Clyde Kay Maben Kluckhohn 1905-1960
[originally published in American Anthropologist, 64:140-161, 1962]

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CLYDE KLUCKHOHN was certainly one of the most notable anthropologists of the present century. But he was more than that – an eminent social scientist generally, an important academic statesman, and an influential figure in public affairs. In anthropology his influence was deeply felt in at least four important ways, namely his penetrating ethnographic studies of the Navaho, extending over a period of 37 years; his contributions to the development of the theory of culture, particularly in the fields of pattern analysis and the study of values; his intellectual leadership and stimulation of a large number of students, both graduate and undergraduate; and, not least, his representation of anthropology in a wide range of different contexts – academic, governmental, and otherwise. He was a man of unflagging energy and the widest catholicity of interests, with mastery of some seven languages, wide knowledge of the humanities, firsthand acquaintance with many parts of the world, and passionate concern for human values.

While Kluckhohn did some pioneering work in the field of culture and personality, engaged in some research in linguistics and human genetics, and also did some early work in archaeology, he will, in our judgment, go down in the annals of strictly intellectual history mainly for his work in Navaho on the one hand, and his theoretical work on the concept of culture, on the other. Kluckhohn’s interest in the Navaho began in 1922 when, at the age of only 17, ill health interrupted his freshman year at Princeton, and he was sent by his family to a ranch near Ramah, New Mexico. The nearest neighbors were Navahos and young Kluckhohn soon developed a deep interest in learning to speak Navaho and in studying Navaho customs. He quite obviously had both an unquenchable curiosity about exotic customs and a deep sensitivity to the nuances of alien ways of life – two qualities essential for an anthropologist. The American Southwest in general, and Navaho country in particular, had what Kluckhohn called “an obsessive fascination” for him. Throughout his life he was always happiest, more relaxed, and in his best form, both as a magnetic person and as a creative thinker and teacher of anthropology, when he went on field expeditions to the mesa and canyon country of New Mexico and Arizona. Travelling on horseback or in various models of old station wagons or jeeps, he became a familiar figure as he led his many devoted students through the piñons and junipers in pursuit of elusive Navaho informants, or lived for weeks at a time in Navaho hogans. He spoke Navaho fluently and was known affectionately by hundreds of Navahos as “Hasteen Clyde.”

It was in this Southwestern setting that much of Kluckhohn’s creative work was accomplished. His portable typewriter was in use almost every day, even on field expeditions, with a steady flow of anthropological writing. On the day of his fatal heart attack, July 28, 1960, he was working on an article in a small cabin on the Upper Pecos River near Santa Fe.

Kluckhohn’s first book, To the Foot of the Rainbow, describing his early pack trip to the Rainbow Bridge, was published in 1927. In 1928 he completed the work for his A.B. at the University of Wisconsin, studied at the University of Vienna in 1931-32 and at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in 1932, served as Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico from 1932 to 1934, and completed his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1936. During this decade he kept in close touch with the Navahos, making a number of pack trips to unexplored country on Wild Horse Mesa, and published his second popular book, Beyond the Rainbow, and two semi-popular articles on the Navaho in 1933. In 1935 Kluckhohn was appointed an instructor of anthropology at Harvard, and the rest of his formal academic career was spent at Harvard.

More serious ethnographic work with the Ramah Navaho began in the summer of 1936 and from that season on he was either personally or through students continuously in touch with the Navaho until his death. In his introduction to the Leightons’ Gregorio, The Hand-Trembler, he wrote of his Ramah Project:

The original plan was to spend two summers (with assistance from graduate students) doing the ethnography of the group as a background for the child study. Advisors assured me that Navaho culture was already well known and that it was merely necessary to describe local variations at Ramah together with the Ramah situation. It was also pointed out that no
Navaho local group had been described. In 1938 I completed the first draft of an ethnography. However, when we checked it during the 1938 field season I got a sense that we had not yet mastered the basic patterns, let alone the cultural dynamics. It was resolved, therefore, to continue ethnographic investigation simultaneously with the research upon the children. Gradually there emerged the notion that the following of a small community and its culture through time was a needed experiment in anthropology. It seemed plausible that the lack of time dimension was primarily responsible for the flat, one-dimensional quality which acute and sensitive scholars from other disciplines had noted in even the best of anthropological monographs. In 1939 a long correspondence with Professor Donald Scott, Director Emeritus of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, clarified my thinking. Mr. Scott stressed the significance of “continuous observation of the same persons in the same environment.” He suggested that “if biologists have found it profitable to spend their lives following the events in colonies of paramecia, it is likely that the science of man would be rewarded by intensive, longitudinal observations of a small community.”

Over the years Kluckhohn produced a series of technical papers and monographs on the Navaho that are noted in the profession as models for accurate and perceptive ethnographic description. Two of these monographs, *Navaho Classification of Their Song Ceremonials* and *An Introduction to Navaho Chant Practice*, were written in collaboration with his close friend and colleague, Professor Leland C. Wyman. A third, *Navaho Witchcraft*, is perhaps his finest work, since it combines detailed description with a new and penetrating theoretical interpretation synthesizing psychoanalytic, learning, and social structure theory. Less technical, but still classic examples of fine anthropological writing and analysis, are the two books he wrote with Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho and Children of the People*. He also collaborated with Leonard McCombe and. Evon Z. Vogt on the picture book, *Navaho Means People*. Another ethnographic study, *Navaho Material Culture*, written in collaboration with W. W. Hill and Elizabeth Colson, is now in press.

Kluckhohn was often criticized by his anthropological colleagues for not writing a full-scale technical monograph on the Navaho. In point of fact, he clearly planned to do such a monograph and would, we think, have done so had he lived. His files contained too much good material collected by technical ethnographic methods over a periods of 24 years to make this an easy assignment, especially while Kluckhohn himself was busy with a number of other enterprises.

A strong and continuing interest in theory developed very early in Kluckhohn’s career. His thesis on “Some Aspects of Contemporary Theory in Cultural Anthropology” was submitted in 1936 and his early papers in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s soon gave him a real charismatic quality for large numbers of anthropologists. This perhaps explains in large part why Kluckhohn was in 1947 the first president of the American Anthropological Association to be elected to the post after the Association was reorganized and the method of election changed.

It is extremely difficult to characterize Kluckhohn’s theoretical position. He never developed a tight theoretical scheme; rather he was wide-ranging and eclectic in his interests and publications. He was deeply interested in developing anthropology as a science; yet he was also a humanist who wrote from a philosophical as well as a scientific point of view about values in human culture. In addition he wrote papers on statistics in anthropology, on aspects of psychoanalytic theory, and on population genetics. He was hence very much of a generalist in anthropology. Yet if one were to attempt to isolate a special thread in his theoretical development, it would, we think, be his writings on culture pattern and value theory. Many of his basic ideas were summarized in his *Mirror for Man* (which won the McGraw Hill prize for the best popular work on science in 1947); they are also developed in the monograph on *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* which he wrote in collaboration with the late A. L. Kroeber. But more impressive were the series of papers he did on levels and types of patterning in culture in which he developed especially the idea of “covert” or “implicit” culture. His theoretical concerns with value systems took two major forms: a search for universal values and the development of a series of categories based upon the idea of “binary distinctive features.” The papers on universal values make an increasingly convincing case for the position that, despite wide differences in customs, there are apparently fundamental human values common to the diverse cultures of the world. The application of “distinctive features” analysis to value systems was just beginning to emerge in his writings in the last few years of his life. It is too early to judge whether this method of analysis will provide a lasting contribution, but it was a pioneering effort to bring some order into what will continue to be one of our most difficult areas of study in the social sciences.
These deep interests in value systems were also the strongest moving spirit in the organization of the Comparative Study of Values in Five Cultures Project which included additional field work with the Ramah Navaho but extended the study to include four other neighboring cultural groups – the Zuni, the Spanish-Americans, the Mormons, and the Texan Homesteaders. This large scale project carried out field research in the Ramah area from 1949 through 1953, involving 37 field workers from a variety of the behavioral sciences, and leading to an impressive series of papers and monographs on the five cultures and their value systems.

Kluckhohn’s eclecticism in theoretical matters precluded his founding a “school” with “disciples,” and hence a focused effort to develop a particular type of anthropology. On the other hand, it had the virtue of enabling him to cultivate and encourage novel and often times “off beat” ideas in his students. He had an astonishing capacity to stimulate students in all branches of anthropology to go ahead on their own, and he was amazingly tolerant of the diversity of points of view that were developed among his students and younger colleagues. He was a gifted field worker, and much of his skill and enthusiasm was communicated to his students as he initiated successive generations of them into field research in the Southwest. At Harvard he devoted countless hours listening to and counselling students who flocked to his office with ideas or problems, large and small.

To return to Kluckhohn’s contributions as a theorist in anthropology, it seems fair to suggest that he occupied an important transitional position. He came to maturity in the heyday of the ideas of cultural relativity which had become predominant in the earlier years of this century in American anthropology, particularly under the impact of the thinking of Franz Boas, and of the traditions of German idealism on which Boas built. As we have noted, Kluckhohn, with his humanistic sensitivities to uniqueness and qualitative considerations had much sympathy with these positions; he above all felt the absolute necessity of the empathetic understanding of the attitudes of people living in cultures other than his own, which he carried out so outstandingly in his work on the Navaho.

At the same time he was fully cognizant of the inadequacy of the more radical type of cultural relativism for the needs of scientific theory, and he was determined that anthropology should assume its full place among the theoretical sciences. Hence, from an early phase of his career he was, as again we have noted, actively concerned in the search for elements of universality in human cultures. His solid knowledge of biological science sensitized him to the importance of invariants at this level, but perhaps even more his studies of psychoanalytic theory convinced him of the existence and importance of essential common elements in the structure of human personalities, influenced as these were by the processes of personality development within the framework of kinship.

A relatively early insight in this field was that matrilineal kinship systems – which of course, included the Navaho – did not, as Malinowski had claimed, eliminate the relevance of the Oedipus complex.

The articulation of these personality factors with both the biological and the sociological aspects of kinship might have led Kluckhohn’s search in a sociological direction, but he showed less interest in this than in going directly to the patterning of culture itself, particularly the component of values. Here he was certainly striking at the heart of the matter so far as the main traditions of American anthropology were concerned. In the process he came increasingly to look to linguistics as a model and to hope that universal units of culture analogous to the phoneme and the morpheme could be identified. He also was much attracted by Roman Jacobson’s emphasis on the importance of binary oppositions in the structure of language and, in his last papers on the theory of culture, he made this the main basis of his very tentative approach to systematization. In the whole process he not only looked to a scheme of cultural universals, which could be used as a framework for cross-cultural comparisons, and could be articulated with the social, psychological, and biological levels, but he also explicitly revived consideration of the problems of cultural evolution which the previous generation of anthropologists had so ceremoniously buried.

Along such lines as these, though not the systematic developer of a single coherent scheme, Kluckhohn, in his time, had an important catalytic influence on his discipline and beyond. This influence is closely connected with the fact that Kluckhohn had such a catholicity of knowledge and understanding for the whole world of learning, which made him, though so eminent an anthropologist, never content with anthropology alone.

In addition to the variety of influences he was exposed to and he himself sought out in the
course of his education, and to his continuing breadth of reading throughout his life, this catholicity underlay the extension of his role at Harvard beyond anthropology, both as one of the principal founders and mainstays of the Department and Laboratory of Social Relations and as a prominent citizen of the University as a whole, not least in his capacity as a member of the Committee on General Education and a teacher under its auspices.

Among the constituent disciplines which were brought together in the social relations group, in addition to anthropology to which he was so deeply loyal, his closest affinity was with clinical psychology. This involved not only his lifelong interest in psychoanalytic theory, but very particularly the ideographic and empathic aspects of the “clinical approach.” He was fond of suggesting that there was a correlative affinity between anthropology and clinical psychology on the one hand and sociology and social psychology on the other, in the latter case associated in particular with their common concern for statistical methods and the breaking down of complex configurational phenomena into quantitatively measurable units. It was clear where his own primary personal sentiments lay, and yet he was certainly deeply committed to working toward a synthesis broad enough to include both types of approach, a commitment which was indeed manifested in the direction his analysis of culture was taking in his last years. Another evidence was his insistence on a requirement in statistics as part of the training of social anthropologists.

However much, to observers in the foreground of major innovations of academic organization, such developments may seem to depend on the particularities of immediate settings in university organization and politics, and of the personalities involved, in a longer view they could scarcely occur or prove viable if they did not incorporate major possibilities in the trend of development of cultural content itself. Kluckhohn had the rare imagination to grasp, more clearly than any but a few, the potentialities of the fruitful interplay between these three major growing disciplines in the behavioral field. In evaluating his contribution in this respect it should be remembered that, at the time when he first made these commitments, the importance of the relationships was far less widely recognized that it has since become.

For the record it may be noted that certain early associations and friendships prepared the way for his later more general role at Harvard and on the national scene. Besides his early field experience in anthropology, his experience with psychoanalysis in Vienna, and his contact with R. R. Marrett at Oxford were certainly important. Again, there was a very old friendship with John Dollard, starting when they were undergraduates together at the University of Wisconsin, and an early and long-continuing friendship with Alexander and Dorothea Leighton. The psychoanalytic interest was also continued by participation in the joint seminar of Abram Kardiner and Ralph Linton at Columbia during one year when Kluckhohn was on leave of absence from Harvard. Also it is important that he saw a good deal of Robert Merton during the brief period, in Kluckhohn’s early days at Harvard, when they were both there together.

On the other hand, in the development of what came to be his central anthropological interests, it is striking to note what the anthropologists under whom Kluckhohn studied during his graduate student days made upon him. The interests in pattern theory and in value systems bore little relationship to the concerns of his early anthropology professors in Vienna, or of R. R. Marrett, or of Tozzer, Dixon, or Hooton at Harvard. Two things seem to have happened. From the very beginning he began to range well beyond the field of anthropology for ideas and insights. He came to respond more strongly to the influence of four men with whom he never studied as a graduate student: Sapir, Boas, Linton, and Kroeber. Sapir clearly stimulated his interest in culture and personality and in culture pattern theory, as did Linton who was more of a contemporary. He came to have great admiration for the contributions of Boas. And in the last 15 years of his life he developed a very close intellectual and personal relationship with Kroeber. Although the relationship was not as close, Kluckhohn was also an admirer of the contributions of Ruth Benedict and Robert Redfield, whose intellectual interests were in many respects very close to those he was working on at the time of his death.

Another salient aspect of Kluckhohn’s professional character was his concern with and talent for practical affairs, in which he was heavily involved over most of his mature life. These ranged from the prominent role he played in the profession of anthropology itself to very active involvement in the affairs of government. He was thus, within his profession, one of the principal advisors to and participants in the activities of the Wenner-Gren Foundation. He also played a particularly prominent part in the
relations between his beloved Navaho and the government, being deeply involved in this problem in the months immediately preceding his death.

At the university level, in addition to his participation in the affairs of the Department of Anthropology (he served as its Chairman from 1957-1960), of the Peabody Museum, where he was curator of Southwestern Ethnology, and the Department and Laboratory of Social Relations where he was the senior social anthropologist and a member of the executive committee of the Laboratory from the beginning, he performed particularly important services as the first Director of the Russian Research Center, established in 1947 with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

This was explicitly an interdisciplinary venture oriented to the most important single focus of American foreign relations after World War II. Many eyebrows were raised over the fact that the Director was not an established expert in the field of Russian or Soviet affairs; indeed the many languages which Kluckhohn commanded did not at that time include Russian. His qualifications, in addition to his high general level of ability, were those of a general social scientist talented in administration. In addition, two more specific factors played a part. The first was the role Kluckhohn had played during the war in the research unit of the Office of War Information, under the directorship of Alexander Leighton, which was concerned with the analysis of the trend and determinants of Japanese morale. This group showed that it was possible, by careful use of social science methods, to achieve a substantially higher level of understanding, precisely in the areas most relevant to policy; than could even the best interpretations of the empirical, policy-oriented “experts” operating within the traditional framework of government. Specifically, the progressive deterioration of Japanese morale from early 1944 on, and the importance of the role of the Emperor, were matters on which the usual experts did not have clear, certainly not agreed opinions, but the relevant findings of research were unequivocal. The important point here is that the directors of the research, though they made liberal use of experts on Japan, were not themselves such experts at the beginning, but were general social scientists. The second factor was Kluckhohn’s participation in the social relations experiment, which was expected to provide an important part of the orientation for the projected studies of Soviet society and its background.

The Center under his direction brought together a variety of talent in these fields. It also provided one of the most extensive examples of collaboration between the social relations disciplines and history; economics, and political science. It has produced a long series of important publications in the Russian field and has had an important, though intangible, influence on policy. Among these he himself participated as author in only one, How the Soviet System Works, by Kluckhohn, Inkeles, and Bauer.

Kluckhohn’s administrative talent was manifested not only in the way in which he brought together a particularly able team of social scientists and “nondirectively” directed their work, but by the way in which he handled the extremely delicate and sensitive political aspects of the problem. It should be remembered that the Center was established just when the tensions of the cold war were coming to their first peak of exacerbation and that Kluckhohn’s directorship included the period of the Korean War and the early stages of McCarthyism. Throughout this he was able to retain the confidence of all the important relevant government and university agencies without sacrifice of academic integrity or the freedom of research and opinion. And this was done with only a few relatively minor disturbances. It is significant that McCarthy, in his crusade against “Pusey’s fifth-amendment communists,” did not even mention the Russian Research Center.

It is not surprising, in view of this record, that Kluckhohn was in great demand as a consultant and advisor outside the University, particularly in the foundations and in governmental agencies. Especially in the last 10 years of his life he devoted a great deal of his energy and time to these demands. He was also in demand as a “cultural ambassador” and in this connection served on assignments at the Salzburg Seminar in Austria, with UNESCO, in Japan, Australia, and India at various times.

Kluckhohn was, to an unusual degree, honored by election to major professional organizations beyond his field, including the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. Characteristically, he treated these memberships not merely as an honor, but he played a major active role in the affairs of all of these associations. He thereby also served to keep the
relatively small field of professional anthropology in constant and effective communication with the higher echelons of American academic as well as governmental life. In 1949 the University of New Mexico conferred on him an honorary degree of L.H.D., and in 1954-55 he was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

The theme of creative eclecticism, which we stressed in connection with Kluckhohn’s more strictly academic work, can thus be extended to his professional career as a whole. His career was in a sense a living demonstration that it is possible, even in the modern age, to approach the role of a universal man, a true Renaissance type. As anthropologist his work was of high distinction in a number of specialties, but he will probably be remembered more as a generalist, as some have said perhaps the last general anthropologist in the great tradition of Boas and Kroeber. But he was a generalist in a much wider sense than this, as eminent citizen in his own university and in the academic world generally, as promoter and director of manifold interdisciplinary alliances between his own field of anthropology and a whole series of its academic neighbors. He was one of the best examples of the academic man in practical affairs, both as university administrator and policymaker and in the outside world. With all this he was a deeply cultured man in the widest sense, and a man with a genius for personal friendship, with the widest variety of types of people. And all this he did while living in the most precarious state of health from late adolescence on, blithely ignoring the dangers inherent in that condition. His premature death removes from our ranks a great anthropologist whom we can ill afford to lose.

Professor Kluckhohn is survived by his wife, Florence Rockwood Kluckhohn, with whom he collaborated on a number of publications, and a son, Richard Paul Rockwood Kluckhohn, now an assistant professor of Anthropology at Boston University.

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