

Culture Areas and Strata.

THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE AREA FROM AN HISTORICAL STAND-POINT.

It is customary to group the tribes of North and South America, as of other parts of the globe, into a relatively small number of culture areas, that is, groups of geographically contiguous tribes that exhibit so many cultural traits in common as to contrast with other such groups. Despite the undoubted conveniences of this mode of classification, we should be under no illusions as to its character. The culture area is primarily a descriptive, not an historical, concept. The various culture elements that serve to define it are of very different ages and their grouping into a set of cultural differentia is applicable only to a particular, in our case generally a very recent, cross-section of history. This means that the different culture areas recognized in North America, say, are historically not necessarily comparable at all. If for instance, it could be shown, as seems not unlikely, that all or most of the cultural differentia constituting the Plains culture area arose at times subsequent to the development of most of the features characterizing the Eskimo and Eastern Woodland culture areas, we should be compelled to conclude that, from an historical standpoint, the Plains area is a sub-grouping of some kind when contrasted with the relatively primary groupings of the Eskimo and Eastern Woodland areas. Such a result necessarily follows from the quite different historical weightings given, let us say, to the skin tipi, buffalo hunting, the rawhide industry, the camp circle, and the Sun Dance, on the one hand, and to the kayak, the conical bark lodge, the two-pronged fish-spear, beaver hunting, the birch-bark industry, and "medicine" conjuring on the other.

As for the earlier cultural status of the tribes that constitute our "sub-grouping," two possibilities present themselves. We may find that the elimination of those historically secondary cultural elements that were responsible for the interpretation of the sub-grouping as a distinctive culture area either leaves the area possessed of primarily such features as are shared also by a single neighbouring culture area; or, on the contrary, discloses