

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by
Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

**History, evolution, and
the concept of culture**

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by
Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



Alexander Lesser on a field trip to the Kiowa in Anadarko, Oklahoma, during the summer of 1935. The photograph was taken by one of his students. (Photograph by courtesy of Virginia Hirst Lesser.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

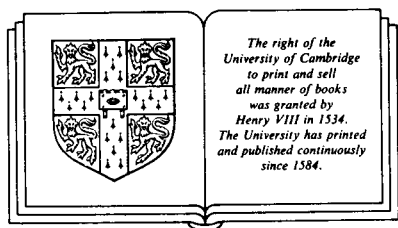
History, evolution, and the concept of culture

Selected papers by Alexander Lesser

Edited with introductions by

SIDNEY W. MINTZ

Department of Anthropology, The Johns Hopkins University



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by
Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521277365

© Cambridge University Press 1985

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1985

Reprinted 1987

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Lesser, Alexander, 1902–1982

History, evolution, and the concept of culture.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Ethnology – Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Culture – Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Social
evolution – Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Mintz,
Sidney Wilfred, 1922– . II. Title.
GN304.L47 1985 306 84–12732

ISBN 978-0-521-25860-9 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-27736-5 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by
Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

Preface	<i>page</i> vii
Introduction	1
Part I Boasian anthropology	
Introduction to Part I	9
1 Franz Boas and the modernization of anthropology (1981)	15
2 Research procedure and the laws of culture (1939)	34
Part II Theory and method	
Introduction to Part II	45
3 Functionalism in social anthropology (1935)	53
4 Problems versus subject matter as directives of research (1939)	62
Part III Evolution	
Introduction to Part III	73
5 Evolution in social anthropology (1939/1952)	78
6 Social fields and the evolution of society (1961)	92
Part IV Anthropology and modern life	
Introduction to Part IV	103
7 The right not to assimilate: the case of the American Indian (1961)	108
8 The cultural significance of the Ghost Dance (1933)	118
9 Foreword to <i>The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game</i> (1978)	125
10 Anthropology and the future of internationalism (1974)	140
Notes	150
References	154
Index	161

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by
Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Two years before his death, Alexander Lesser asked me to assist him in the preparation of a volume of his collected papers. I acceded immediately to his request, which greatly honored me. As a college sophomore, I had been Lesser's student in my first (and only) undergraduate course in anthropology. Though I had not the slightest idea of it at the time (1939), Lesser was then at the very height of his intellectual powers. For my efforts in his course, I received what I realize now to have been a generous "C." (Years later, when I was introducing Lesser to a Yale audience and mentioned the grade he had given me, he confessed to the audience that he had taken his first course in anthropology with Franz Boas, and that Boas had given him a "C"!)

In spite of my mediocre performance, my esteem for Lesser was from the start considerable, even though I hardly knew why.

When I began to teach anthropology myself more than a decade later, I was impelled to recall what it had been about Lesser's presence in the classroom that had affected me. In spite of my callowness – the adolescent fear that a show of interest in what an older person thinks will be interpreted by one's peers as a sign of weakness, sycophancy, or naïveté – I remembered both liking and admiring the way Lesser acted. The reason why, reflection showed me, was quite simple: Lesser took himself and his subject seriously. He thought what he did mattered. He was serious about the importance of anthropology, serious about teaching it, and serious about his students. As I reflected further, I realized that many of my teachers had thought that teaching – and learning – were important to their society, as well as to their self-images. They derived much of their self-respect from the classroom. They thought that it was not only as good a place, but also as important a place as a bank, a barracks, an assembly line, a playing field, or a board room. I should perhaps stress that their feelings plainly did not depend upon their success in the classroom – for by no means were all successful. But whether they succeeded or failed as teachers, the classroom was where many of them felt they earned the right to practice their profession.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)viii *Preface*

Lesser was that sort of teacher: He believed that what he *did* embodied who he *was*; and he believed that it was important to American society, and to himself, that he do it as well as he could. He thought anthropology could contribute toward making a better world by making us humans more aware of ourselves and of the forces – particularly the cultural forces – that affected us. Anthropologists, he believed, had an obligation to work at revealing those forces, in the classroom and out.

Anthropology and teaching have moved on since 1939, not altogether for the better. But I now realize that my own feelings about the aims of both anthropology and teaching derived in some measure from those conveyed to me by my teacher. Though I recognized the basis for my admiration only dimly at the time, Lesser's influence made its impression silently, even imperceptibly, upon my own sense of vocation. In recognition of that influence, I feel privileged to have been able to work with him during his final years in fashioning this book.

Although many of his students will think of Lesser first as a teacher, his lasting effect on anthropology flows even more from what he thought and wrote than from what he taught. Yet he was never prolific. His own bibliography of his writings lists but twenty-two items if we omit reprints, summaries of his work by other authors, his editorials in *The American Indian*, and a few brief reviews and specialized contributions. The list includes one monograph, *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game* (1933; reissued in 1978) and his unpublished doctoral dissertation. The remaining twenty essays can be classified roughly by subject as follows: religion, two; kinship, four; linguistics, one; race, one; Franz Boas, two; anthropology and modern life, four; and theory, six. Since Douglas Parks of Mary College is preparing a volume of Lesser's work in linguistics, and Raymond De Mallie of Indiana University (Bloomington) is doing the same with his work on kinship, there was no need to deal here with his achievements in those fields. The ten papers selected for this volume include one on religion, one on Boas, three on anthropology and modern life (one never before published), four of the six theory articles, and the foreword to the 1978 edition of his monograph on the Ghost Dance.

The collection represents a working accord between Lesser and myself. He and I consulted by mail and by telephone on many occasions concerning the essays to be reprinted, and readers of early outlines of the manuscript made suggestions as well. Lesser was particularly interested in the republication of his essays on evolution. It was his peculiar modesty, I think, that led him to recognize only at the end of his life how much ahead of their time were his early papers in anthropological theory. We aimed at striking a balance that would represent his range of competence without tilting sharply toward the heavily technical and ethno-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27736-5 - History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser

Edited by Sidney W. Mintz

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface* ix

graphic end of the spectrum. But Lesser's untimely death, only shortly before the cheering news reached me that Cambridge University Press had accepted the manuscript, left me to make some of the final decisions about what was to be included, and those very familiar with his work may find favorite articles missing. The final, rather arbitrary, grouping of the articles into four sections is also my responsibility.

The corpus of Lesser's writings is modest compared to that of many of his contemporaries and successors. But his work is rich in critical insight and originality, and his technical papers are typified by the detailed and rigorous treatment of the trained ethnographer. His sallies into matters of public policy and his dedication to making anthropology useful to society repeatedly revealed his intellectual youthfulness and lack of pretense.

On one occasion, I was privileged to invite him to give an inaugural lecture marking the establishment of the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. He gave a vigorous and exciting lecture, then carried on a lively discussion with the faculty and students. Toward midnight, I asked him whether he was ready to go to sleep. "You know," he said, "if none of you were here, I could lie down on that couch and fall asleep in a minute. But as long as people want to talk anthropology, I do, too." Such was Alexander Lesser's unforgettable spirit.

In preparing the manuscript I was helped by many friends and associates. Virginia Hirst Lesser (Mrs. Alexander Lesser) and Ann Margetson (the daughter of Alexander Lesser and the late Gene Weltfish) provided ideas. Tom Biolsi, Sol Miller, Doug Parks, and Joan Vincent supplied useful information of all kinds. Kenneth Bilby, John V. Murra, Kathleen S. Ryan, Rebecca Scott, and particularly William C. Sturtevant gave me valuable substantive and editorial criticism. At an early stage, Ray Fogelson and David and Kathrine S. French made trenchant critical readings. Later Ashraf Ghani and Joan Vincent did the same. Ashraf Ghani made especially useful specific suggestions for improving the general Introduction and the Introduction to Part I. Ray DeMallie and Doug Parks were very helpful in locating suitable materials for the dust jacket design. Elise LeCompte gave me indispensable assistance from the inception of the project almost until its conclusion. Deborah Caro showed both care and good sense in preparing the index. To the editorial staff of the Cambridge University Press I have several debts: to Sue Allen-Mills, in particular, for her faith in this project; and to Sue Comfort, Sue Potter, and Linda Spencer, for their valuable help with the manuscript along the way.

Sidney W. Mintz