

## AN ALTERNATIVE TAXONOMIC CLASSIFICATION FOR ETHNIC GROUPS

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Taxonomies for classifying cultural and ethnic groups constitute folk systems for organizing human types into cognitive categories. Criteria presently in use for the construction of these taxonomies emphasize arbitrary and inconsistent characteristics, including geographic area, language, skin pigmentation, economic characteristics and native nomenclatures.

The application of one principle versus another, or combinations of two or more principles, seems to vary somewhat by cultural and geographic area such that one part of the world seems classified by language while others combine economic, pigmentation and other criteria. An attempt to deduce logical principles from existing classification failed completely. We, therefore, propose an alternative taxonomical system based on a single organizing principle.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction.

Recently a survey, apparently sponsored by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, was conducted throughout the California State Colleges. Called the "Affirmative Action" Survey, it was designed to identify the racial-ethnic background of employees. At one institution, the survey was initially presented as voluntary. One of us ignored the form and later received a reminder which suggested that the questionnaire may have gotten lost among our paperwork and that it was important to submit the duplicate card enclosed. The penalty for failure of submission would be evaluation by inspection of one's surname and/or person.

The "Affirmative Action" Survey allowed 23 choices for ethnic identification. These included Afro-American, Black, Negro, Eskimo, Chicano, Mexican-American, Spanish-surnamed, Malayan, five different kinds of Indians (including Asian), Caucasian, White and a residual other. We noted (1) that the list was not mutually-exclusive and was jointly exhaustive only insofar as the "other (specify)" category permitted deviations; (2) that the list included several pejoratives (e.g., Central and South American "Indians" and use of the term Indians to include Pakistanis, etc.); (3) that the vast majority of respondents, if they did not wish to identify as "white" (a racist category) or "Caucasian" (either a euphemism for "white" or meaning one whose ancestry stems to the Caucasus), were required to enter something into the "other" category which was most probably ignored.

We were under the impression that, as anthropologists, we should be able to come up with a more comprehensive and less biased taxonomy of human ethnic groups. A survey of a few of the better-known and time-tested sources such as Garn's Human Races (1961) and Spencer's Ethno-Atlas (1956) revealed that there was not general agreement upon how the world's peoples should be subdivided. We found that some peoples are classified primarily by morphological criteria, others by geographic contiguity, and still others by linguistic similarity and dissimilarity. Along with these classes are the folk systems which lurk in the minds of those who attempt to achieve a systematic classification.

#### Morphological systems of taxonomy.

Morphological systems are based upon the premise that in some sig-

nificant respect, peoples are physically different, and these differences have reality at least for taxonomic purposes. Having made this assumption, human taxonomists have proceeded to the task of selecting from a large repertoire of physical traits those few which are supposedly diagnostic. Anthropologists have progressed beyond the "black, white, red and yellow" type of classification, but have substituted other criteria which, if less arbitrary, are also less diagnostic (like blood groups). This shift in emphasis is reflected in the gradual change of titles of physical anthropology courses from "races of man" to "human variation".

The presumption made in morphological taxonomies is that differences have evolutionary significance reflecting selective as well as geographic forces. This kind of differentiation is supposedly a micro-process of the same sort which occurs between and among species. The premise is poignantly described for us by Drummond who states:

The progenitors of Birds and the progenitors of Man at a very remote period were probably one. But at a certain point they parted company and diverged hopelessly and forever. The Birds took one road, the Vertebrates another; the Vertebrates kept to the ground, the Birds took to the air. The consequence of this expedient in the case of the Birds were fatal. They forever forfeited the possibility of becoming human.<sup>2</sup>

Modern anthropology has forsaken such references to sheer physical morphology and progressed to more fundamental questions such as behavioral evolution and the development of mind. This trend was presaged in the 19th century by such foresighted theorists as R. V. Pierce, who in 1895 discussed the comparative mental attributes of human populations. Of the American Indian, he notes:

His skull, though broad at its anterior base, and high and wide at the cheekbones, differs from the European in being broader and longer behind the ears . . . While a great

breadth of the base of the brain indicates morbid susceptibilities, yet these, in the Indian, are opposed by a superior height of the posterior part of the skull. Consequently, he is restless, impulsive, excitable, passionate, a wanderer upon the earth. The basilar facilities, however, are large, and he is noted for instinctive intelligence. His habits alternate from laziness to heroic effort, from idleness and quiet to the fierce excitement of the chase, from vagabondism to war, sometimes indolent and at other times turbulent, but under all circumstances, irregular and unreliable. In this case, lacteal activity is greater than lymphatic, as his nomadic life indicates.<sup>3</sup>

The wisdom of these observations was such that most of the more recent developments on this subject have continued as refinements of Pierce's seminal work, which had gone through 59 editions and nearly two million copies by the turn of the 20th century.

#### Linguistic systems of taxonomy.

The assumption underlying linguistic classifications of ethnic groups seems to be the concept that while all human languages are ultimately related, some are more closely related than others. Evidence of this is found in the fact that while French and English are more closely related than French and Norwegian, French and Norwegian are more closely related than Norwegian and Hindi. While this conclusion may relate to the fact that the Norwegians never invaded India, it is assumed that the divergences we observe in linguistic comparisons reflect a "genetic" model. Following this genetic hypothesis, we can assume that the continued divergences of languages over time are reflected in an ever-increasing number of discrete language communities. In some areas of the world this evolutionary process has progressed to the point that there are fewer and fewer speakers of some individual languages. In New Guinea, for instance, there are only about 130 known speakers of Binumerien and less than 50 of Warapina. Some

North American Indian languages, notably Salishan groups, now have as few as 5 or 6 speakers.

Following upon recent developments in kinesics and semiotics, modern linguists have become much more interested in processes of symbolization. This modern trend can be traced back as far as the end of the 19th century. Again citing Drummond, we find reference to this process:

Some of the more primitive races . . . still cling to the gesture-language which bulked so largely in the intercourse of their ancestors. No one who has witnessed a conversation --one says "witnessed", for it is more seeing than hearing-- between two different tribes of Indians can have any doubt of the working efficiency of this method of speech. After ten minutes of almost pure pantomime each will have told the other everything that it is needful to say. Indians of different tribes, indeed, are able to communicate most perfectly on all ordinary subjects with no more use of the voice than that required for the emission of a few different kinds of grunts.<sup>4</sup>

More recent attempts to typify human ethnic groups by linguistic criteria have progressed far beyond such early attempts, yet we find there is a unity of human consciousness reflected in linguistic behavior which allows us to categorize as a single unit speakers of such widely diverse languages as Hopi, Iroquois, Navaho and Kwakiutl under the one rubric of Native American.

#### Geographic systems of taxonomy.

Geographic classifications of human groups rest upon the premise that peoples who are geographically contiguous are more likely to be similar than those widely separated spatially. Use of this principle is witnessed by the classification into a single category of such peoples as Japanese, Chinese, Mongols, Thai, but excluding such marginal peoples as Ainu. Dissimilar peoples in a local area are accounted for by theories

of migration and/or invasion, and similar peoples in widely diverse regions are explained by survivals of past homogeneity over a wide area. Thus, we have a long-standing tradition of categorizing into a single set such similar peoples as the Ituri pygmies, the Semang of Malaya, the Andaman Islanders and the Upper Ramu peoples of New Guinea.

Geographic taxa are based upon the notion that similar adaptations to specific environments lead to increased similarity in type. Huntington aptly describes this process:

Man is a migratory animal; he keeps moving from one environment to another; he carries his civilization with him. When Englishmen settle in Jamaica, or Germans in tropical Brazil, they form an island of high civilization in the midst of a lower civilization. Nevertheless, as time goes on, even the migrants tend to conform to the climate in which they live. This does not mean that the British settlers in Australia and South Africa will ever go back to the level of the natives near whom they dwell. It does mean, however, that in the future the people who settle in these unfavorable lands are not likely to go ahead as fast as those who remain where the climate is better.<sup>5</sup>

In similar vein, Tacitus explained to us that the reason the Germans were a physically pure and uncorrupted race was that no one else would want to live in such a hateful place:

*Ipsos Germanos indigenas crediderim minimeque aliarum gentium adventibus et hospitibus mixtas . . . [I]nformem terris, asperam caelo, tristem cultu aspectuque, nisi si patria sit?*<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the great diversity of Native American groups, as well as immigrant ethnic populations in California may be related to its unique environment. Again citing Drummond:

Its wonderful climate, wild and equable beyond example, is well known. Half the months are rainless. Snow and ice are almost strangers. There are fully two-hundred cloudless days in every year. Roses bloom in the open air through all seasons. Berries of many sorts are indigenous and abundant.

Large fruits and edible nuts on low and pendant boughs may be said, in Milton's phrase, to "hang amiable".<sup>7</sup>

Geographic classifications of human groups have in recent years paid less attention to environmental factors, but we find nevertheless that the commonly accepted taxonomies of human types rest largely upon physical contiguity as a basic organizing principle.

#### Consistency of criteria.

In our assessment of the underlying principles of taxonomy in human ethnic groups, we have noted gross inconsistencies in the application of these types of criteria. Fijians, for example, are classed as Melanesians on morphological grounds, even though they speak a Polynesian language. The people of Tikopia, however, are classed as Polynesians on linguistic grounds, even though they are geographically situated well within Melanesia.

It is clear that the three types of criteria are adequate only when all of them happen to coincide. When a group overlaps criteria there is a taxonomic dilemma and we must either hold a conference to iron out differences or cite the wisdom of previous authorities.

#### Proposed alternative taxonomic system.

Given the inadequacy of previous systems, we have joined the time-honored tradition that says that when existing systems do not work, one is justified in creating a new one. Our system takes note of a heretofore overlooked attribute of ethnic groups--their propensity to name domestic animals after themselves. We are suggesting that this propensity has great significance in that, for many ethnic traditions, the identity

of a group lives on in such nomenclature even though the group may effectively vanish. One of us has noted that his Pomeranian ancestry lives on most noticeably as a registry in the American Kennel Club, rather than as a linguistic (Old Prussian), morphological (Baltic), or Geographic (Pripet Marsh) type. We noted that other such groups, such as Dalmatians and Samoyeds, share a similar fate. Rather than lament this phenomenon, we went on to discover that in addition to dogs, peoples are named after cattle, sheep, goats, horses, rabbits, swine, chickens, cats and rats.

Our proposed taxonomy takes account of established ethnic classifications using these existing criteria. Under the heading of the dog people we find that the American Kennel Club recognizes such ethnic groups as:

Afghan	English (three or more varieties)
Pekingese	Irish
Germans	Rhodesian
Danes	Siberian
Welsh (two varieties)	

Cattle peoples include:

Holstein-Friesian	Sindhi
Dutch	Channel Islands (two varieties)
Afrikander	

Goat peoples include:

Swiss  
Nubian  
Maltese

Cat peoples include:

Siamese	Persian
Burmese	Paraguayan
Abyssinian	Malay
Russian	

Rabbit peoples include:

Belgian	Japanese
Flemish	Polish
New Zealand	Thuringian

Some areas of the world, like Africa and South America, are poorly represented. It is conceivable that we have been slow in recognizing the animals of these regions; however, if our taxonomic set is accepted, this deficiency is easily remedied by recognizing other species of domestic animals such as the llama, guinea pig and camel, as well as such national emblem species as the Quetzalcoatl (Mexico) and Bird-of-Paradise (Papua-New Guinea).

In fairness, we should note that previous anthropologists have not been completely unrecognizing of the principle of our taxonomic system. Many have accepted the designation of the Kiwi for the recent immigrants of New Zealand, and North Americanists have recognized important varieties of animals in the naming of several indigenous groups, such as the Fox, Crow, Caribou, Beaver, Hare and Dogrib.

#### Conclusion.

If there is general significance to our discovery of this heretofore poorly recognized taxonomic system, we believe that it is in the

area of man's symbolic relations with the important animal species abounding in his environment. We would suggest as a future direction of research that the entire concept of totemism needs to be re-evaluated in the light of these findings. The original significance of totemism as an important dimension of culture appears to have been sidetracked as a result of more recent theoretical and ethnological fads. We would suggest a re-examination of Frazer's monumental opus on the nature of totemism.

The clan totem is revered by a body of men and women who call themselves by the name of the totem, believe themselves to be of one blood, descendants of a common ancestor, and are bound together by common obligations to each other and by a common faith in the totem.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1972 Annual Meeting of the Kroeber Anthropological Society as part of a symposium on linguistics chaired by Paul Kay.

<sup>2</sup>Drummond, 1894, pp. 187-188.

<sup>3</sup>Pierce, 1895, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup>Drummond, 1894, p. 163.

<sup>5</sup>Huntington, 1927, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup>Tacitus, 1970, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup>Drummond, 1894, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup>Frazer, 1910, vol. 1, p. 4.

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