

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS



## Chapter I

INTRODUCTION. RELATION OF MATERIAL CULTURE TO OTHER SUBJECTS. INVENTIONS AND CIVILISATION. MATERIAL CULTURE AND MIGRATIONS

**A**N account of the occupations and material culture of primitive peoples should deal with such matters as foods, drugs and stimulants, clothing and ornaments, the types of habitations and the methods of transport and the objects employed, with the many kinds of domestic utensils, with weapons and other equipment used in war and in hunting and fishing, with the forms of art, charms and amulets, musical instruments, and with the objects used for ritual purposes and in games. It should describe the processes by which material things are produced, the tools used in their manufacture, the ways in which they are handled. It should also include some account of the origin and the distribution of all these objects and practices. In such a study there should be no limitations with regard to period or country. Obviously, however, a complete work of this kind would run into many volumes, and the most that can be attempted within the present limits of space is a general introduction to the subject, and a review of some of the main principles involved.

One of the principal characteristics of modern thought is a realisation of the essential unity of all

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS

knowledge. Few nowadays would waste time in trying to define the exact scope and limits of the various branches of study. Scarcely any subject is self-contained and self-sufficing. Each borrows from, and may in return throw light upon, many others. We cannot, for instance, understand the material culture of a people, unless we constantly take into consideration the other aspects of its life, such as its social organisation and religious beliefs. "A culture is a living organism, which will not tolerate an arbitrary amputation, and not much more than an inanimate trunk is in fact left, when the very heart blood, which in the form of the primitive philosophy of a primitive religion pulsates out into its extreme arteries, is lacking."<sup>1</sup> The parallel between a culture and an organism is sometimes called into question. A more satisfactory comparison may perhaps be made between a culture and a biological association, where the interrelation of the various culture elements might be likened to the interplay between and mutual help rendered each other by the different varieties of plants, birds, animals, insects, and bacteria. Professor Malinowski has also drawn attention to this interdependence.<sup>2</sup> He says that the ethnographic reality of a canoe would not be brought home to a student in this country even by placing a perfect specimen before him. To understand the canoe fully the student would need to know the rules concerning its ownership, how and by what people it was sailed, the ceremonies associated with its construction and use, and particularly the emotional attitude of the native to his craft, which he surrounds with an atmosphere of romance, built up of tradition and of personal experience. To the natives of the

<sup>1</sup> Kaj Birket-Smith, *The Caribou Eskimos*, I, 10.

<sup>2</sup> B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS 3

Troabriands the canoe is a thing of beauty and has an individuality of its own. This question of the inter-relation between the several aspects of culture is so important that a few examples will be quoted.

Many material objects such as charms, idols, and sacred buildings, have much interest for the student of religions. Musical instruments, sculptures, paintings, have much significance for other than the pure technologist. A complete study of these things would involve an acquaintance with the teachings of philosophy, aesthetics, and history.

Some objects may be forbidden to persons of one sex, of certain ages, or of certain social grades. Among some of the tribes in Australia the bull-roarer may be handled only by initiated men; it must not even be seen by women on pain of death.<sup>1</sup> A similar tabu is associated with the pipes among the Paressi Indians of South America. Among the BaVenda the conus disc was formerly only worn by the royal women, and the wife of a chief was allowed to wear ivory bracelets made from elephant tusks.<sup>2</sup> Certain occupations may be forbidden to certain classes of a community. There is nearly always a well-marked division of labour between the sexes, which may have some socio-religious sanction. Among many Bantu tribes agriculture is the work of the women, who are forbidden to have anything to do with the cattle. Hence the hoe may be essentially a woman's implement. The distinction between men's work and women's is often very clearly marked and may be very important to the native mind. It may have a direct bearing on problems of administration and education. The endeavours of missionaries to teach useful occupa-

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Haddon, *The Study of Man*.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. Stayt, *The BaVenda*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS

tions to native boys have sometimes been wrecked by the inclusion of arts which belonged to the girls. In the early days of Natal it was almost impossible to persuade native men to come and work for Europeans as agricultural labourers, and crops frequently had to be left to rot in the fields.

In many cases occupations are related to social grades. Among the composite tribe, Banyankole, the BaHima, who form an upper class, devote themselves chiefly to pastoral occupations, while the subordinate BaHeru practise agriculture. In the old Welsh laws several privileges were reserved for the free tribesmen, and denied to what must have been a fairly numerous unfree element, consisting probably of remnants of the earlier inhabitants, of strangers in blood such as refugees or kin-wrecked men from other tribes, and of slaves.

Many processes cannot be carried out by anyone, at any time, and in any circumstances. It is essential that the operatives should be in a state of ritual purity, and to ensure this various ceremonies or abstinences may be necessary. Though numerous examples from primitive peoples could be quoted, one or two must suffice. The following references to Bambala iron working are taken from Smith and Dale's *The Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, Vol. II, 203 et seq. The people believe it would be impossible to smelt iron without the medicines which they say transform the ore into iron. Consequently the principal person in connection with the industry is "the iron doctor," who is supposed to have jealously guarded knowledge of the different medicines. The work is only carried on in the spring. When smelting is to be done a long temporary shelter is built in which the smelters live while the work is going on. During this time they are in a state of strict tabu. They

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS 5

may not enter their own homes; nor may their wives, who stay in the village, wash, nor anoint themselves, nor put on any ornaments that might attract the notice of men. They are in the same state as recently bereaved widows. While the men are moulding the kiln for the smelting they are not allowed to drink any water.

Wives of Lamba elephant hunters have to observe several tabus. In the native hunter's mind there is some connection between their wives and the quarry. If the elephant when it is sighted is digging up earth, the hunter knows that his wife has broken the tabu against sweeping out the hut in the day time. If a male elephant is seen to touch the teats of a female it is known that irregularities are going on at the village dances.<sup>1</sup> Ill health may be regarded as a disability. In Basutoland no woman should approach the place where pottery is being made if she has "a weak head," that is, if she easily catches cold.

Then, too, not all times are propitious to an undertaking. It may be necessary to consult the witch doctor (shaman, soothsayer) to obtain a favourable date on which to start on a journey or a warlike expedition. Sometimes it is the condition of the moon that is important. Many Bantu tribes will not fire pottery when the moon is on the wane; to do so would cause all the pots to crack. The Zulu herdboys use a simple reed pipe or whistle, known as "umtshingo," to while away their ample leisure, but woe betide any boy who made use of this instrument while the crops were standing, for such an indiscretion would assuredly bring hail to destroy the crops. Unlucky days are common among many peoples. Friday is sometimes considered a day of

<sup>1</sup> C. M. Doke, *The Lambas of Northern Rhodesia*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS

ill omen. In the Hawaiian Islands there are four sets of unpropitious days during each moon, though they do not occur at regular intervals. On such days it is forbidden to light fires, to bathe, or to launch a canoe.

The preceding examples emphasise the facts that in primitive societies the distinction between the religious and the secular is much less sharply drawn than it often appears to be among modern civilised peoples, and that occupations, which to us are quite commonplace, are intimately associated with important rites and tabus. The late Dr Rivers gave a detailed description of the extremely complicated ritual connected with the care of the herds and with dairying processes among the Toda.<sup>1</sup> In the old days, before a MoSuto was allowed to work in iron he had to pass through an initiation into the guild of smiths.<sup>2</sup>

Many examples of the inter-penetration of the material and non-material sides of life readily come to mind. To make a Maori canoe only men of rank were employed. The Tohunga of the tribe directed the work, and each stage was accompanied by the appropriate "karakias" or ceremonies, as for instance, (1) at the felling of the tree, (2) to give power to the axe to shape the canoe, (3) when the canoe was drawn out of the bush, (4) to propitiate the heavens on starting on a long voyage, (5) to calm the sea, (6) on arrival at a strange land, (7) to enable the paddlers to keep time, (8) at the naming of the canoe, when the priest sprinkled the canoe with water, and a slave was sacrificed.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the aforementioned points are illustrated in the following summarised description of the building of

<sup>1</sup> W. H. R. Rivers, *The Toda*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Casalis, *The Basuto*.

<sup>3</sup> A. Hamilton, *Maori Art*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS 7

a Kabyle house in Algeria.<sup>1</sup> The task is in no sense a purely family affair. It is a collective undertaking, which involves not merely the future occupants, nor even their immediate relatives. A young man who is about to build a new house has the right to ask all his fellow-villagers for certain recognised help, and of course he is liable to render similar service when called upon by any of his neighbours. The habitations are constructed mainly of stone, with or without mortar. Several large posts are required for the roof and its support. The apportionment of the work is clearly determined by local custom. The women collect and carry all the stones and the water for the mortar. The men are responsible for the timber, the transport of which is a collective act; its completion is marked by a communal meal. House building takes place sometime in the summer, when long fine days are assured, and generally just before or after the harvest, when fewer demands are being made by the yearly routine on the people's labours.

The excavation of the foundations is performed in public, and is an act of much solemnity. A trench is dug, and in it are deposited sacred objects, such as a few pebbles gathered near some saint's tomb, or silver coins to ensure abundance, or iron and steel, with an ox horn and hairs of a circumcised male child, in order to ensure that the future occupants will be blessed with male children. Then the first stone is laid. It has often been taken from the tomb of a marabout or from the village mosque. Then follows the sacrifice of a sheep by the head of the family. Its blood is allowed to flow into the trench and over the first stone of the foundations in order

<sup>1</sup> R. Maunier, *La Construction Collective de la Maison en Kabylie*, Paris, 1926.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

to bless the house. In the evening all who have helped in the digging of the foundations eat the sacrificial animal and are thereby blessed. When the roof has been completed there is often another sacrifice, followed by a communal meal, dancing, and singing.

At all stages in the building of the walls, the erection of the posts, and the construction of the roof the procedure is prescribed by custom. A complete study of the erection of a house provides therefore much information concerning the social and religious life of the people. On the other hand, a knowledge of the ways in which certain kinds of work and the use of certain tools are restricted to one sex or the other is necessary for the comprehension of what may otherwise have been considered a purely materialistic process. Thus it will be readily understood that we cannot profitably divide the study of man into a number of independent and unrelated sections, and that though we may for a time concentrate our attention on man's material productions, we must never quite forget his less tangible but not less important activities, such as his beliefs, his dreams, and his ambitions. In fact, the study of the material side may be regarded as being a good method of approach to an understanding of the other aspects of a culture.

Particularly close are the connections between ethnography and archaeology, a subject which might be described as the ethnography of the past, as far as it has been preserved for us. The latter qualification implies a definite restriction. Archaeology normally has to deal with the less destructible objects, such as stones, pottery, and metal. It very often happens that circumstances have not been favourable to the preservation of the more perishable materials, such as wood, textiles,



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS 9

basketry, or leather. The prehistorian has frequently to be satisfied with collections that represent only very incompletely the cultures that he wishes to study. At a modern Zulu habitation site we should find well-built huts of saplings and grass, basketry of various kinds, objects of woven grass work for straining beer, mats made of rushes, clothing of skins or textiles, ropes of grass, string of sinew, wooden neck rests, pots, dishes and spoons of wood often elaborately carved, shields of hide, feather and bead ornaments, knobkerries and assegai shafts of wood, some pottery, a saddle quern of stone, and a spearhead or two, an axe, and perhaps a knife blade and a hoe of iron. Even if the complete assemblage were left undisturbed, very little would be left for the archaeologist two thousand years hence. What had been a fairly complex culture, which had satisfied the needs of its makers, would be represented by a few decayed objects of iron, a few potsherds, a stone quern, and some beads. Out of such poor material the present-day archaeologist has to reconstruct with the aid of an imagination, informed and disciplined by science, the living cultures of the past. Obviously he is the better qualified to do this, if he has some knowledge of the cultures of peoples who are now living in more or less similar conditions. "It is only through the known that we can apprehend the unknown, only by a study of the present that we can understand the past; and archaeological investigations therefore must be largely barren if pursued in isolation and independent of ethnology."<sup>1</sup> Traces of particular peoples fade quickly into the generalised past. "Without the many hints which it (ethnology) furnishes for the interpreta-

<sup>1</sup> R. B. Dixon, "Some Aspects of North American Archaeology", *The American Anthropologist*, 1913.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62207-4 - Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture

R. U. Sayce

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 PRIMITIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS

tion of the past the archaeologist would often find himself groping in the dark.”<sup>1</sup> A similar idea has recently been forcibly expressed by a distinguished archaeologist, who has said, “Without anthropology, in fact, archaeology would be blind of one eye and very short-sighted of the other.”<sup>2</sup>

It is sometimes objected, that in human affairs we cannot apply the principle, which has played so great a part in geology, that the present may be used to explain the past. The criticisms that have been brought forward may be summarised as follows. The so-called primitive peoples of to-day have a long history behind them, and consequently it is unsafe to speak of arrested development, because their cultures may have been progressing steadily if slowly for many centuries; or, on the other hand, they may have been affected by degeneration, a phenomenon as common perhaps in the cultural as in the organic world. Others believe analogies between ancient and modern savages to be particularly dangerous, because the former are said to have possessed some qualities, which made possible their progress to their present civilised condition, but which are lacking in modern primitive peoples. Undoubtedly these objections require careful consideration, but they should not be pushed too far. We may freely recognise the facts of degeneration, and of development by small variations.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is also clear that some elements of human culture, like many simple organisms in the biological world,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Holmes in a discussion following Dixon’s paper.

<sup>2</sup> Dr D. Randall-MacIver, Presidential Address to Section H of the British Association, York, 1932.

<sup>3</sup> *Vide* Chapters IV and V. The third objection would not be accepted by all students. It is too complicated a question to debate at this stage.

<sup>4</sup> *Vide* “Survivals”.