

Culture



Louis DUMONT, *Affinity as a Value: Marriage Alliance in South India, with Comparative Essays on Australia, Chicago*, University of Chicago Press, 1983. 230 pages, US \$22.00 (cloth)

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desire" (pp. 239-40). Add to this the extremely low birth rate as the result of venereal disease spread from the lumber camps, and its effect on relations between the sexes and it is no wonder that the Fang seek renewal in Bwiti.

Or do they? Fernandez's unabashed support for Bwiti (he even suggests that the leading figure in the village would be better off in the new religion) fails to come to grips with his own figures: Bwiti has never managed to attract more than 8-10% of the total population. Bwiti does not appear to be truly transformative at the societal level. Since, despite the cosmogonic claims Fernandez makes for it, Bwiti does not displace Fang culture, perhaps it should be seen, like the other mobile cults and dances in the region, as a part of the larger whole, as a particularly rich resource among many into which Fang can dip at will. Fernandez provides a fascinating and innovative "intellectual history" of the Fang—European dialogue, but he fails to discuss fully the satisfactions of contemporary Christianity or the other interests which keep the vast majority out of Bwiti, or at least away from full commitment, and the forces which create family conflicts at each new recruitment. That Fernandez avoided a functionalist analysis of mainstream Fang life of the 1950's is a tribute to his clear vision, but in painting a negative picture of Fang social life, perhaps he goes too far the other way. Certainly his portraits of individual Fang introduced into the narrative as "argumenti personae" turn out to be disappointingly unidimensional.

These criticisms aside, *Bwiti* is a wonderful book, the art of ethnography at its highest, literate, engaging, superbly documented, always original and thought-provoking, while eschewing any inherited or invented procrustean bed of theory. Fernandez is particularly apt at evoking the vitality of Bwiti, "the pleasures... of ritual activity," even while providing a complex analysis of its sources in such abstract processes as condensation, syllogisms, and metaphoric predication. Like the Bwiti sermonizer, Fernandez offers us subtle words which, to use one of his favourites, edify. One of the critical tasks of anthropology, whether conceived in its materialist or symbolic veins, is the comprehension of whole, autonomous worlds. In the colonial and capitalist eras perhaps this can only be achieved indirectly, through imaginative reconstruction. An image, however hazy, of this wholeness is the edifying achievement of Fernandez through his meticulous cataloguing of what, during the last century, the Fang have lost. And this sense of wholeness too, as Fernandez demonstrates, is the achievement of Bwiti.

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Rodney Needham once asked me, if I were to translate an anthropological classic from another language into English which one would it be. My reply was Louis Dumont's *Dravidian et Kariera*. Apart from the intriguing comparison between South Indian and Australian society therein—intriguing as much because of the contrasts as the correspondences—there was Dumont's insistence that in neither case could affinity be assimilated to consanguinity as leading theoreticians of the time were insisting. This is also the theme of the present volume, itself a collection of essays published by Professor Dumont between 1953 and 1970, including four articles in *Dravidian et Kariera*. Of the book's five articles, two—"The Kariera Kinship Vocabulary" and "Nayar Marriages as Indian Facts"—are available for the first time in English. Of the remaining three, one—"Descent or Inter-marriage? A Relational View of Australian Section Systems"—is on Australia, and two—"The Dravidian Kinship Terminology as an Expression of Marriage" and "Marriage Alliance in South Indian Kinship"—are on South India.

The reason for bringing these previously published articles together in a single volume is compelling: Dumont's analyses have not only not been superseded but also not really understood. And the reason for the misunderstanding or, really, the inability to comprehend? Even anthropologists are unable to break through conventional habits of Western thought to alien realities.

In South India, insists Professor Dumont, in contrast to the West where affinity is subordinated to consanguinity, affinity is itself transmitted from generation to generation. The "mother's broker", for instance, is thought of as the father's brother-in-law and not as the *mother's brother*. To anthropologists who have imposed the latter translation on the data, he says,

the terms in which the people actually think their kinship relationships, are more important than the terms in which (they tell us that) they think they are thinking.

The “they” in “tell us” is intended to refer, I think, to certain members of the “Chicago school” who have been busily “reworking” basic data on South Indian society to fit current trends in anthropological thinking. “Extensionism”, “transactionalism”, and “symbolic anthropology” are cases in point. Such “fairytale accounts” as he calls them, often do more harm than good to the progress of knowledge. But rather than deny the effect of paradigm on data in the positivist tradition, Dumont insists “that the data do prefer one frame of reference to another and that the job of the anthropologist consists in finding out which and in subordinating oneself to that tendency of the data.”

Approaching the book as an Australianist dabbling in South India, I am, of course, more interested in the Australian aspect. Dumont readily admits his lack of expertise here, particularly his lack of fieldwork experience. But this does not prevent him from locating the same biases at work amongst Australianists as amongst South Indianists—even amongst fieldworkers. Nowhere is this bias more apparent than in the “double descent” interpretation of Australian section systems perpetrated by Radcliffe-Brown and perpetuated by Lawrence and others, including even Lévi-Strauss. Here, sections are seen as deriving from the intersection of patrilineal and matrilineal moieties despite the fact that the concept of moiety is entirely absent in the societies in question. Such is the pervasiveness of “descent” thinking amongst anthropologists. Dumont rather sides with T.G.H. Strehlow in seeing sections as alternating generation divisions within the patri-clan, the four section system implying two kinds of patri-clan in the society (Karia), the eight section system implying four (Aranda).

Needless to say, Dumont rejects extensionist claims altogether and takes particular exception to Scheffler’s misrepresentation of his work. It is, indeed, the extensionists, who reflect in the extreme the “Western” bias Dumont has located, though the point could, perhaps, be lifted out of its

“kinship” context and placed on a more philosophical level. This is their inability to comprehend any arrangement that places alter first, before ego. In the extensionist view, kinship and marriage arrangements extend out from the individual to his or her universe: “I” am the reference-point of society.

There is, though, perhaps something Dumont misses in his comparisons. Dravidian terminology may very well reflect an incorporative society at the caste level within which lineality is attempting to assert itself; hence the reason why, in Dravidian, there is but one term for all males in the grandparent and grandchild generations yet dualistic distinctions such as between Father and Mother’s Brother in the others. Here a lineal, exclusive principle seems to be asserting itself on marriage but otherwise remains subordinate to caste unity. On the other hand, Karia terminology may very well reflect a lineal society within which incorporation is struggling to emerge; hence the reason why a Karia woman calls some people by different terms than her brother, for instance, her own children by birth. Marriage seems to be incorporating her into the clan of her husband, though the clans themselves do not mutually incorporate.

This, though, is not a book about “kinship and marriage”, certainly not about “kinship terminology”. Rather it is about encountering foreign realities for which we have few concepts, few parallels in our own experience. It is about anthropology emerging out of a predominant imperialism. To discover what? A non-imperialist alternative? It is impossible to study Indian caste (and one might add, “Australian clan”), Dumont says in his Nayar article, in terms of self-sufficiency. A caste is embedded in a society of castes. Could it be that even our “liberating” tradition with its “obviously” progressive concepts of “autonomy” and “self-determination” is also an inherently imperialist one in being presumed to have universal applicability?