

whose distributions are compared. Properly speaking, no such element originates at a specific point of time, but is imperceptibly connected, by a process of gradual change, with another element or with other elements lying back of it. Thus, a specific type of house or a religious belief or practice is linked historically with other types of house or of religious belief or practice from which it has been modified or by which it has been influenced. Eventually, it is bound to be historically connected with (derived from) a cultural form with which it has little outward resemblance. Hence the logical necessity of delimiting by a specific characteristic or characteristics the particular elements of culture whose relative ages it is determined to ascertain. Such a procedure may seem arbitrary at times, but it is made unavoidable by the futility of the quest for true origins.¹ In comparing the ages of culture complexes (and most cultural "elements" are at last analysis complexes) the complexes themselves must be clearly defined as an assemblage (functionally unified, as a rule) of specific elements. The relative ages of culture complexes do not necessarily throw light on the ages of the elements themselves. Thus, it would be a great mistake to infer from the priority of American agriculture to the Sun Dance complex also a necessary priority of agriculture to such elements of the Sun Dance complex as the ceremonial mock battle, the Sun Dance type of offerings, or the practice of self-torture; nor does the probable priority of the quadrangular wooden house to the Sun Dance complex involve its priority to the type of house which served as model for the Sun Dance lodge. The failure to distinguish between the age of a culture complex and that of one of its elements is largely responsible for much of the unhistorical character of cultural interpretation of the evolutionary type. Many a supposed "survival" is doubtless far older than the typical complex which

¹ This is not the place to develop the thesis that the only conceivable kind of culture origin is the association into a functional unit of cultural elements already in existence in unassociated form. From this point of view any stage in the history of a culture element is fully as much an origin as the reconstructed or hypothetical starting point. Origins, as ordinarily understood, are set off from other points of a cultural sequence merely by more or less arbitrary relative evaluations of such points; to the "origin" is attached greater significance, for whatever reason you please, than to the immediately preceding and following points of the sequence. To use a geographical metaphor, an "origin" is the peak of a time-ridge.