

Anyone for Anthropology?

Examples of twentieth century anthropological treatments of witchcraft beliefs will be used to illustrate the discipline's methodological trajectory, with the purpose of assessing its usefulness for current and future postgraduate students of astrology.

Anthropology's reputation was founded upon early twentieth century ethnographic studies of so-called 'island' cultures. Pioneering participant observers shaped the discipline while struggling to describe and explain, in the language of the academy, the 'traditional', non-modern systems of knowledge and belief which they encountered on their 'islands'. In more recent times, the ever-increasing global interplay between cultures has problematised the notion that there were ever any true 'island' communities and anthropologists are, in any case, increasingly choosing to conduct their studies 'at home'. Those who live and work in metropolitan communities confront an inherited sociological prejudice against manifestations, within such societies, of systems of knowledge and belief customarily written off by the academy as irrational, archaic remainders. Additionally, the discipline's once exclusively synchronic approach has been challenged by cultures whose extensive written histories dictate the adoption of a diachronic analytic frame which blurs the boundaries between anthropology and history.

This trajectory can be traced in the following studies of witchcraft beliefs:

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Favret-Saada, J. 1980. *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Luhrmann, T.M. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft in Present-day England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell).

Greenwood, S. 2000. *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: an Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg).

Hutton, R. 2003. *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon & London).

(See Chapter 9, 'Living with Witchcraft', for an interesting comparison of Favret-Saada's, Luhrmann's and Greenwood's studies.)

Anthropologists studying 'at home' can be their own research informants; increasingly, they are writing their own, often contradictory, experiences as participant observers into their studies. Does this threaten anthropology with autobiography? Examples of the literature which address this question are:

Aull Davies, C. 1999. *Reflexive Ethnography: a Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge).

Okely, J. 1992. 'Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge' in J. Okely and H. Callaway (eds.) *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London: Routledge).

USEFUL ANTHROPOLOGISTS FOR ASTROLOGERS

Anthropology of Religion: General Texts

1996 (1987). Morris, B. *Anthropological Studies of Religion: an Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

1994. Morris, B. *Anthropology of the Self: the Individual in Cultural Perspective* (London: Pluto Press).

1991 (1990). Tambiah, S. *Magic, Science and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Worth a Look

2000 (1977). Bourdieu, P. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Development of Van Gennep's work and exploration of the 'habitus'.

Durkheim, É. Commentaries on *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

1969 (1962) Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 'Religion and the Anthropologists' in *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London: Faber & Faber).

2000. Geertz, C. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

1973. Geertz, C. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books).

1995 (1994). Good, B.J. *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: an Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

2001. Kapferer, B. 'Anthropology: the Paradox of the Secular' in *Social Anthropology* Volume 9, Part 3.

Lévi-Strauss, C. Commentaries on his structuralist analyses of myth.

Lévy-Bruhl, L. Commentaries on his notions of 'pre-logical', 'mystical' thought and 'primitive', 'participationist' mentality.

Redfield, R. Commentaries on his differentiation between 'great' and 'little' religious traditions.

1992. Turner, E, et al. *Experiencing Ritual: a New Interpretation of African Healing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

Expansion of Victor Turner's anthropology of experience and consciousness.

1969. Turner, V. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books).

1967. Turner, V. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (London: Cornell University Press).

Explorations of the 'multivocality' of symbols; development of Van Gennep's work.

1977 (1909) Van Gennep, A. *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).

His work had fallen into obscurity when it was re-discovered and developed, in Britain, by Victor Turner and, in France, by Pierre Bourdieu.

1999. Willis, R. *Some Spirits Heal, Others only Dance* (Oxford: Berg)

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Social Evolutionism, Diffusionism and Cultural Relativism

The discipline's nineteenth century great-grandfathers are now described as 'armchair' anthropologists; these social theorists took advantage of contemporary European expansionism to collect travellers' tales and the testimonies of missionaries and colonial officials living among the growing number of communities subjugated to the metropolitan powers. Comparing and contrasting this frequently spurious data, they extrapolated from them what they termed universal sociological theories. Most of these conformed to the paradigm of social evolutionism; fewer sought to prove the doctrine of diffusionism.

Developing the social evolutionism of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Victorian theorists confused geographical with temporal distance. They studied remote communities of peoples whom they regarded as 'savage' in order to discover more about their own, Western ancestors, and traced a range of fanciful social developmental trajectories which ran from primitive promiscuity, sometimes through a temporary matriarchal episode, to end with what they regarded as the most highly evolved system: the patriarchal and patrician capitalism practised in their own 'enlightened' modern societies.

J. FRAZER (1854-1941)

The Golden Bough (twelve volumes 1890-1915)

Sir James Frazer was appointed to the first university professorship in Social Anthropology at Liverpool University in 1908. The archetypal 'armchair' anthropologist and social evolutionist, he is reported to have replied 'God forbid!' when William James asked him if he had ever made the acquaintance of any of the 'savages' he wrote so much about (Eriksen 1995: 5). Frazer's main project consisted in demonstrating his theory that thought developed, in an evolutionary manner, from the magical, through the religious to the scientific. His monumental work enjoyed a considerable influence: reading it prompted Malinowski to abandon science and take up anthropology – of which more later – and Wittgenstein wrote a short criticism of the book.

Diffusionism was a less popular theory which attempted to trace connections between societies, however remote and seemingly separate, in the belief that cultural traits were geographically disseminated. The philosophy was developed chiefly in Germany and America, but was not taken up by British scholars. Differing from social evolutionists in that they sought the cultural origins of all contemporary social phenomena in the geographical distance, the space travel of the diffusionists might, or might not, also involve time travel. A twentieth century diffusionist who caught the public imagination was Thor Heyerdahl, who was brave, or foolhardy, enough to test his theories by sailing his craft, the *Kon Tiki*, from South America to Polynesia in the 1960s. More recently, diffusionism has been remodelled as globalisation theory, in response to the proliferation of international communication and migration.

F BOAS (1859-1941)

Perhaps the most influential of the German theorists, and trained originally as a geographer, Franz Boas emigrated to the US in the 1880s to study among American First Nations and Inuit communities in the Arctic. He rejected the idea that societies could be arranged on an evolutionary ladder and argued that cultures could only be assessed in line with their own internal systems of logic. His analyses, originally known as 'historical

particularism', remain central in the anthropological canon in their current manifestation of cultural relativism. Boas founded American cultural anthropology virtually single-handedly; his students included Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict.

Functionalism, Structural Functionalism and Structuralism

É. DURKHEIM (1858-1917)

Émile Durkheim, generally regarded as the founder of modern comparative sociology, (although Marx and Weber are close runners-up for that title), marks the turning point between diachronic evolutionism and the synchronic functionalism that developed from it. Holder of the first-ever chair in Sociology, Durkheim was an armchair theorist who contrasted economic and social conditions in 'primitive' and modern societies, borrowing his evidence on the former from newly published research on Aboriginal societies in Australia.

Customary ways of thinking and acting were reified by Durkheim as 'social facts' which existed as entities to be observed and analysed, but only to a knower outside of the system, to a social theorist, for they floated free of the realm of understanding of individual members of societies. This being the case, sociologists could substantiate their interpretations scientifically, and could replicate them, by means of empirical justification and, proceeding independently of its individual practitioners, the newly founded subject of sociology would earn its place, Durkheim insisted, as a 'respectable' and 'objective' science.

The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life

Durkheim identified the function of beliefs in religion and sympathetic magic as contributing to what he called the 'mechanical solidarity' which bound pre-industrial communities. Modern societies exhibited a more complicated 'organic solidarity'. But both types of solidarity were underpinned, on Durkheim's view, by ritual behaviours which differentiated the 'sacred' from the 'profane', the former functioning as an ideal manifestation of the social collective to which individual worshippers belonged. Since, in his analysis, religions and beliefs in metaphysical entities were socially generated, Durkheim opened the way for social theorists to consider ideologies and conceptual systems for the first time. Having previously been the preserve of philosophers and theologians, whose purposes had been to judge their relative truth values, religious beliefs could for the first time be assessed in terms of the cultural roles they played. Durkheim's biographer, Steven Lukes, suggests that Durkheim anticipated the later thought of Wittgenstein by at least half a century in presenting cultural concepts as socially generated collective representations (Lukes 1975: 437).

By the end of Durkheim's life, anthropologists had abandoned their 'armchairs' in favour of becoming professional explorers who, rather than sitting at home in comfort, travelled to remote parts of the increasingly colonised world in search of exotic tribal customs and beliefs which they would chronicle for themselves, during a period of months – or even years – living in their 'fields', before returning with their notebooks to their academies to analyse their records in terms of the pre-existent body of social theory and to compare and contrast their findings with those of their fellows.

A.R. HADDON, W.H.R. RIVERS, C.G. SELIGMAN

These three undertook the Torres Straits expedition together in 1898. (Rivers turns up in Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*.) Charles Seligman was dissatisfied with the nature and quality of the information they

collected, and argued that future studies should be conducted more intensively and on a smaller scale. Having undertaken further research along these lines in the Sudan, he was appointed to the new department of Social Anthropology at the LSE in 1910, where he trained both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

B. MALINOWSKI (1884-1942)

Sent to Oceania in 1914 by the LSE, Bronislaw Malinowski – a Pole who had emigrated to Britain in 1910 – was stranded there for the duration of WW1 to avoid internment in the UK. Although he was not the very first fieldworker, he has come to be regarded as the pioneer, bush-whacking anthropologist. His ‘discovery’ of the methodology of participant observation was a felicitous side-effect of his enforced four-year long period of study on the Trobriand Islands. After the war, he returned to the LSE where he trained the first groundbreaking students of the new, consciously holistically-oriented social anthropology to aim towards understanding ‘their’ natives’ points of view, collecting what he termed the ‘imponderabilia’ of daily life and natural behaviour, and recording the particular details of the lives they witnessed while undertaking a prolonged period of total immersion in their research communities.

(His field diary, published posthumously by his daughter in 1967, painted the warts onto the idealised portrait previously painted of Malinowski. It’s more lasting effect can be seen, however, as validating the late twentieth century trend towards a more openly reflexive, almost autobiographical, ethnographic style which allowed anthropologists to record more realistic accounts of their lives in their ‘fields’, vicissitudes and all.

Trained originally as a scientist, Malinowski saw humans as biologically-driven beings whose social institutions, including their recounted histories, functioned in the present to enforce reciprocity and to keep individuals’ biological drives from threatening the equilibrium of the social groups upon whose existence they relied. Malinowski’s biological bias did not make for easy explanations of religion. He concluded that magic was a crutch on which his research subjects leaned when their technical expertise failed them; ritual offered comfort in times of despair; myth underwrote and justified the existence of social institutions.

A.R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN (1881-1955)

A student of Haddon’s and a contemporary and rival of Malinowski’s, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown undertook his ethnographic ‘rite of passage’, (reluctantly, for he was an unenthusiastic participant observer), in the Andaman Islands. Radcliffe-Brown rated culture more highly than biology and, strongly influenced by Durkheim, identified social institutions as products of culture, rather than biology. Like Durkheim, he applied the ideals of natural science to social science, in the hope of developing what he called ‘general laws of society’. His top-down, deductive approach theorised a group’s culture as being, by definition, inaccessible to its individual members. He was by temperament a theorist rather than a fieldworker who rated culture more highly than he did the individuals who of whom it was constructed. He introduced the term ‘structure’ to functionalist analysis to emphasise the fact that societies depended for their continuity upon firm foundational principles; these were supplied by social institutions which reinforced each other to contribute to the maintenance of the whole. History and religion were two such institutions, and fulfilled functions in the present.

C. LÉVI-STRAUSS (born 1908)

Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism succeeded in mixing functionalism with a touch of diffusionism. Influenced by Hegel, Marx, Freud and Jung, as well as by Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss presented ‘primitive’ humankind as rustic

philosophers or '*bricoleurs*' who endlessly improvised new patterns of culture by practising a 'science of the concrete'. All were variations on a series of universal and socially fundamental contradictions and antinomies, or binary oppositions, which, though largely inaccessible to the consciousness of the individuals themselves, were clear to the structuralist anthropologist who took time to analyse their various myths in line with the 'deep structure' of the human mind.

Lévi-Strauss's top-down analyses of the myths he selected, some at second-hand from the ethnographic and historical records of a range of societies, enjoyed a vogue during the 1960s. The structuralists promised to reveal the basic structures of the human mind which, immanent in cultural products, operated at subconscious levels. Received largely with suspicion by most of the British school, this work was developed by cognitive anthropologists who focus upon culturally-specific categories of thought, philosophies and systems of belief, and categorise and analyse their data in the terms of linguistic theory and method.+

Structural Marxism and Feminist Anthropology

Another movement linked with structuralism was Marxist anthropology, the pioneers of which being the French social theorists, Maurice Godelier, Claude Meillassoux and Emanuel Terray. Societies, now known as 'social formations', were classified by these anthropologists in terms of their modes of production. Their work, heavily influenced by Althusser's 'functionalist Marxism', enjoyed a brief following in Britain during the 1970s with students trained by Gluckman and the functionalist Manchester School who countered the synchronic analysis of what was known as 'structural Marxism' by introducing elements of the thought of British Marxist historians such as Hill, Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson. What has survived these Marxist, somewhat extremist analyses is a more critically informed engagement, on the part of recent anthropologists, with ideology, economic and power relations.

A willingness to analyse the latter social phenomena fused with wider feminist currents in Western society to pave the way for the genre of feminist anthropology. A number of Malinowski's female students at the LSE having conducted innovative fieldwork and gone on to become successful anthropologists, the discipline was not lacking in female representation. But, the nature of the cultures in which they worked often meant that, in effect, women ethnographers were treated as honorary males; this was the price they paid for insisting, (as they could in the colonies), upon access to the men's worlds. On the other hand, male anthropologists could not hope to access women's worlds, and were now accused of having simply taken the word of the men for what the women were up to. Women frequently elected, for practical purposes, to confine their studies to the roles of the women in their subject societies. Feminist anthropology developed analyses of gender and nature as social constructs, often tied only tenuously to biology.

From Function to Meaning: Writing Culture

The reflexive consideration by feminist anthropologists of a range of socially constructed descriptive terms, such as nature, culture and gender, contributed towards the formation of a more self-conscious and reflective anthropology which adopted phenomenological, interpretive approaches. In line with its view that anthropology was actually an exercise in hermeneutics, it shifted its analytic lens onto the literary style of the ethnographic text.

However tentative their fieldwork experiences, the works of anthropologists, once written up, acquired a *gravitas* and authority all of their own. And yet, all ethnographers know that their written accounts are heavily edited in line with their authors' pre-occupations. For Geertz, ethnography often seemed 'part philosophy and a good deal of the rest confession' (Geertz 1967: 25-32). Evans-Pritchard acknowledged that the set of abstractions which any anthropologist draws from her observations of an alien society are, finally, imaginative constructs of the individual herself. (When he taught at Oxford, he welcomed research students who had been trained in literary criticism.) Geertz, an advocate of the art at which he himself excels, that of 'thick' ethnographic description, nonetheless admits that, knowing in advance what views an anthropologist holds, one can predict what she will say about the people she studies; (Margaret Mead's and Derek Freeman's diametrically opposed accounts of Samoan society serve to corroborate Geertz's point). Cultural biography slides towards anthropological autobiography; while the literature in this genre might make cracking good reading, it will not lend itself to any supposedly systematic and empirically substantiated comparative study of cultures. The monographs of an increasing number of anthropologists studying 'at home' blur the boundaries between biography and autobiography still further. As a development of this movement from ethnography to literature, a number of authors wrote their epistemological and stylistic concerns into their texts.

Medical Anthropology and the Anthropology of Development

The proliferation of NGOs and the growth of overseas aid projects have led to a boom in the anthropology of development. Researchers attempt to identify the genuine needs of a community by means of the trademark gestalt anthropological research methodology. It is not uncommon for anthropologists working in developmental communities to 'trade' the data they collect for involvement in political and legal advocacy in support of the rights of indigenous peoples to an equitable share of resources. Medical aid workers in non-Western communities have come increasingly to rely upon the communicative expertise of medical anthropologists to plan and implement culturally sympathetic health care projects. They are also applying their specific expertise to studying the range of 'alternative', and non-Western medical practices and therapies which have become increasingly popular in the metropolitan states in recent years. Both areas of research have highlighted the cultural status of Western medical assumptions which were, and still are, presented in terms of universal truth, as well as the extent to which illness is, itself, a cultural construction. Anthropologists now work alongside medical workers, both mainstream and 'alternative', and examine the theories, therapies, practices and languages of medical care. They conduct classroom and experiential ethnographic research while training to be practitioners, therapists and healers in their own rights. They are their own informants, and here they interrelate with anthropologists involved with experiential studies of the ritual and religious experiences which had, until fairly recently, been 'off limits' to 'respectable' social scientists.

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