THE TYPE-VARIETY METHOD OF CERAMIC CLASSIFICATION
AS AN INDICATOR OF CULTURAL PHENOMENA*

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ABSTRACT

This discussion deals with the theoretical reasoning that underlies the type-variety method of ceramic analysis. Not only do pottery "types" and "varieties" embody sets of recognizably distinct attributes and impart particular cultural, areal, and temporal connotations, but they are also meaningful entities of cultural interpretation.

1. "Varieties" that have been tested by continued close study and by increases in knowledge concerning their nature and range of variation are close approximations and reliable indicators of original ceramic manifestations due to individual or small social group variation in a society.

2. Ceramic "types" represent the combining of a number of attributes into abstract conceptions which, when executed in clay by potters, are acceptable to them and a majority of others within their cultural configuration. Types are summations of individual or small social group variation consistent with boundaries imposed by the interaction of individuals on a societal level and determined by the operative value system present in any society. Pottery types are therefore representative of cultural phenomena.

3. Ceramic types are cultural derivatives and can be related one to another through space and time. Relationships of this kind are recognized as "ceramic systems" and "ceramic sequences."

ONE OF THE primary reasons why the archaeologist finds it advantageous to analyze pottery in terms of typological concepts is that a pottery type, once recognized and described, will inevitably repay the analyst by providing him with certain information otherwise unavailable or only available in part. Over thirty years ago Vaillant (1930: 9) observed "that the backbone of most of the New World chronologies is variation in pottery types and that the arrangement of a tribal ceramic into chronological divisions is not only very technical but also highly interpretive and impressionistic." The minimum elemental information now held to be usually bound up in a type is that the ceramic entity, such as Benque Viejo Polychrome, a type, is a specific kind of pottery embodying a unique combination of recognizably distinct attributes, and that this pottery, as well as being the product of a certain cultural configuration, has a definable areal distribution and temporal significance. When the analyst has set down a pottery type description, then the taxonomic device, or pottery type name, he attaches to the described ceramic entity, comes to stand for the entire set of recognizably distinct attributes plus a particular cultural affiliation, areal distribution, and temporal connotation.

In addition anthropological schemes of classification such as this should be means to define and weigh the relative importance of variation and regularity in human society. Most classifications used in anthropology find their rationale in that part of the scientific method which subscribes to the basic assumption that out of what may appear to be a mass of variation, regularities or laws of (cultural) process may be discerned, delineated, and described.

A scheme of ceramic classification has been proposed in three recent papers that is geared especially to the analysis of material aspects of human culture and that also provides a foundation upon which theoretical cultural considerations can be based. These three papers outline and define what is called the "type-variety concept" (variety, Wheat, Gifford, and Wasley 1958; type, Phillips 1958; type-variety concept, Smith, Willey, and Gifford 1960). In the following discussion whenever the term "type" is used, it is intended strictly as defined by Phillips. His usage corresponds to the "type cluster" in the Wheat-Gifford-Wasley nomenclature. For present purposes the terms "type," "variety," and "type-variety concept" are words with a special meaning not to be construed in settings other than those set forth in the three interpretations cited.

Within the context of the type-variety concept, variation as a recognizable reality can be thought of as the product of the individual or of relatively small social groups in human society. "Individual and small social group variation" is meant to encompass not only (at a minimum) actual individual variation, but also variation due to the activities of potters in a village segment, a village, a group of small villages, a community, or a series of communities (at a maximum). When entire cultural configurations are taken into account certain regu-

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laries are discernible that are due to the interaction of individuals and small social groups within a society, and these are observed as types. Types in this sense are material manifestations of the regularities of human behavior. Furthermore, theoretical conceptions such as “horizon style” (Willey 1945), “tradition” (Thompson 1956; Willey and Phillips 1958: 34-40), “ceramic system” and “ceramic sequence” (Wheat, Gifford, and Wasley 1958) are based on the assumption that on higher levels of societal integration, currents may be discerned which represent the very generalized responses of human groups as determined by recurrent situations and pressures of an even higher order of regularity in human behavior (Fig. 1). The type-variety concept accepts the premise that “cultural phenomena, by definition, have other than a chance distribution” (Kluckhohn 1958b: 40) and that there is discoverable order in the data. If the behavioral regularities of societies are documented by means of ceramic and other schemes of classification, some of the laws of human behavior which may exist will become apparent. Classificatory schemes applied to archaeological materials are in part useful as a means toward this end.

These views come to center in particular about the idea that the “type” as an entity is meaningful from the standpoint of cultural interpretation. In the most general terms and to varying degrees, this sentiment is adhered to by many others who have conducted and written about ceramic analyses. Nevertheless, there are competent analysts who do not concur with this view; they believe it tends too far in the direction of interpretive inference. Most previous discussions of ceramic data, however, have been severely limited because the type was the only accepted unit of analysis. Limitations have also come about through an insufficiently coordinated use of theoretical conceptions having to do with other factors in the cultural context under investigation.

The possession of a more flexible definition of the type in conjunction with the variety as well as other ideas such as those embodied in the “ceramic system” and the “ceramic sequence,” makes it possible to add new dimensions to a discussion which previously of necessity had to revolve about notions restricted to ceramic units of equivalent status. Within the type-variety concept analysts do not need to refer to all entities as types, and the newer levels of analytical deliberation introduced by an application of more than one theoretical conception upon the ceramic material open up avenues of greater freedom in our thinking. It may thus be possible to bring under one roof viewpoints and opinions previously thought to incline toward opposite poles and be irreconcilable.

When conducting a ceramic analysis utilizing the type-variety concept, the ceramic units involved in the interim sortings are designated “potential varieties.” These potential variety units are useful because they are separable on the basis of attributes which are recognizably distinct from one another, but at this stage in classification, these units may or may not be contrivances or artificial constructs of the student. Nevertheless, as any pottery analysis proceeds and as other studies are conducted involving like materials, knowledge concerning each variety increases to the extent that those varieties which are only artificial constructs can be discarded on the basis that they have no cultural reality and therefore virtually no further utility. Varieties which survive each addition to knowledge concerning them more and more closely approximate actual material ceramic manifestations of individual and small social group variation in a society. Consequently one may admit that some preliminary variety units indeed prove to be creations of the worker, but in accord with the underlying premise that classification for classification’s sake alone is not justifiable, those variety units which expanded knowledge does reveal as having been without cultural meaning are discarded. The more we know of varieties and types, the better we are able to formulate them into units that approximate what were meaningful entities in whatever cultural context we are endeavoring to illuminate.

Types generally include several or many varieties, and as a result are summations of individual and small social group variation. The basic attributes involved in any type came together in the combination of a mental image plus the motor habits of the prehistoric artisans of a culture in such a way that when executed in clay, they fulfilled the requirements of the ceramic and stylistic values of that culture. As noted by Kluckhohn (1958a: 474): “In the last analysis it is clearly from individual variability that new cultural values take their origin.” And so it is that “types,” having grown
out of a blending of individual variation, both reflect cultural values and are determined by them. A type is regarded as being the material outcome of a set of fundamental attributes that coalesced, consciously or unconsciously, as a ceramic idea or “esthetic ideal”—the boundaries of which were imposed through the value system operative in the society by virtue of individual interaction on a societal level. These ceramic ideas occurred in the brains of the potters who made the ceramic fabric that constitutes a type, and they are not by any means creations of an analyst.

The distinction of one variety from another within a type rests upon differences having to do with one or several minor characteristics. In contrast with those particulars which distinguish one type from another, such minor ceramic differences were the result of work produced within the confines of relatively small social groups or by individual potters who indulged preferences as to the locale where temper or clay must be gathered or who were able to give vent to artistic flairs and so on. As such, varieties cannot be held as representing any cultural configuration in its entirety. Varieties are apt to reflect “individual and small social group variation” rather than whole-culture phenomena, while the type portrays a combination of a number of pottery traits that were acceptable not only to the potter but to most others adhering to a given culture pattern (Fig. 1).

Here we approach certain important observational points that bear upon the reasons why types do represent cultural phenomena.

There are psychological causes or mental conditions—generally considered physiological—that might also be called “tendencies.” Such are the tendency to fatigue, the tendency to form habits, the tendency toward imitation by suggestion, and others. These exist nearly identically in all men, whatever their degree of civilization... The tendencies of which we have spoken are at the root of all anthropological phenomena (Kroeber 1952: 18).

The “tendency to form habits” and “the tendency toward imitation by suggestion” are intimately connected with the basic causal factors intertwined in the cultural validity of the type.

In the words of a passage contained in a theoretically oriented study by Rands and Riley, one can find a pertinent statement of this validity. Cultural phenomena and processes can be documented in the identification of varieties and types because “culture growth often involves a great deal of elaboration—those embellishments which so often impress the student by their number and variety. At the same time, habit channeling, together with the nature of the complex nucleus, will tend significantly to delimit the forms of embellishment that are likely to take place” (Rands and Riley 1958: 276). Applying the first of these remarks to prehistoric pottery, the “ceramic variety” represents elaboration and embellishment, whereas the second statement refers to that which results in a combination of abstracted elements that in pottery is represented by the “ceramic type.”

It is plain that a pottery type has a cultural basis because the implicit values inherent in the cultural configuration as a whole cast serious limitations upon what in the realm of ceramic products will be acceptable to the participants in that cultural configuration. At the same time the cluster of values also imposes serious strictures upon the ceramic mental images that the potters will draw upon. The potters respond to value-sanctioned, culturally-defined images and not to others that could be encompassed by their abilities or imagination because most people, due to economic necessity and for reasons of greater psychological comfort having to do with reduction of social stress, tend to conform to the demands of a majority of the norms that are a part of their culture at a particular time in history. “To speak of ‘values’ is one way of saying that human behavior is neither random nor solely ‘instinctual’... the individual gets abstract, perduring standards primarily from the culture or sub-culture as mediated by parents and other persons from whom he learns” (Kluckhohn 1958a: 474). Types, therefore, equate themselves with the crystallization of conscious or unconscious ceramic esthetic images conditioned by values. In this regard, the scheme of classification discussed approaches a definition of the ceramic value system which pertains to any given archaeological culture. In other words, when recognizing and defining types, the analyst is describing the material manifestations “of preferred paths of behavior that take their direction from varying concepts of the desirable” (Kluckhohn 1958a: 473).

In speaking of artifacts Leslie White says, “We do not customarily call these things human behavior, but they are the embodiments of human behavior; the difference between a nodule of flint and a stone axe is the factor of human labor. An axe, bowl, crucifix—or a haircut—is concealed human labor.” White maintains...
But which are at the same time patterned and conditioned by the value orientation held to by a majority of the participants within a cultural configuration (recognized analytically as "varieties")

Types that are aligned into theoretical conceptions (units of integration) represent recognition of different aspects of very generalized human group responses as determined by recurrent situations and pressures of an even higher order than those which were responsible for the types themselves (recognized analytically as "complexes," "ceramic systems," "ceramic sequences," "wares," "horizon styles," "pottery traditions," and "design styles").

The type-variety concept

Fig. 1. Chart showing how the analyst can recognize certain cultural phenomena in a collection of pottery by applying the type-variety method of ceramic classification. (In terms of absolute theory: within a cultural matrix where the individual motivation of all participant pottery makers coincides completely with the ceramic and stylistic values of that culture, all types would tend to be exclusively one-variety types with a certain range of variation in each case as determined by participant diversity in skills and so forth; on the other hand, within a cultural matrix where no value orientation obtains concerning pottery or where the value orientation has for some reason been totally shattered, the products of every pottery-producing individual would be a distinct variety and the number of varieties within a type would be limited only by the number of pottery-producing individuals within the cultural configuration.)
artifacts are the result of acts which cumulatively, in this sense, are human behavior and the concern of psychology. "If, however, we treat them [artifacts] in terms of their relationship to one another, quite apart from their relationship to human organisms, i.e., in an extra somatic, or extraorganismic, context, the things and events become culture — cultural elements or culture traits." The difference between the two "derives from the difference between contexts in which their common subject matter is treated" (White 1959: 232-3).

Tacit recognition is accorded these well-stated contextual observations in the implications of the type-variety concept. The situation, however, is treated not as a dichotomy but as a duality (one flowing from the other) in that the "variety" is a reflection of concrete individual human behavior while a "type" represents an abstraction from individual or small social group behavior that is the ceramic unit most useful in showing relationships of one kind of pottery (one ceramic cultural element) to another. Furthermore when viewed in this light the type-variety concept tends to be consonant with the definition of culture by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 155) who say it "is an abstraction from concrete human behavior, but it is not itself behavior." By analyzing pottery within the framework of the type-variety methodology we move from a consideration of human acts to the consideration of theoretical abstractions that can be used in various ways to increase our understanding of cultural processes (Fig. 1). It is an analytical progression from the specific to the general, from percepts to concepts, and in this case from appreciable examples of human behavior (in pottery making) to concern with abstract cultural elements.

In the light of the foregoing remarks as they pertain to innate human tendencies, the archaeologist, in his capacity as a student of material culture, seems to come more directly into contact with what may be subsumed under two particularly fundamental tendencies. These two tendencies are to be found as components of elemental human nature in the form of (1) stability, as expressed by type persistence and continuity through time, a condition essentially embodied in the concept of tradition (Thompson 1956; Willey and Phillips 1958: 34-40); and (2) change, as encompassed by the constant regrouping of artifact attributes into new types. In each individual craftsman there is a rudimentary desire for a measure of both stability or continuity (manifested by habits and a clinging to the old) and change (manifested by the desire for something new). The extent to which either of these is satisfied or emphasized is conditioned by the total value system of the society in which the individual finds himself. Some societies emphasize fast moving change accelerated to such a point as to be constantly disturbing to the individual. Others emphasize stability to such a degree as to be almost dormant. On his own the individual seems to incline toward a fine balance of change and stability, and his desires would be met under ideal conditions by a rhythmic pattern of new types within established traditions. Actual situations deviate from the ideal in accord with the degree to which stability or change is emphasized within a cultural matrix. In trying to describe and observe the tendency in any given configuration toward one or the other extreme we approach an understanding of the underlying mechanisms of human nature and the societal values that produce types as observable realities. In describing types and recording the material traditions within a society we are indicating the tempo of that society as reflected in its material culture.

Cultural anthropology has consistently drawn attention to tendencies of this kind and there has been an effort to delineate them with regard to value orientations. A recent paper (Colby 1958: 317-22) pinpoints the problem in the context of an equilibrium theory of behavioral redundancy. In any cultural configuration predictability of tomorrow's events and of what people may do or think is of paramount importance. . . . For predictability to be constantly maintained at a high level of efficiency, value systems must be changeable, must always be in process. . . . But there are other trends in the opposite direction which temper the dread of the unexpected. These are trends toward disorganization, toward the unknown, and toward experimental innovations. . . . By maintaining some sort of equilibrium between order and disorder or rigidity and fluidity [man] can stay at peak adjustment. Such is the maturation process in culture and in personality. . . . One may say then that life in general, like language, seeks . . . an equilibrium between the new (unexpected) and the old (predictable); between disorganization and organization.

In consequence of these underlying tendencies of human behavior as discussed by Colby, there is in any cultural continuum a "process of constant reformulation, reassessment, and affirmation of value structure regulated by the movement either toward or away from organization."
It is this interesting aspect of human nature that provides a considerable explanation of the "why" and the cause of dynamics in cultural process. The archaeologist sees and documents it when he describes gradual change within a cultural or artifact "tradition." The ceramic analyst has observed similar circumstances when he elucidates a "ceramic sequence."

The fact cannot be overemphasized that it is due to the results of the combined value forces of the total cultural configuration (indeed the inherent cultural bias) that particular kinds (types) of pottery become widely acceptable and are striven for as desired norms in ceramic manufacture. Awareness must be exercised that any normal "human act, even in its first expression in the person of a single individual, is a group product to begin with" (White 1959:244). The individual craftsman is never really "free" to "create" the entity recognized as a variety or type because although he may be free to produce an entity of some sort, his production may either be accepted or rejected by the culture in response to its particular bias. And since the individual did not by himself create the bias, the cultural acceptance of his product is beyond his immediate control. The results of his work may, in terms of the culture, merely go down as experiment, thereby resulting only in one or a few expressions of individual variation, or it may "catch on," that is, be compatible with the bias of a major portion of the culture and thus have an appeal which is pleasing or advantageous in one way or another to a majority of the participants in the culture. And of course, due to the mechanisms of culture change through time, the cultural bias shifts with time and what will please at one time may not please at another—so it is that a type is a true indicator of time and a complex of types (a ceramic complex) is a valid delineation of the ceramic content of a phase.

To repeat the substance of many an earlier discourse, a potsherd is surely not a biological entity and therefore cannot in a biological sense be related to or evolve into another kind of potsherd. But let me reiterate my view that pottery types are manifestations of ceramic ideas, ceramic images, held originally in the minds of human beings. The ideas are human concepts and as such can be and are indeed related to one another areally and do indeed, as ideas or conceptions develop one into another through time. Relationships of this order are recognized by the analyst through the medium of theoretical conceptions such as "ceramic systems" and "ceramic sequences" (ceramic micro-traditions).

Ideas, mental images, are the "genes" of culture. These ideas or mental images, and in particular ceramic ideas or mental images, while being in no way biologically related to other mental images, can be and often are related within cultures and cross-culturally within a cultural frame of reference (see Osgood 1951:202-14). Therefore, anthropological classifications having to do with ideas or mental images as recognized in objects of material culture find their basis and justification within the processes of culture itself. Such classifications as these should not in any sense be viewed as biological classifications. They are cultural classifications. As a result, even though man is a biological organism, the "type-variety" methodological approach is a cultural classification because it is concerned with the analysis of man's nonbiological culture products.

An interesting point has been raised by Kluckhohn to the effect that classifications which are to be of use to anthropology should be typologies. He defines a typology as a classification that has an intent, that is, has a direction. The ways one may classify things are limitless and therefore any number of classifications may be conceived, but a typology has an explicit theoretical basis and the typologist is interested in using a given classification in order to shed light upon the reasons beneath the occurrence of some observable phenomena. . . . A classification is no more than a set (or sets) of empirical groupings established for convenience. A typology, however, is a theoretically oriented classification that is directed toward the solution of some problem or problems (Kluckhohn, in press).

Following this distinction I view the type-variety methodological scheme as a typology. In addition, when an analyst subjects a collection to study by means of the type-variety concept, I believe he accomplishes both what Rouse (1960) calls "analytic classification" and "taxonomic classification."

In conclusion, let us review the query, should an anthropological typology be an end in itself? Absolutely not. Any classification of use to anthropology, whatever the medium, must be but a means whereby cultural processes are described and elucidated. Within such a frame of reference cultural classifications (anthropological typologies) are some of the instruments which anthropologists must use if they are to
chart reliably the actualized and potential dimensions of human nature through time and space.

This is not by any means to say that it is desirable to adopt blindly any one scheme and stick to it come what may. It is rather my feeling that ultimately a classificatory scheme or group of compatible schemes will be refined which will accurately reflect the regularities and irregularities, the similarities and dissimilarities, of cultural processes, perhaps on a world-wide basis, and that our present efforts are but steps in this direction.

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