

## Culture

# Edmund LEACH, *Social Anthropology*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982. \$22.31 (cloth)

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## Book Reviews / Compte rendus

Edmund LEACH, *Social Anthropology*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982. \$22.31 (cloth).

By David S. Moyer  
University of Victoria

This book will annoy practically everyone. However, some people will find it much more annoying than others. Leach isn't unaware of this for he remarks at the beginning of Chapter Four, "By this point some of my readers will be up in arms" (p. 122). However, upon reflection this statement probably belongs at the end of the first chapter, "The Diversity of Anthropology". Here Leach devotes most of his energies to describing the differences between social and cultural anthropology. The following captures both the substance and the tone of his argument. "The crux of this difference is that where the social anthropologists are still carrying on a dialogue with Durkheim and Max Weber the cultural anthropologists are still arguing with Tylor" (p. 37f). Or earlier, "the former trace their intellectual descent from Durkheim and Max Weber, the latter from Tylor and the traveller's-tale ethnologists of earlier centuries" (p. 13). However, he reserves his strongest criticism for one aspect of the cultural anthropological tradition, the comparative method. "But I myself find the whole ideology quite incomprehensible. In the HRAF tabulations the characteristics of Tikopia culture and Chinese culture are itemized trait by trait as if they were segmentable units of just the same kind. I must admit I do not understand the language" (p. 42). If one's inclinations are in the social anthropological direction this is good clean fun. On the other hand, for the cultural anthropologist this is undoubtedly offensive.

For a reviewer the first chapter is a gift. One could easily spend all of one's allotted space in relating the aphoristic invective. However, there is more to the book. Chapters Two and Three deal with the nature of the human species. In Chapter Two, "The Unity of Man", having reviewed the various aspects of the problem from a historical perspective, Leach argues that there is a unity of man in his physical nature but also that any unity of

man as a cultural and moral being is a contradiction of our human nature (p. 84). Having established this fundamental point of reference he proceeds, in Chapter Three, to a discussion of "Humanity and Animality". Interestingly, Leach develops the argument that speculation on the nature of man has been explored by theologians as well as anthropologists. In the course of the discussion he draws a fascinating parallel between Chomsky's notion of deep structure and the doctrine of original sin. Eventually he argues for several universals. First, "in every human society, language and social behaviour, in conjunction, serve to establish a category distinction between what is normal, natural, correct on the one hand and what is abnormal, supernatural, incorrect on the other" (p. 111). Second, "human beings use their resources of language and technology to *simplify* the world of experience so as to bring it under control..." (p. 112). And third, the "moral valuation of the geometrically simple is a markedly human characteristic" (p. 112). And once again he is clearest at the end of the argument. "I myself view the varieties of human society as alternative systems of moral order rather than as a sequence of specialized adaptations to different economic circumstances" (p. 121).

The fourth chapter, "My Kind of Anthropology" isn't as irritating as the title might suggest. After some remarks about Chinese ethnography in general and Hsu's in particular Leach gets down to the business at hand. Among the more interesting items are his model attributes of a 'primitive' society. "They are homogeneous... segmented... [and] mythopoeic" (p. 142ff).

Finally the last three chapters deal with matters that one traditionally associates with social anthropology. In "Debt, Relationship, Power" he argues that "every social relationship entails a state of indebtedness" (p. 159). However, when he examines the notion of exchange the argument seems strained. He asserts that the notion of generalized exchange applies equally to trading arrangements in modern industrialized societies and to what Lévi-Strauss called generalized exchange in the context of systems of circulating connubium. The presentation lacks the usual intellectual pyrotechnics so one suspects that Leach may not appreciate the differences between commerce and gift-giving.

The sixth chapter, "Marriage, Legitimacy, Alliance", presents an interesting examination of the notions of marriage and legitimacy using six detailed examples. Two of these (on the Kachin and the Sinhalese) are quite extensive and present some useful and perhaps new insights on the two areas. In the very short seventh chapter, "Some Aspects of Cosmology", Leach adds a bit more on the Kachin but leaves the impression that it is the seventh day and not the seventh chapter and thus he should rest.

As a whole the book is loosely organized, often marred by aphoristic digressions that appear to be attempts to score points to the detriment of foes, real and imagined. With the exception of the chapter on marriage the book is also notable for its lack of sustained argument. I only fear that this review suggests that there might be more coherence than there in fact is. These petty complaints aside, the book might make an excellent discussion piece for advanced students. Or perhaps it could provide a several years' supply of unkind remarks applicable to one's more irritating colleagues.

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Luc de HEUSCH, *The Drunken King, or, the Origin of the State* (R. Willis, trans.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982. 288 pages, US \$27.50 (cloth). Originally published in French by Editions Gallimard in 1972.

By Jim Freedman  
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Let me pose my main query right off. To what extent does de Heusch's wizard-like intellect overlap with the African intellect? The question inevitably comes up. Here are two intellects in dialogue with one another. The African locution of allusions and symbolic reference exploring the costs and benefits of kingly rule... and de Heusch's synthesis of high wire proportions, taking this world of myths, rituals, incantations and adages to demonstrate the semantic unity of the broad area of central African kingdoms. De Heusch has taken these references and images and for the sake of the exercise collapsed them into categories of which all cultures in the area partake in expressing themselves. These categories constitute a framework erected out of abstractions from experience, abstractions such as texture, sound, sensations, continuity and directions. This framework is the 'tour de force intellectuel' of this book. The question is whether these categories which are explicit in the analysis are at least implicit in the mythology.

And my answer, right off, surprises even me in its affirmative response of yes. The argument is quite convincing. De Heusch's wizardry is indeed an accurate reflection of the wizardry of African political reflections. The reflections are subtle. Anyone who knows African traditional politics, the profound concern with power, its exercise and its control, would be inclined to believe that the complexity of reflections which de Heusch demonstrates is indeed authentic.

I was fortunate to experience the original expositions, in 1968, of the analyses which make up this book. He delivered pieces of the first four chapters in this book as part of a course at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. I had already read one of his earlier works, *Le Rwanda et la civilisation interlacustre* and had felt that this book was like nothing I had ever read before. My fascination with his facile and creative style drew me in his train, and I too began to study African mythology and history in the interlacustrine area. The Belgian reputation as colonial administrators in poor; but the Heusch, and his peer, Jan Vansina, who is Belgian also and an ethnologist/historian of considerable repute for the Zaire/Interlacustrine area, have gone some way to make up for their country's colonial performance. Their contributions to this area's history and culture is enormous. Working within their footsteps have been a pleasure.

In 1972, six years after the appearance of Vansina's *Kingdoms of the Savannah* (a study of the history of the central Congolese Kingdoms), de Heusch published this study of the kingdoms' mythologies, *Le roi ivre ou l'origine de l'État*, Volume 1. Following its publication a decade ago, it was hailed as the Africanist's answer to *The Raw and the Cooked*, and de Heusch was hailed as Africa's Levi-Strauss. In his review in *Africa* (October, 1973) Vansina praised de Heusch for providing an impressive interpretation of the Kuba mythology via his structural extrapolations, even making sense of data to which de Heusch had never had access. Mary Douglas reviewed it for *Man* (September, 1973) and praised the book for finally allowing "Africanists to judge for themselves in their chosen field of competence, the value of structural analysis". The book became a landmark in mythological analysis, and remains so. Mary Douglas closed her review with the hope that the volume be translated so as "to be more accessible to the Anglophone Africans who are increasingly concerned to understand the origins of their culture." Now, in 1982, we have the translation.

One value of the book is that it makes the enterprise of structural analysis much more trans-