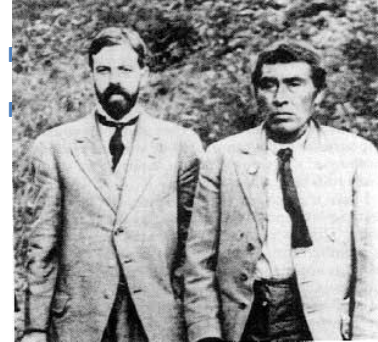


Alfred Kroeber

the "Superorganic" and "Style Patterns"

Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) received his doctorate under Franz Boas, at Boas at Columbia University in 1901, basing his dissertation on his field work among the Arapaho. He spent most of his career in at the University of California, Berkeley, where he worked as both a Professor of Anthropology and the Director of what was then The University of California Museum of Anthropology (now the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology). His influence was so strong that many contemporaries adopted his style of beard and mustache as well as his views as a social scientist. During his lifetime, he was known as the "Dean of American anthropologists."



Alfred Kroeber with Ishi, the last Yahi Indian, ca. 1911.

His theory of the "superorganic" asserts the culture develops its own unique "style patterns." For our purposes, we will equate the superorganic as not unlike how we have defined "culture" in this course, as a system of organized symbols expressive of underlying values. Within any give society, the style pattern entails certain cultural goals, ideals and orientations that are aspired to, and, once formed, are somewhat fixed and rigidly structured. The society then moves inevitably toward realizing and manifesting those ideals, developing, growing all in conformity to the style pattern. It is an incremental process over time, as each element is brought into place, each of which is a precursor and antecedent for the next element, building on itself, until the style pattern is fully realized, resulting is a "cultural climax." It is as if the architectural plans for a an wonderful skyscraper are drawn up, a style pattern formed. Then starting with the foundation, each story of the building are built, level by level, until the once ideal becomes manifest. Once a culture style pattern is fully realized, there is an inevitable "fatigue" and decline in that culture.

As an illustration of this process, see the example of [Greek History](#). Also consider the intriguing example of [Thomas Kuhn's Paradigm](#) theory. How different is Kroeber's "style pattern" from Kuhn's "paradigm"?

The importance and presence of cultural diversity is imperative to the health of any given society. Kroeber's theory suggests that with the fatigue of any particular style pattern, a new style pattern can be much more readily established given the diversity of ideals present to build upon. With a mono-culture, from where would a new style pattern emerge?

See: A. L. Kroeber. 1944. *Configurations of Culture Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press