire machinery of tribal initiation. For obedience to the tribe is substituted obedience to the chief. Initiation ceremonies retain their tribal aspects only in societies which have not yet emerged from the primitive stage in which all social control is in the hands of the elders The presence of such

ceremonies throughout Australia and New Guinea is to be associated with the absence of definite and permanent chieftainships in the islands. In Melanesia and Africa political centralization has resulted to a large degree in the establishment of chieftainships. But this process has not continued so far as to make possible the entire surrender to the tribal chiefs of those functions of social control which in the earlier stages of society rest with the elders alone In communities where the political powers of the chiefs are as yet in a formative stage, the secret societies provide effective social restraints and supplement the governmental activity of the earliest rulers. With developing political centralization, such functions tend to become obsolete, and the religious and dramatic aspects of the societies assume the most important place. This last stage is reached both in Polynesia and North America, where we find aristocratic conditions in process of formation and powerful chieftainships already established. Under these conditions tribal secret societies have developed into fraternities of priests or shamans, who are intrusted with the performance of the religious rites of the community.

One more point and Professor Webster's theory is complete. The resemblance, which he finds between the secret organizations of widely separated peoples, he traces to the fact, that "they everywhere exhibit the characteristics of the original clan organization which underlies them." Does Professor Webster mean that a clan organization, in the common acceptance of that term, is to be found wherever secret societies are present?

His theory is thus complete. It is a provisional theory, and yet it attempts to explain one of the most intricate elements of primitive culture. It would be useless to criticise all the positions advanced, although that could be done. Any number of illustrations could be brought forward in support of such criticism. But the validity of theories does not depend upon illustrations such as Webster, following Spencer, Tylor, Morgan and recently Breysig, has employed, because the different interpretations put upon them divests them of all probative force. And not until we have all realized that only when an illustration in its manifold relations to its individual, historical and psychological setting, really shows an undeniable resemblance to the phenomena to be illustrated, will the exemplification of theories by "facts" or "illustrations" be fruitful of results. Throughout his work, Professor Webster has not regarded any such strict definition of a "fact" or "illustration." This has led to his artificial separation of "cultural" phenomena from everything that gave them their distinct and individual significance. This is to me the glaring fault of the whole work, and has given to it that unfortunate characteristic of "distinctness," fatal

to all theories when examined in detail. That there is a resemblance between the cultural achievements of people the world over it might be hazardous to deny, but any evidence for a cultural unity of man can be obtained only by a reversal of just that method of investigation which the work under review exemplifies.

A few minor points might be mentioned. No attempt has been made to use any of the authorities critically; the evidence of the trained scholar, the missionary and the traveler receive the same amount of credence. Certain data have either been omitted or inadequately used, as the Californian, Canadian, Athabaskan, the Mexican, Central American, Peruvian, South American and Siberian. Dr. Koch's work on the animism of the South American Indians, and some other valuable papers are not even mentioned. The English and American authorities have been thoroughly used, but, on the whole, the same cannot be said of the German or of the Spanish data.

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The Humanity, Benevolence and Charity Legislation of the Pentateuch and the Talmud. By MAURICE FLUEGEL. Baltimore, 1908.—306 pp.

The purpose of Mr. Fluegel's rather bulky work is to prove the originality of the Mosaic laws and their superiority, social and economic, over those of the Hammurabi code. Certain scholars, among whom is Professor Delitzsch, have dared to intrude into the long-hallowed lore of the Old Testament, turning upon it the searchlight of history, of science and especially of the newly found Hammurabi code, and, as a result, have pronounced the Pentateuch a sheer plagiarism. Mr. Fluegel has seized the opportunity to rehabilitate the Thora. He has examined both the Hammurabi and the Hebrew legislation and finds the claims of the critics to be utter nonsense.

The book would be more convincing if it were less declamatory, and if the author had not attempted to strengthen his position by blaming and accusing those who think differently. Whatever may have been the personal motives of Professor Delitzsch, his views were promulgated in the name of science, and they should be criticized dispassionately. Invectives and repeated accusations of anti-Semitism are no arguments. The book suffers, also, from prolixity. Not only do we find the same ideas recurring, but the same quotations, refutations, and eulogies are constantly repeated in unchanged wording, until, in spite of its impassioned style, the book becomes tedious.