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LESLIE SPIER

1893—1961

A Biographical Memoir by
ROBERT F. SPENCER

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Biographical Memoir

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John F. Kennedy

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December 13, 1893–December 3, 1961

BY ROBERT F. SPENCER

A QUARTER CENTURY has gone by since Leslie Spier's death. Yet he remains a major figure in American anthropology: references to his scholarship are widely made, and his influence is still strongly felt.

However hesitantly, I cannot help but begin this memoir with a personal note. In preparing to write this summary, I went of course to the various sources of information on Spier—not only the professional obituary appearing shortly after his passing¹ but also to the lecture notes I had taken as a student in his courses at the University of New Mexico in 1939–40. A second-year graduate student in anthropology, I had enrolled in his course, “Culture Provinces of Western North America.” I recall the rather anxious discussions, reflecting then as now graduate student paranoia, attempts to grasp precisely what it was that Spier was expounding. House types, cradle boards, clothing and footgear, containers, transport, and so through a host of highly factual listings of the elements—material, social, and religious—that make up the cultural systems of western native American peoples. What were we, as students, expected to do with such detail? Was it

¹ Harry W. Basehart and W. W. Hill, “Obituary: Leslie Spier, 1893–1961,” *American Anthropologist*, 67(165):1258–77.

a question of memorizing, of somehow regurgitating this plethora of facts in an examination? But then Spier called for an evaluation of the material: in a paper to be written in lieu of an examination, we were asked to provide an analysis, to put forth the perspectives we had derived from the course.

Well, by the end of the term something had jelled. Suddenly it all fell into place. Spier's view of ethnology, his scientific concerns, his delineation of problems and his explanatory solutions somehow became clear. I look back on the paper I wrote, at the prized comments in the instructor's own hand, and I note with no little sense of pride that he gave me an A+. However remote in time or space, the Indian tribes of aboriginal California, of the Great Basin, the Southwest, or the intermontane Plateau, assumed new significance. It was at this point, as a result of taking Spier's course, that I can say I became an anthropologist. Spier offered the student a virtual conversion experience. Students might be interested in ethnology, in the varied customs, habits, and practices of aboriginal peoples, but until they experienced the *Aufklärung*—the enlightenment—that Spier could impart, they had not quite made the grade. Few students have had such gifted teaching.

But clearly there is much more to Spier than his superiority as a teacher. True, those students like myself retain the most vivid recollections of his classroom presence, but few teachers succeeded so well in wedding teaching with empirical research. Indeed, this was Spier's forte. He is best remembered for his extensive field work, his descriptive analyses of the precontact cultures, those aboriginal forms of American Indian life in western North America. Not that his interests related solely to American ethnology: he possessed a profound knowledge of human achievements and organizations across the world. Africa, for example, remained one of his strong interests. But it was his firsthand acquisition of

knowledge of the content of the social and cultural systems of native American life that established his ethnographic place.

As may be surmised, implicit in Spier's empirical studies of various tribal groups is an underlying body of theory. Yet one cannot call Spier a theorist, at least in terms of his developing a special school or following. His contribution represents a perfecting of a technique of history, one usually identified—not wholly accurately—with the “school” of American anthropology ascribed to Franz Boas (d. 1942) and his students at Columbia University. The problem to which Spier addressed himself most pointedly concerned a history without documentation, a historicist perspective not so much in terms of a search for origins as in a sense of discovering processes of culture building among comparable peoples. Basically, Spier's interest lay in demonstrating relationships between cultural systems in definable areas and positing interrelations and growths. And he carried it off to perfection.

Spier's theoretical orientations are perhaps best seen against the period in which he was most active and the climate in anthropological research that was then operative. One can thus see how he arrived at his specific place in the forefront of American ethnographers.

Leslie Spier was born in New York City on December 13, 1893, one of the four children of Simon F. Spier and Bertha Adler Spier. He went to school in the city itself, a circumstance that drew him into urban life and an interest in the burgeoning technology of the day. It is not surprising that he was a student in applied mathematics and engineering, fields in which he took his B.S. degree at the City College of New York. Yet by happy accident in 1913, when he was employed as an engineering assistant for the New York Public Service Commission, he was assigned to the New Jersey Archaeological and Geological Survey. His interest in anthro-

pology stemmed from this experience, and his early career was marked by a series of publications in archaeology, most notably an evaluation of the prehistoric Trenton Argillite culture of the eastern United States. But archaeology and prehistory were not to be Spier's *métier*. It was rather that for him this initial field experience opened up undreamed of horizons—the continent inhabited by native Americans, as it was before the arrival of the Europeans.

Drawn to the powerful personality of Franz Boas, Spier came to Columbia University in 1916 as a graduate student in anthropology. He shared with his mentor an interest in archaeology, to be sure, but he was also attracted by physical anthropology (human biology), linguistics, and ultimately cultural anthropology through the avenue of ethnology. In later years Spier was to demonstrate his command of all branches of the holistic discipline of anthropology, studying native American languages as well as conducting a study of physical changes among the descendants of Japanese immigrants. But ethnology remained his first commitment. As an assistant anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History, he had ample opportunity to become familiar with the artifacts of cultures spread across the world. And with his bent for technology, Spier never lost interest in the material side of human achievements in their respective cultures.

In 1920 Spier was awarded a doctorate from Columbia. The Ph.D. dissertation that Spier submitted to Boas was essentially a library problem combined with some field research. Although he had visited the Pueblo of Zuni in New Mexico in 1916 and had, in 1918 and 1919, begun his significant work with the Havasupai group in Arizona, he spent some time in the latter year with the Kiowa, Wichita, and Caddo, all peoples of the American Plains. His thesis related

to the Plains area: it was a comparative study of the dramatic Sun Dance, the most important ritual of the American bison hunters. The focus of the study was historical, raising the question of the sources of a ceremonial complex deeply entrenched in Plains Indian life. Often quoted, Spier's Sun Dance monograph provided a model not only for historical inquiries of other scholars but also for his own future work.

In 1920 Spier accepted his first teaching post at the University of Washington, remaining there until 1929. In New York in 1920 he had married a fellow anthropologist, Dr. Erna Gunther, like himself a student of Boas and a major figure in northwest American anthropology until her death in 1982. The Spiers had two children, Robert and Christopher. The latter is still resident in the Seattle area; the former received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1954 and—following in his parents' footsteps—is professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri. Spier remarried in 1931; his second wife was Dr. Anna H. Gayton, an equally gifted anthropologist trained by A. L. Kroeber and Robert H. Lowie at the University of California. Dr. Gayton-Spier died in 1977.

Spier's productivity in teaching and research continued over the next three decades. His academic appointments were many: they were often on a visiting basis, but he also held chairs at Yale (1933–39) and at the University of New Mexico (between 1939 and 1955). These appointments often left him free to engage in his extensive field investigations. Other institutions at which he served included the University of Oklahoma (on leave from Washington in 1927 and 1929); the University of Chicago (1928 and 1930); and Harvard University (1939 and 1949). In addition he was occupied with summer teaching over many years with appointments at Columbia and the University of California at both Berkeley and Los Angeles. Spier also held research associateships at Cali-

ifornia and Yale, and he directed field studies at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and field training programs in both the Southwest and Northwest.

Although Spier's wide range of teaching experience influenced many who then moved into professional anthropology, it was in the ethnographic field that he made his name as a scientist. His abiding interest in the native peoples of America stemmed, as may be seen, from his initial endeavors in the Plains and in the Southwest. One finds him moving extensively through the diverse western American Indian cultures—from the Southwest to the Great Basin and California and into the intermontane Plateau. In all these regions are to be found a congeries of native peoples, each group or tribe in its own way distinct, and each, at the time Spier contacted them, retaining elements of an aboriginal way of life. Spier saw his task as eliciting—essentially descriptively—the components of these various native cultures. Implicit in his reasoning as he approached the material and social content of the groups he studied was a sense of historicism, his query being basically directed to the origins and comparisons of cultural systems.

It is at this point that one becomes aware of Spier as a scientific ethnographic field worker. It is by no means an easy task to settle into a remote area (especially given the problems of transport and travel in the preflight era), establish rapport with the members of a tribal group, and ask the kinds of questions that field ethnography requires. Spier's extensive experience, however, made him a master of ethnographic techniques. He acquired a speaking knowledge of various native languages, interested himself in all facets of the cultural and social system in question, and above all brought a keen and sensitive awareness to bear. Those of us who have sometimes followed Spier, asking different questions of the same people, retain our amazement that thirty and forty

years later the oldsters in a community recall him with affection and respect: "That man could talk our language." "He could make a basket just like we used to in the old days." "He figured out all the people in my family." The lessons that were imparted are not lost today; in Spier's work there is a superb model for gathering information on the human experience in culture. Moreover, none of his collected data has required revision.

Like other fields, the discipline of anthropology has, over the years, had its ups and downs, problem orientations that may change with each decade, new horizons and perspectives. But, however much the research goals and purposes of cultural and social anthropology become subject to modification, the field remains at base a comparative one, dependent on an awareness of the human potential for cultural difference. In other words, ethnology still underlies the conclusions of whatever theoretical avenue contemporary anthropologists elect to follow.

Spier's studies rested on an awareness of cultural difference rooted in time, the uniqueness of each system. But such uniqueness is to be seen in the context of historical relationships. With other American anthropologists generally active at the time of Boas, Spier rejected any notion of a unilineal evolutionary development of culture—and thus, ultimately, any Marxist position. He held no brief for the so-called "functionalist" schools, that of Malinowski, for example, or Radcliffe-Brown. He tended instead to follow Boas's functional approach, which posits relationships between the components of a culture. Similarly he was generally indifferent to the sense of an all-pervading ethos or configuration, a notion that characterized the famous work of Ruth Benedict. In Spier's work there is a clear idea of what constitutes culture among humans. Because every cultural system depends on time for its growth and development, those features that of-

fer insights into the rise of various cultures are the ones to be analyzed.

Like his mentor Franz Boas, Spier retained throughout his career a strongly defined sense of caution. He was often impatient with conclusions drawn by his contemporaries, arguing that they went too far without sufficient evidence. It was, in fact, this reserve that heightened Spier's brilliance as a field worker. Beginning with his analysis of the Plains Indian Sun Dance, he displayed a meticulousness that carried into all his later work and became his hallmark. In his view a cultural system was made up of parts, discernible elements that, taken together, form a total complex. The components of a culture permitted an evaluation—not only of the way in which they interrelated within the system but in terms of the comparative and implicitly historical relations between cultures.

An example or two of Spier's empirical approach may serve to highlight his contribution to anthropology—ethnology and the kinds of concerns with which he was preoccupied. As stated earlier, he saw himself as a culture-historian; basically he questioned how a particular cultural system developed as it did. The most striking example of Spier's ethnographic method unquestionably appears in the Sun Dance monograph. But because this ceremonial complex moves so deeply into an area of some esoterica, the theoretical stance perhaps may be more readily illuminated in more encompassing studies, such as that of the Havasupai or the Klamath Indians of southern Oregon. Spier worked with the Klamath tribe, a group numbering about 1,500 people, during both 1925 and 1926. His task, as he saw it, was to place the Klamath in "western"—that is, native American—culture. To resolve this issue—seeing the Klamath in relation to native California, the rest of the Plateau-Basin, and the Northwest—Spier set about obtaining an inventory of the components of

the culture. As listed in his monograph, these ranged from all material items—houses, clothing, weaponry, transport, containers, and so to economic life generally—on through the array of nonmaterial features—settlements, chieftainship, warfare, social classes, kinship and family structure, and ceremonials.

The result is an account of Klamath life, one that involves a description of how the native system was put together. In this study, as indeed in nearly all his works, the ethnography is complete, the intent clear. Spier tells us what is there in native Klamath life. Contemporary critics might argue that this is a “shopping list,” an account in which all component elements are given essentially equal weight. A “modern” anthropologist, fifty years later, might want to stress the ways in which the component elements are put together and so seek to move more deeply into the dynamic aspects of Klamath life. This does Spier an injustice. He was well aware of the problems inherent in native American systems. To him, for example, a ceremony, a bit of ritual, involved a vast number of elements coming together: the locus of the ritual, the participants, their clothing, and their artifacts—and so to the ultimate meaning of the pattern. Several points obtrude in this regard. On the one hand, Spier felt it important to record the content of those native American cultures he investigated before the cultures themselves disappeared. Moreover, he had a rather different concept in mind.

The fundamental issue in the Klamath and other studies was the problem of cultural relations. As in his later works—those on the Yuman tribes or the Havasupai, among others—he drew tightly knit comparisons. Consequently, having described Klamath dwellings (both an earth lodge for winter use and a mat lodge for warmer seasons), he notes the form and general function of these structures. Then, employing comparative ethnographic materials, he traces the distribu-

tion of these house types—and finds them spread from the middle Columbia to central California. The same procedure is followed with regard to other elements and complexes; Spier notes the points that are characteristic of the Klamath but that are apparent as well among other tribes in both adjacent and remoter areas. What, then, is the permissible conclusion? It is that the Klamath share with other peoples over a wide geographic area elements of common culture. In other words, a shared history is inferred.

But clearly this is not all. The common elements—whether house types or chieftainship, for example—are given different weighting in different local settings, differences that are slight, perhaps, but none the less perceptible. In short, when the distributions of elements in space are analyzed, they reveal a slightly different integration from group to group. Comparison of the overt discernible features suggests the presence of a major theme, the spread of an idea or thing over a wide area. But, however much demonstrably related groups may possess a common history, each one makes of the elements it possesses something peculiarly its own. To employ a musical analogue, each culture offers its own variations on a theme. One cannot, of course, discover the point of origin of such shared or borrowed traits. But when a vast area of aboriginal America is shown to possess features in common, there is the implication of a broad historical base. Spier's inductive methodology sheds light on the rise of areas of culture in the native New World and indeed elsewhere.

To Spier the concept of culture was primary. His detailed penetration of material and societal institutions affirms the proposition that although human cultural entities are distinct from each other, yet they may share a common cultural base. The ultimate conclusion makes for an essentially relativistic

perspective on the nature of culture. Spier's disciplined empirical studies are built on a sense of the properties and processes implicit in a concept of culture. But Spier never sought to develop any elaborate cultural hypothesis, however much his contemporaries—not to mention anthropologists today—agonized over definitions and formulations. Rather than compressing the idea of culture in mankind into some definable and limited frame, Spier was content to let the empirical data speak for themselves. Obviously there are propositions and assumptions, self-evident truths, that color all of Spier's writings. Culture to him was made up of people; his writings show a concern with the role of the individual in culture.

Is the human being free to make choices, or are modes of behavior that are characteristic of cultural systems determined, directed, and limited by the system itself? According to Spier, humans act in their social and natural environments within a framework conditioned by time, i.e., history. Men are free within the limits of historically derived cultural systems. Equally, Spier was much preoccupied with the question of cultural growth as dependent on accident. A culture, he notes, is not accidental or random. Provision can be made for individual choices and their effects, but at the same time the cultures of mankind are always influenced by what has gone before. The patterns of understanding that are characteristic of members of a given culture derive from the factors that have built it.

There are also discernible processes that are operative in the building of culture. Individually made inventions do occur, to be sure, but these—given the frequent absence of verifiable circumstances—come generally from history. Spier devoted considerable time to an analysis of the Prophet Dance of the American Northwest, a messianic revivalistic movement that marked the tribes of the area. Here Spier

could demonstrate the innovative in a social movement that drew on both the aboriginal context and on the imposition of ideological elements drawn from Christian missionization. Two processes were shown to be at work. On the one hand, there is the employment of native symbols that gave rise to the Prophet Dance idea; on the other, there is the problem of the spread, the diffusion of the invented rituals from one group to another.

It is the latter point—the diffusion and integration of cultural elements—that becomes problematic for Spier. To Spier, traits and features come out of time; they are invented—but always within the limiting context of a given cultural system—or they are diffused with the same limitation applying. For such reasons, western North America assumed a special place for Spier. The area provided a living laboratory in which major related complexes could be shown to exist, where a common history was evident, and where each culture gave its particular twist, its idiosyncratic interpretation, to the things, material and social, derived from history. Spier remained impatient with the idea of cultural holism, an idea that in the 1920s and 1930s became a watchword and that still reflects a major preoccupation of many anthropologists. The integration of the elements that make up a system is understandable in terms of history and not in terms of a preconceived structure or a psychological bent. By letting the data speak for themselves, Spier's formulations convey a vitality, an objective sense of the real world of ethnographic analysis. In short, the collected data fall into their own niche, offer their own explanation, and never, as Spier employed them, stray from a scientific historicism.

There is one remaining side of Spier's many-faceted career. He saw it as most important to spread the message of a scientific anthropology. Teaching and research were ex-

panded by his work as an editor. And he insisted that every opportunity be given to colleagues and students to publish solid and informative work. As editor of the *American Anthropologist* (the official organ of the American Anthropological Association) from 1934 to 1938, he took a broad and eclectic view: he often published papers—if they were well argued—whose perspective clearly might not dovetail with his own. Open to nuance but insistent on the highest scholarly standards, Spier exerted considerable influence on anthropological publishing for a long time. Eager to further publications, in 1935 he founded a short-lived *General Series in Anthropology*, which was designed to issue monographs on various ethnographic topics. Continuing financial support for this venture proved difficult to obtain; he was able somewhat later, however, in 1945, to found the *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, a major journal that Spier continued to edit until his death. (Although still in existence as the *Journal of Anthropological Research*, after Spier's death the *Southwestern Journal* was never able to recapture the vitality he injected.) As an editor, both in his selection of manuscripts and in his treatment of them, he was without peer. Every sentence, reference, and diagram were carefully combed. Indeed, it was this same meticulous quality that appeared in his teaching. Having begun his career in engineering, Spier made full use of his drafting skills and artistic gifts, sometimes going so far as to redraw diagrams and similar items for his contributors. One can recall, as an example, his skills at the blackboard. To illustrate an artifact, he would draw it; and if it were a pot, a basket, or some other symmetrical object, he would take a piece of chalk in each hand and draw a perfect shape.

Lamentably, Spier and the majority of his contemporaries are gone. Quite apart from the sense of loss that must be felt, there is the question of what has happened to the discipline

of anthropology, and particularly of ethnology/ethnography since those historicist days. There are some today who are still appalled at the diffuseness of the discipline as it is now practiced and the consequent decline in scholarly excellence. Spier perhaps saw it coming but remained faithful to the field as he knew it. He was and remains one of the “greats.”

HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS

DEGREES

- 1915 B.S. (engineering), College of the City of New York
 1920 Ph.D. (anthropology), Columbia University

PROFESSIONAL RECORD

- 1912–1914 Assistant Anthropologist, New Jersey Archaeological
 and Geological Survey
 1916–1920 Assistant Anthropologist, American Museum of Nat-
 ural History
 1919 Cutting Fellowship, Columbia University
 1923 National Research Council Fellowship
 1920–1929 Professor, University of Washington
 1930, 1934 Director, Anthropology Field Training Program, Pa-
 cific Northwest, Okanagon and Modoc
 1932–1933 Research Associate, Yale University
 1933–1939 Professor, Yale University
 1936, 1937, Research Director, University of New Mexico Chaco
 1939, 1941 Canyon Field Sessions
 1939–1955 Professor, University of New Mexico
 1960–1961 Research Associate, University of California,
 Berkeley

Visiting Professor:

- 1927–1929 University of Oklahoma
 1928, 1930 University of Chicago
 1939, 1949 Harvard University
 1921, 1923, Columbia University (summer)
 1925, 1932
 1924, 1925, University of California, Berkeley (summer)
 1927, 1932,
 1933, 1948
 1947 University of California, Los Angeles (summer)

HONORARY SOCIETIES

- 1946 National Academy of Sciences
 1946 American Philosophical Society

- 1953 Fellow, Academy of Arts and Sciences
1955 Fellow, California Academy of Science
1960 Honorary Fellow, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great
Britain and Ireland

HONORS

- 1946 Townsend Harris Medal
1960 Viking Fund Medal and Award

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

- American Anthropological Association, President (1943); Editor
(1934–1938)
American Association for the Advancement of Science, Vice-
President, Section H (1943, 1946)
Andean Institute
Society for American Folklore
National Research Council
Sigma Xi

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1920

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