

DR. ALLAN D. COULT
(1931 - 1970)

A Personal Memoir

On April 24, 1970, the spirit of Dr. Allan D. Coult separated from its earthly body. Although he was one of the most dedicated and productive of anthropologists, he was reviled during his lifetime by most of his professional colleagues, who thought him a madman. The Anthropology Department at the University of California, Berkeley, granted him its Ph.D. in 1961, but later tried hard to forget it had ever considered him a colleague.

Coult came to Berkeley with a B.A. in psychology from Syracuse University in his home town, and a stint with the Army in Korea behind him. After gaining his doctorate he moved from school to school, including UC Davis, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz, the University of Texas, and the State University of New York. Several years later, disillusioned with Establishment universities, he set up his own "New University" in Berkeley, which was principally a forum for him to expound on his ideas to the paying public. When he found that to be an inefficient means for reaching large numbers of people, he took over the Berkeley Barb for several months during 1969 in a last major effort to be heard.

Although I first met Allan when I was a new graduate student in anthropology at Berkeley, we did not achieve any real closeness until I too was ostracized from the hallowed halls of Kroeber for putting on a poor act of grinning and foot-shuffling fo' de Massas what runs de professorial plantation. In the course of our work together, we collaborated on a book, a play, a screenplay, and many underground press articles. Later in our association we clashed, and finally had a parting of ways several months before his death.

On my desk is Allan's obituary, clipped from the San Francisco Chronicle. The article mentions the 1966 Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Pittsburgh at which he organized a special session on

"Psychedelic Anthropology." According to the Chronicle, "Dr. Coult caused a flurry (at the meetings) when he said his own use of drugs had convinced him the experience helped him understand the mainsprings of human culture. Then a member of the faculty of the State University of New York, he said: 'The anthropologist's first field trip should not be to Africa or South America or Japan, but into the hidden primitive layers of his own mind.'" The clipping triggers memories

At those meetings I was hanging around with Allan and wearing a beat-up old hat. Allan pulled me aside. "Take off the stupid hat," he said. "What," I replied, "do you want me to look like the rest of those penguins in their brown suits and white shirts?" "A hat is not an important thing to fight for," he said. "Dress like them so they'll listen to you. Then you can fight for your ideas, if you have any." And so, fully decked out in his brown suit, white shirt, and tie, Allan proceeded to do battle for his heretical brand of science.

In his opening remarks he made a plea to revive methods dismissed nowadays as "introspection" -- the attempt of the mind to experience and understand itself. Only by striving to enter the secret and often forbidden rooms of his own mind, he maintained, could the social scientist hope to comprehend anything about the ways of the human species. He claimed to have experienced ancient ceremonies and mystery rites during LSD trips, and found a cross-cultural, trans-temporal unity in all such ceremonies and their accompanying mythologies. To those who scoffed at his "imaginary" methods, he urged that they try psychedelic drugs themselves to see what he had seen, although he never recommended the indiscriminate use of drugs by anyone. His rejoinder was usually dismissed by his colleagues with a nervous, condescending snort. "These people would have burned Galileo," he told me, "they refuse to look through the telescope." He believed that the psychedelic experience was universal to all mankind and that it was the kernel of all myth and religious ritual throughout the world. Those few of us who did dare to "look through the telescope" came to agree with him.

Although he believed his own theories, he emphasized at that meeting that he didn't care whether his particular anthropological views became accepted or not, but did care that psychedelic research become open and accepted as a means of learning about man. To this end he founded the International Society for Psychedelic Anthropology, but increasing Government repression of psychedelic research soon caused the Society to fizzle out. It was inconceivable to him that such a powerful research tool as LSD would not be fully and freely utilized by those claiming to seek insights into human culture and behavior. All this and more he told the anthropologists as he stood there in his brown suit. It is ironic that several years later, while trying to revolutionize the underground Berkeley Barb, which he published and edited for five months, he was criticized in the magazine Rolling Stone for his apparel, which the writer thought was not "hip" or "revolutionary" enough. Somehow Allan managed to antagonize the Underground Establishment as well as the Establishment Establishment. He was a phenomenon: a loner, an independent thinker in pursuit of the life of the mind wherever it led and whether he was paid for his efforts or not. (Usually, he wasn't.)

Often he was frustrated when he arrived at an academic party eager to discuss anthropological theory with colleagues who were "relaxing" and wanted only to discuss the latest movie or the antiquing of furniture. On many occasions he was told that it was more important to "get along" with colleagues than to engage in intellectual discussion, a view which of course enraged him. Sometimes he took to insult or startling statement to get a reaction, like the Zen master who hits people on the head to help them become enlightened. Most didn't appreciate this technique.

In private he was often a delight, as his brilliant sense of humor satirized everything and everyone, including himself. One of his favorite self-parodies was the role of the "mad genius." He would muss up his hair and speak in a fantastic Russian accent about the sexual "therapy" he proposed to give to lady patients: "Bee-lyiv me, Lady, dis voodn't hurt

a bit. Dis iss all for da terr-a-pee. Bee-lyiv me, I voodn't feel ah ting." While laughing at this routine, it struck me that Allan really was feared as some kind of sexual, drug-taking, Jewish "mad genius," and he knew it. His joke was really his insight into the paranoia of his colleagues.

Allan would let his mind run for hours, spinning out brilliant patterns of logic and illogic in the air. My brain had to stretch and contort just to keep up with him. One evening he taught me his secret for creative thinking: "Don't worry about whether it's true or not. Just let your mind run and see what it spins out. You've got a million trips in there. Go along with the trip, suspend your judgment. After that, there's plenty of time to decide whether or not it's true. It's all just words. Don't be afraid of them."

He had a strong romance with words. His passion for reading (in several languages), writing, and speaking were unparalleled. Last year (1968 - 1969) he gave a dazzling series of lectures in Kroeber Hall which was packed by interested students. (Many of his colleagues stayed away, as usual.) Although he dearly loved to talk and argue, he well knew that words and so-called "rational" thought were not conducive to the "mystic" enlightened state he prized above all else. In the middle of a monologue he was apt to catch himself, break off the brilliant verbal flow, and exclaim, "What am I talking about? I gotta get outta here," meaning he wanted to transcend this earthly plane of words and word-created dualities.

"You know what a real mystic is," he once asked me. "Someone who has complete faith that his methods will work even though he has never seen or heard of them working. Look at the Lowie Museum, for instance, all that stuff they've collected. Those people have a mystic faith that somehow all those broken pots and arrowheads will give them real insight into mankind if only they collect enough of it in one place. They've got graduate students in there who spend all day piecing broken pots together.

When they gather "data" on psychedelics they give you the Latin name of the mushroom, describe the pots and spoons the Indians use to make it -- but never bother to have the experience for themselves. Yet they believe that "someday" a theory will mystically emerge from that garbage dump. Nowadays they've also got hundreds of people on big grants studying monkeys to learn about man, and they come up with their own minds -- 'dominant and subordinate males' in a monkey hierarchy based on power and fear. Wherever man looks out on the natural world he sees himself."

He said the world of action could be best understood if you imagined everyone as a little kid, that most people spent their adult lives not in striving to attain new and higher levels of awareness and understanding, but in trying to recoup their frustrations or hangups as children. He explained academic departments this way, in terms of fathers (professors) and sons (students). The ingratiating son would try to emulate his father who, in a quest to perpetuate himself, would take the son into his "business" via recommendations and introductions to the "right" people. He never recovered from his disappointment that academia was not a true "aristocracy of merit," but merely another father-son aristocracy based on the arbitrary distribution of prestige. He was shocked to find no more real intellectual activity in "name" schools than in unknown ones, and was horrified by the shallowness and pretentiousness of the "famous" professors he met.

Allan's written output was prolific. In addition to his thesis on the Hualapai Indians, he compiled a computer-based analysis of trait correlations from the Human Relations Area Files, and produced a steady stream of articles, critiques, and book reviews. He was an outspoken critic of "ethnoscience," which he regarded as an intellectual fraud, and generated much controversy in the learned journals.

His magnum opus, "Psychedelic Anthropology," still unpublished, is the most comprehensive expression of the results of his explorations into the nature of man. Time and again he was struck by the consistency of

esoteric teachings, and by how the doctrines of Yoga, Zen, and other ancient philosophies fitted with the independent work of unconventional Western thinkers such as Reich and Ouspensky. "Psychedelic Anthropology" is a masterly and successful attempt to synthesize these sources, to use the resultant synthesis as a basis for interpreting myth and ritual, and to point the way for an anthropology which is genuinely relevant to the lives of its readers. It is a unique, profound, and mind-expanding document. One hopes this book will soon be available to all who seek access to Allan Coult's hard-won knowledge.

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