

# Analysis, Interpretation, Meaning; The Dilemma of Structural Anthropology

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The not unimpressive degree of agreement which prevailed as regards theory and practice among British social anthropologists between about 1940 and the later fifties was produced by a variety of factors, including of course the opportunities for fieldwork in the British colonial empire, on which the sun was unobtrusively, but inexorably, setting. Other factors were the relatively high degree of cordiality between the small number of leading social anthropologists, almost all of whom had been in some way influenced by both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, and who found it possible to teach and organise research on the basis of what was called 'structural-functionalism', a workable synthesis (to simplify slightly) of Malinowski's fieldwork methods with Radcliffe-Brown's stress on the classification of social structures.<sup>1</sup> The range of interests of structural-functionalism was unduly narrow, myth and ritual being treated as supporting adjuncts to the social institutions on which attention was focused, and both linguistics and oral literature were very largely ignored. Much of the theoretical basis of structural-functionalism was also of the sort that survives by not being questioned; if 'the function of exogamy is to increase the solidarity of kin groups', are those kin groups which allow endogamy therefore lacking in solidarity, how does one measure solidarity, and if exogamy (or any other social institution) cannot be explained as useful, what sort of explanations do we give?

The turning away from the structural-functional orthodoxy would have come anyway, with the end of the colonial era and the increase in number of social anthropologists, but it is only fair to point out that the new directions of social anthropology in Britain from 1960 onwards did grow out of work done by the leading apostles of structural-functionalism. Three books were of particular significance; the late Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion*<sup>2</sup> (1956), Dr

<sup>1</sup>Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was not lacking in theoretical ability, but his functional theory became at times little more than a claim, at once undeniable and unhelpful, that in any given culture everything is related to everything else. Nowadays, 'functionalism' tends to mean a method of explaining particular social institutions in terms of their utility to the society as a whole. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1956) never quite escaped from a tendency to see social structure in over-concrete terms, but did establish a universal grammar of kinship systems.

<sup>2</sup>Oxford, Clarendon. This book seems to have had more influence on comparative religionists and theologians than on anthropologists.

Audrey Richards' *Chisungu*<sup>3</sup> (1956), and Professor Meyer Fortes' *Oedipus and Job* (1959).<sup>4</sup> Of these, *Chisungu* has been probably the least read by non-anthropologists, and it is certainly the least ambitious of the three. It is an account, based on fieldwork in the early thirties, of the girls' initiation rites among the Bemba people of what is now Zambia. Dr Richards gives a very detailed account of the rites from her own observations, but for commentary relies mainly on what the Bemba themselves said. Despite this caution, *Chisungu* retains its value as a new departure by its insistence on the different ways in which the meanings of the ceremony could be expressed, through actions, through exhortations, through songs, and through statuettes, and likewise on the need for different levels of interpretation to be applied, both psychological and sociological. By showing how in the *Chisungu* ritual a multivalence of symbolism prevailed Audrey Richards reopened the road, seemingly closed for ever by the mighty shade of Durkheim,<sup>5</sup> to the use of psychological and psychoanalytic explanations within a sociological framework.

*Chisungu* has appropriately given birth to another book, Dr Richards' *festschrift*, *The Interpretation of Ritual*, edited by Dr J. S. La Fontaine.<sup>6</sup> In the sixteen years between the two books, however, the shadow of Levi-Strauss had fallen across the British anthropological scene, and several of the contributors to *The Interpretation of Ritual* are concerned to build some sort of bridge on which Dr Richards and Professor Levi-Strauss can get within shouting distance of each other.<sup>7</sup> This means that the book has much more unity than *festschrift* volumes usually have.

'British school' anthropologists had already in the sixties given a collective response to Levi-Strauss in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, which appeared in 1967, edited by Edmund Leach.<sup>8</sup> Before discussing this, I had better explain two features of the Levi-Straussian approach which seem particularly to have challenged the contributors to both the Leach and the La Fontaine volumes.

Levi-Strauss is not particularly concerned, as other anthropologists have been, to show how a particular myth, or body of mythology, reflects the social life of the people who possess it. He is rather concerned to see myths as being, like a piece of music or a mathematical

<sup>3</sup>Faber and Faber, London.

<sup>4</sup>Cambridge University Press. This discusses ideas about destiny and personality in West African religion.

<sup>5</sup>Emile Durkheim had laid down in 1895 in his *The Rules of Sociological Method* that social facts must be explained sociologically, not psychologically. He was thinking of the associationist psychology of the nineteenth century, but attempts to relate psychoanalysis to social anthropology before *Chisungu* had been disappointing.

<sup>6</sup>Tavistock Publications, 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Dr Richards' own comment on 'the thought systems postulated by Levi-Strauss, which are at least degrees removed from the ethnographic data' (quoted by Southall, *The Interpretation of Ritual*, p. 74), sounds harsher than it was meant to be.

<sup>8</sup>Tavistock Publications. I have used the paperback version.

equation, built up of elements which may be grouped together and set in opposition to each other, and then regrouped in other sets and other oppositions. He has developed his technique of doing this sufficiently well to show how several myths, spread over a very large area and in appearance very different, are reshufflings of a small number of common elements.<sup>9</sup> While his treatment of particular myths, or particular groups of myths, can be, and has been, attacked, it must be admitted that Levi-Strauss has really got something here. The question is; what is the something?

At times Levi-Strauss seems to be saying that discovering the hidden unities and oppositions of the units of myths, the orphaned boy, the crippled girl, the talking jaguar, the walking tree, is all that we can do with them; more often, however, he seems to be claiming that the message of the myth is contained, not in its surface moral, nor in its mirroring of its society, but precisely in the counterpoint of units, each reshuffle therefore providing a different message. Not so much the medium, as the structuring of the medium, is the message. Now this is surely a legitimate approach in mathematics and music, admirable products of the human mind, but which do not communicate, cannot communicate, an awful lot of what is human. Myths and rituals are surely attempts at a total summing-up of what it means to be human; can their only fundamental message be gained from the analysis of the inter-relation of their constituent elements? True, Levi-Strauss can at times show neatly how a particular myth relates to a particular social or environmental setting, but this raises further worries. Is he saving his system by breaking his rules? Or are such settings of myths in their social situations simply exercises in corroboration, no longer necessary when the principle has been accepted? At any rate, it is worth noticing that the most favourable opinions expressed on Levi-Strauss in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* draw attention to his capacity to discover resemblances and uniformities where none were seen before,<sup>10</sup> while the most unfavourable comments are those occasioned by his neglect of the actual social contexts of myths and totemic classifications, and his apparent claim that the meaningful content of a myth is ultimately its form.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For examples from the Pacific islands and Australia, see C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966, pp. 76-94.

<sup>10</sup>See Dr Leach's introduction, and the contribution by Nur Yalman, 'The Raw, The Cooked, Nature, Culture'.

<sup>11</sup>Nobody who has read Dr Peter Worslev's 'Groote Eylandt totemism, and *Le totemisme d'aujourd'hui*' (pp. 141-159 in *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*) can ever have quite the same attitude to the neatly tied-up systems which swarm in Levi-Strauss's volumes. In her contribution Dr Mary Douglas offers on the work of Leach and Levi-Strauss a verdict more severe than my own. 'When Edmund Leach applies the same technique to the Book of Genesis, the rich metaphysical themes of salvation and cosmic oneness are reduced to practical rules for the regulation of sex. When Levi-Strauss has finished with the Tsimshian myth it is reduced to anxieties about problems of matrilineal cross-cousin marriage (which anyway only apply to the heirs of chiefs and headmen'). (*The Structural Meaning of Myth*, p. 63.)

*The Interpretation of Ritual* marks a step beyond *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* in that the problem is no longer the choice of a stance towards Levi-Straussian structuralism as a whole, but rather the insertion of a structuralist level in the interpretation of particular myths and rites. True, not all the essayists are explicitly concerned with Levi-Strauss, though all are true to the theme of *Chisungu*, that all ceremony and ritual carry a message, indeed messages, since Audrey Richards defined symbolism as combining 'fixity of form with multiple meanings, some of which are standardised and some highly individual'.

The individual essays tend to fall into pairs, linking together a male and a female contributor. Emeritus Professor Raymond Firth and Dr Esther Goody show, the one with world-ranging comparisons, the other with reference to two Ghanaian societies, how greetings structure social contacts and are themselves structured by the wider social environment. Then Professor Southall and Dr R. G. Abrahams examine attitudes towards twins, Southall taking a wide sweep of African societies, and Abrahams drawing on his fieldwork in northern Uganda. Then Dr J. S. La Fontaine and Dr Edwin Ardener seek, she for the Gisu of Uganda, he for the Bakweri of Cameroun, to tackle a poser which might have been set by Levi-Strauss; how does the biological and cultural distinction between men and women relate to the conceptual distinction between nature and culture? Then there is an essay which stands on its own, as though to remind Levi-Strauss and ourselves that binary division and coupling are not invariable, Professor Monica Wilson's *The Wedding Cakes*, a charming account of how a new item of the marriages of Christians in South Africa soon acquired a symbolic content from the traditional social background.<sup>12</sup> Then, finally, there is a deliberate attempt at dialogue between Dr Elizabeth Bott, and Dr Edmund Leach. The subject of this is the ceremonial drinking of *kava* in the Pacific island of Tonga. Dr Bott gives a functionalist explanation of how *kava* drinking reflects the holding of titles, more specifically their historical significance rather than their actual power content,<sup>13</sup> and then gives a rather cautious psychoanalytic interpretation of certain associated myths. Dr Leach then comes on to offer a structuralist interpretation, which he claims to be more objective. Dr Bott comes back with a reply combining humble gratitude with a note of critical reserve. Dr Leach manages to have the last word.

<sup>12</sup>The family of both groom and bride provided cakes; 'each had three tiers, but the bride's cake was iced in white, the groom's in blue. The two families vied with each other to provide a magnificent cake, and, first at the homestead of the bride and then at that of the groom, bride's friends and groom's friends danced separately, each grouped round their cake, which was carried by one of the women dancers. They danced with the cakes, displaying them, before either was cut'. *The Interpretation of Ritual*, pp. 194-5.

<sup>13</sup>The people of Tonga have three systems of reckoning status, one based on power, one based on patrilineally inherited titles, and one on personal rank, in which one's mother's family is of some significance.

The essays by Firth, Goody, and Wilson charm and satisfy. Dr Ray Abrahams reminds us that not all peoples studied may have much in the way of explanations for the rites they perform, but may still regard them as efficacious. Aidan Southall, in a rather diffuse essay, points to the contrast between Levi-Strauss' far ranging comparison of myths, which tends to reduce them to a few simple themes, and V. W. Turner's intensive study of Ndembu ritual, which has revealed a rich plurality of themes. Evidently, the anthropological cliché of 'myth equals ritual' is in need of amendment, but Southall ventures no further than 'myth and ritual are of the same stuff and have a considerable common core—beyond this the elaboration of symbols and meanings proceed along rather divergent lines'.<sup>14</sup>

Edwin Ardener's essay reads rather as if it were a trailer for a longer study. His starting-point is the relative inarticulateness of women compared with men in describing their society and culture. He then suggests that this problem can be overcome by studying the ritual activities specific to women, which can be read as women's interpretation of their society. He then takes an example from a woman's cult associated with water spirits (the *mammiwatas* of West African English),<sup>15</sup> and seems to conclude that both sexes have, *vis-à-vis*, the other, elements of both the domestic and the wild. The conclusion seems fairly sound, but not all the supporting arguments are fully developed. Thus, the argument as to the separation between the world views of men and women is hardly documented other than by the aphorism, 'they (women) giggle when young, snort when old'.<sup>16</sup> Dr J. S. La Fontaine, on the other hand, has put her case well and clearly; girls' initiation among the Bemba seems intended to protect their fertility against the powerful, destructive, forces of masculinity, whereas for the Gisu it is the women who carry a destructive vitality that must be tamed by ritual. Gisu men are the carriers of culture and order; yet just as ritual brings women into the orderly world of the men, so too the circumcision of boys approximates them to the 'natural' world of the women.

The dialogue between Elizabeth Bott and Edmund Leach presents certainly the hardest reading in the book. As already indicated, Dr Bott argues fairly convincingly that the vigour of the traditional *kava* ceremony is due to its being a means of expressing certain continuing values about harmony in hierarchy, but that the inevitable conflicts which do not fit this harmony find reflection in myths connected with *kava* which include stories of fratricide and cannibalism. Edmund

<sup>14</sup>*The Interpretation of Ritual*, p. 106. For V. W. Turner's work, see *The Forest of Symbols*, Cornell University Press, 1967.

<sup>15</sup>*Mammiwatas*, over an area of West Africa reaching from Cameroun to Sierra Leone, are female water spirits, who have become symbols of the money economy, and are thus both dangerous and rewarding. The Bakweri *mammiwatas* seem rather atypical.

<sup>16</sup>*The Interpretation of Ritual*, p. 137.

Leach then produces other Tongan ethnographic material, both myths and information on the social structure, and armed with this produces a much more detailed set of parallels between the myths and the tensions of traditional Tongan society.<sup>17</sup> He claims that this interpretation, a structuralist one, is much more objective than either a functionalist or psychoanalytic one. Elizabeth Bott in her reply accepts very largely this interpretation as valid, but rejects any claim to superior objectivity on the part of structural explanations. Her position is worth quoting at length :

'But can one disprove or prove a structuralist interpretation more readily than a psychoanalytic or functionalist one? I doubt it. So many equivalences can be established that one can arrive at a considerable range of possible interpretations—and the choice of one rather than another depends on 'feel' as well as logic—I find myself dissatisfied with the approach on two counts. (1) It places exclusive emphasis on the logical/cognitive aspect of the basic human dilemmas, evidently regarding their emotional aspects as irrelevant or uninteresting. (2) The logic is insufficiently linked to social behaviour. It is like a purely formal analysis of dreams—showing little of the specific anxieties and defences that an understanding of each dream can elucidate'.<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me that Dr. Bott has come nearest of all the contributors to *The Interpretation of Ritual* to fulfilling the tacit purpose of the book—that of seeing how the methodology tentatively developed in *Chisungu* can be enriched by more recent developments. In so doing, she has exposed the dilemma of structuralist anthropology, that it can be a superb tool of analysis, that it can show that changes of structure are associated with changes of meaning, but that it cannot be a satisfactory means of interpretation on its own. Interpretation always has to take into account the levels and modes through which meaning is expressed; there is no single key to the human mind because human beings remain obstinately multi-dimensional.

What are the ways forward from the positions reached in *The Interpretation of Ritual*? One can hope for the development of the three-level technique of interpretation proposed by Dr Bott. Similarly, Professor Southall's proposal for intensive comparative studies in areas of similar cultures, of the linguistic, social, and economic factors in the transformation of myths and rituals, is certainly to be desired.<sup>19</sup> Dr Ardener and Dr La Fontaine, precisely in recognising, as Levi-

<sup>17</sup>Dr Leach honestly suggests that nowadays the *kava* ritual may be a conscious piece of traditionalism, and that this would render any interpretation questionable. *The Interpretation of Ritual*, p. 242.

<sup>18</sup>*Op cit.*, p. 280.

<sup>19</sup>For a recent example of such work on an area of Zaire see Luc de Heusch, *Le Roi Ivre*. Paris, Gallimard, 1972.

Strauss had done, that the boundary between culture and nature is essentially something culturally determined, have shown how important it is to be able to compare its variations in different cultures. This last point can be put in a rather wider context; Godfrey Lienhardt has shown in *Divinity and Experience*<sup>20</sup> (a book which gets surprisingly little mention in *The Interpretation of Ritual*) how much of Dinka ritual can be seen as a re-creation of experience, particularly bodily experience, so that the experience of nature is made tolerable by making it an experience in culture, while Victor Turner has shown how among the Ndembu the three 'rivers', whiteness, redness, and blackness, seen as existing in the human body and in wild nature, are seen also as constituent elements of Ndembu culture.<sup>21</sup> We can, I think, now accept that bodily experience and the body image are in any culture the major sources of the ritual symbols of that culture;<sup>22</sup> The next step is to see how far the human body is regarded as near to wild nature, and hence needing to be controlled, or how far it is seen as something fully human, which ritual seeks to transform and transcend. This programme seems to be a turning from myth to ritual; but Southall's proposal for a better grasp of the difference between them is surely very relevant. Why are some cultures poor in myths, but rich in rites, while others are rich in myths but relatively poor in ritual? It is a mistake to think one knows, or even can know, all the answers; but this should not stop us from raising all the questions at hand.

<sup>20</sup>Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961.

<sup>21</sup>See V. W. Turner, *op. cit.*, and *Chihamba*, Manchester University Press, 1964, for fascinating developments of these themes.

<sup>22</sup>This seems true even of Buddhism and Hinduism.