

Patterns of Culture

(Excerpts)

By Ruth Benedict

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“Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.”

“According to the Kwakiutl it did not matter whether a relative had died in bed of disease or by the hand of the enemy; in either case death was an affront to be wiped out by the death of another person. A chief's sister and her daughter [died] ... [so his tribe] set out, and found seven men and two children asleep and killed them. ‘They felt good when they arrived at Sebaa in the evening.’ ‘The point which is of interest to us is that in our society those who on that occasion would feel good when they arrived at Sebaa that evening would be the definitely abnormal...[whereas] on the Northwest Coast those are favored and fortunate to whom that mood under those circumstances is congenial...” (pp. 480–81)

“We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature. We do not elevate it to the dignity of a first principle. We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, ‘It is morally good,’ rather than ‘It is habitual,’ ... But historically the two phrases are synonymous.” (p. 482)