

## Structuralism in Social Anthropology

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Even the most enthusiastic adherent of **structuralism** in social anthropology will admit that the relationship between Lévi-Strauss's theoretical ideas and the empirical ethnographic facts in which they are said to be exemplified is very complicated. Summary examples can illustrate what is meant when it is argued that structuralism is, essentially, a "way of looking at things", but they are unlikely to convince the sceptic that this is a means for arriving at the truth. At the end of the lecture, which is printed below, I endeavoured to give the listener a taste of the "new" insights which can be derived from an application of structuralist procedures by offering an extremely condensed analysis of certain very familiar materials from the New Testament. I hope that no reader of this printed version of my lecture will imagine that the arguments presented in this truncated form could persuade any serious Biblical scholar. I intend, in due course, to publish elsewhere a much fuller and more scholarly analysis on the same lines which will give the experts a better opportunity to assess both the merits and the limitations of such devices.

Structuralism is a current intellectual fashion and the word itself has come to mean different things to different people, but for present purposes I shall assume that "Structuralism in Social Anthropology" refers to the social anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and work which derives more or less directly from that source. Thus regarded, structuralism is neither a theory nor a method but "a way of looking at things." To see what is peculiar about this way of looking at things we may usefully look at some of the alternatives.

The subject-matter of social anthropology is customary behaviour. In every sequence of such behaviour there is a practical component which "alters the state of the world" and a ritual, or symbolic, component which "says something" about the social situation. For example, when you take breakfast in the morning, the practical aspect relieves your state of hunger but the nature of the

food—whether it be “toast and coffee” or “bacon and eggs”—“says” that this is breakfast and not lunch or dinner.

In the history of social anthropology the bias of interest has lain alternately on one side or the other: Frazer, Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Mauss, and Lévi-Strauss have been mainly concerned with “things said”; Malinowski and his followers with “things done.” The former have neglected economics and the latter have neglected religion.

Another recurrent uncertainty in social anthropology turns on the relationship between sociology and psychology. Are we concerned with social facts which are out there, external to man in the way that physical inorganic nature is external to man, or must we always remind ourselves that cultural products are *phenomena*, in the sense that they are not merely the perceptions of human minds but the products of human minds? And tied up with this is the question of whether we are ultimately concerned with the diversity of human nature or with its universals.

For if there *are* cultural *universals* then these are part of the “nature of man.” They are products of “the human mind” in a quite general sense, as distinct from any particular individual mind.

Frazer and Malinowski in their different ways both supposed that the study of social anthropology can lead to general insights about “the human mind,” whereas the “collective consciousness” discussed by Durkheim and his associates was presumed to be a characteristic of particular societies. The metaphysics of such arguments are complicated and most British social anthropologists have wisely preferred to concentrate on the sociological part of the Durkheimian tradition—namely the thesis that society is an articulated system which exists in its own right independently of the individuals who make it up. In this respect, as successors to Durkheim, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown both emphasized this articulated interdependence of the institutions which make up a social system. But where Radcliffe-Brown thought of the resulting society as a self-sustaining *organism* and proposed a taxonomy of such organisms, classified as species types, Malinowski thought of culture as a kind of ecological interface between the individual and his social and economic environment. For Malinowski, institutions serve to satisfy the *biological* needs of the individual; for Radcliffe-Brown they satisfy the *mechanical* needs of the *social system as such*.

Lévi-Strauss (by developing ideas initiated by Mauss) has attempted a synthesis of these two positions. The Durkheim-Radcliffe-Brown metaphor by which the articulation of *society* is seen as “like that of an organism” is replaced in Lévi-Strauss by the proposition that the articulation of culture is “like that of a language.” The superficial details of this language are peculiar to particular social systems; the way it is manipulated is the outcome of individ-

ual self-interest; but the ultimate grammar of the language is a human universal. But now to the matter in hand.

At the risk of repeating, or even contradicting, what Professor Lyons said, let me try to give you a rough—and it must be very rough—indication of where the interests of linguistics and social anthropology overlap.

By and large, social anthropologists prefer to leave the facts of human physiology to the physical anthropologists and the zoologists. This permits them to describe a vast area of human behaviour relating to food, sex, reproduction, respiration, body maintenance, and so on as “natural.” All human beings are assumed to have roughly the same physiological needs and the same physiological responses. Behaviour which is the immediate undecorated outcome of these physiological drives—e.g. breathing, sleeping, eating, drinking, defecating, and so on—is looked upon as part of human *nature*. The residual category of “non-natural behaviour” (in this blanket sense) is then treated as either *idiosyncratic*—peculiar to a particular individual—or *cultural*—peculiar to a group of human beings who have been brought up in a particular historical tradition.

In this approach, the capability of human children to learn to speak is a part of their *nature*. But particular languages which are mutually unintelligible are *cultural*. Members of a speech community use their spoken language to communicate information to one another. But they also use many other things to achieve the same purpose. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the houses we live in, and so on, all convey information to those who understand the “codes” in question. Structuralist social anthropologists start off with the hypothesis that these codes are “languages” in the same sense (or very nearly the same sense) as spoken languages, and hence they postulate that the kind of linkage between nature and culture that has lately been emerging from the work of structural linguists is highly relevant for social anthropology.

Linguists have long recognized that although human languages are enormously varied in their superficial aspects, nevertheless there are principles which are valid for all languages. At one time, these universal principles were thought to be grammatical but from the end of the eighteenth century right through to about 1950 professional linguistic attention concentrated heavily on phonology. The experts attempted to formulate rules which would explain how one language could evolve out of another by regular sound shifts and, more generally, they sought to formulate rules about how noise elements (phonemes) can be distinguished from one another so that, when strung together in chains, they form distinctive words.

Since 1953, under the lead of Noam Chomsky, there has been a dramatic shift back to the study of grammar—the attempt to discover universal rules governing the construction of meaningful utterances.

It is important that you should appreciate that, in so far as structuralist social anthropology depends upon a borrowing of ideas from the linguists, these ideas come mainly from the theory of comparative *phonology* rather than from the general theory of *transformational grammar*. This may be a pity, yet it is so.

Anyway, just as structural linguistics endeavours to establish that there are "deep level" universals which lie at the back of the diversity of human languages, so also structuralist social anthropology seeks to discover "deep level" universals which lie at the back of the diversity of human cultures. Anthropologists have been searching for such universals for over 100 years with very little success. The structuralists think that they now have the key to the problem.

At this point I must explain the special sense in which I am using the word structure. By way of illustration I shall borrow an example from Bertrand Russell. If I listen to a broadcast version of a piano sonata the music has gone through a whole series of transformations. It started out as a score written on a piece of paper; it was interpreted in the head of the pianist and then expressed by movements of the pianist's fingers; the piano then produced a patterned noise imposed on the air which was converted by electronic mechanisms into grooves on a gramophone record; subsequently other electronic devices converted the music into radio frequency vibrations and after a further series of transformations it eventually reached my ears as patterned noise. Now it is perfectly clear that *something* must be common to all the forms through which the music has passed. It is that common something, a patterning of internally organized relationships which I refer to by the word *structure*. It is the very essence of structures (in this sense) that they are capable of expression in multiple forms which are transformations of one another, and further—and this point is often overlooked by practitioners of the structuralist art—that there is no one particular form which is a *more* true or *more* correct expression of the underlying structure than any other.

The notion of structure, thus defined, is a mathematical idea and empirical structures can be recognized in every aspect of the universe—in the physics of outer space just as in the genetic chemistry of molecular biology—but in linguistics and in social anthropology we are only concerned with the special class of structures which are generated by human brains. They have the peculiarity that the surface manifestations of these structures tend to be non-repetitive. New forms are being created all the time.

Structural social anthropologists, like structural linguists, are concerned to explore the mechanisms of communication between conscious human beings but they take a wider view of what constitutes communication. To start with they observe that we have receptor senses of taste, smell, touch, rhythm, sensuality, and so on, besides those of hearing and sight.

The social anthropologist therefore assumes that cultural forms which exploit these non-auditory, non-visual senses may function as instruments of communication *in essentially the same way* as the highly specialized cultural forms which we discuss under the heading of spoken and written verbal language.

Social anthropologists agree that it is language rather than any other special capacity which sharply distinguishes human beings from other primates. But in saying this they are using the word *language* in a rather unusual sense. All animals—including man—communicate with each other by means of complex stimulus-response mechanisms. There are some behaviourist psychologists of the school of B.F. Skinner who have managed to convince themselves that ordinary human speech is itself a mechanism of this sort. The linguists, however—and here I am referring especially to Chomsky—have argued with great vigour that human speech interchanges are wholly *unlike* stimulus-response mechanisms.

Although human speech behaviour is governed by discoverable grammatical rules, the way a sequence of verbal utterances will develop is no more predictable than the moves in a multidimensional game of chess.

In this debate, social anthropologists are on Chomsky's side. The interesting parts of cultural intercommunication do not depend upon stimulus-response mechanisms; they are linguistic in nature—generated within a context of grammatical rules—but the language involved is at least partly “non-verbal.” When two individuals are in face-to-face communication “the messages which are conveyed by words” and “the messages which are conveyed by other means” are interwoven.

It is possible that the grammatical and phonological structures which can be incorporated in spoken language are more complicated than those which can be built into non-verbal forms of communication—though this is not self-evident—and I should not want to argue that the whole of structural linguistics can be incorporated *en bloc* into social anthropology by an adroit use of algebra and a switch of terminology. But it is suggested, very seriously, that any normal human being, when wide awake in the company of other human beings, is all the time receiving and conveying messages along a variety of different channels—the vocal/auditory channel being just one of many. The receiver of these messages is all the time integrating the information he is receiving through his different senses and attributing a single integrated meaning to his experience. He does not normally attribute one meaning to what he sees and something else to what he hears and something else again to what he touches ... he fits the messages together into a single whole. It seems to follow that this integrating capacity of the brain (or “mind” if you like) must be “structural.” If we recog-

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nize that we exist in one world rather than many, it must be because we can recognize that messages that reach us through different senses simultaneously share a common structure.

But that is viewing matters from the receiving end. The individual who experiences multiple messages from outside as a unity is also a transmitter of messages through many channels. It is at least a plausible hypothesis that the messages which are sent out are just as structurally coherent as those which are taken in.

I have already cited the example of an English breakfast, and food behaviour in general illustrates the structuralist thesis very well. When we sit down in company for a formal meal we do not just scrabble for the nearest food available; everything is done in accordance with cultural conventions ... Although the menu may not be known in advance the individual dishes have been prepared in a special and complicated fashion; they follow one another in predictable order and in predictable combinations. Certainly it is not immediately "obvious" that the patterning of kinds and combinations of food, of modes of food preparation, of regulated sequences, etc. is "the same as" the harmonic and melodic structure of a sheet of music, or the phonological and grammatical structure of a speech utterance, but once this analogic possibility is suggested, it is seen to be plausible. Structuralist social anthropologists go much further and say that it is so.

At this point the interests of the structural linguist and structuralist social anthropologist begin to diverge rather fast.

Orthodox experts in structural linguistics are not greatly concerned with *meaning* as such. Linguistics seeks to discover how it is possible at all for patterned sound to "convey meaning" and, to this end, linguists are extremely interested in the fact that we are able to distinguish meaningful sentences from apparently similar *meaningless* sentences ... for example, even a small child can recognize that "the cat sat on the mat" and "the gnat sat on the cat" are similar forms both of which make sense. Yet a very small phonetic shift which changes the second of these sentences into "the mat sat on the cat" turns it into nonsense. How does this come about? Evidently our perception of meaning here depends on factors other than sound; this particular example seems to imply a deep-level classification system which distinguishes animate from inanimate objects and the relation of such classes to types of verbs.

But this kind of problem—the analysis of how sentences come to have meaning—is different from the problem of worrying about just what sentences mean. Specialists in linguistics do not ordinarily concern themselves either with problems of philosophy or with the task of translating foreign languages.

But the structuralist social anthropologist cannot split up theory and practice in this way. If he claims that the arrangement of cultural objects in space and

of cultural objects in time is "structurally organized" and that these "structures" serve to convey meaning "like" a grammatically organized spoken language, then he must not only show that the patterns in question exist; he must show what they mean. And that is not easy.

I should add here that I myself consider that a good deal of structuralist social anthropology, both in this country and in France, fails at just this point. The authors exhibit the existence of patterns in the material which they are examining, but they fail to demonstrate that the patterns are significant or how they are significant.

However, ignoring that point, how does the structuralist social anthropologist set about his task?

An analogy which has been used very frequently, particularly by Lévi-Strauss, is that of the music produced by an orchestra. The performers in an orchestra play different instruments; the musical score for each instrument is separate from that of any other instrument, so there is a sense in which each performer is providing a separate "message"; but what is being communicated by the orchestra as a whole is a unity. The individual messages of the separate instruments only "make sense" when they are combined as a whole. The individual messages (or, if you like, part-messages) provided by the individual instruments are like incomplete phrases or sentences in a speech utterance.

In conventional Western music (of the kind with which we are familiar in the works of Mozart and Beethoven) most of the phrases are melodic and the meaning of the sound elements is generated by sequence and contiguity. This of course is what happens in speech utterance also; the sound element, as represented by the letters of the alphabet, do not have meanings in themselves, they acquire meaning only when they are ordered in sequences to form words and sentences.

When structuralists refer to this process in which information elements acquire meaning *by contiguous association in sequence*, they are liable to talk about "syntagmatic chains." The jargon is horrible, but there it is. One important aspect of syntagmatic chains is that they are vehicles for the use of **metonymy**. That I am afraid is another jargon word though you will find it in the dictionary. Metonymy is the device whereby a part of a thing is made to stand for a whole. "A" stands for Apple, "C" for Cat, a Crown stands for a King, a Mitre for a Bishop, and so on. Musical melodies have this quality, the first few bars of a piece of music may serve to recall all the rest.

Shifting our frame of reference altogether, metonymy is what happens when "meaning" is evoked as a signal by a stimulus-response mechanism. We can recognize metonymic messages only when they relate to very familiar highly conventional stereotyped patterns.

But to go back to the music of an orchestra. Each player has a score relating to his own particular instrument; the conductor has a score which combines *all* the instruments, and he reads it not merely from left to right, as a melodic or syntagmatic chain, but also up and down as harmony. The conductor generates musical meaning by getting the individual instruments to produce different noises simultaneously. It is the combination of this chorded dimension with the melodic dimension which produces the "music as a whole."

In speech utterances, metaphor plays the part of harmonic (chorded) association in music. Metaphor is the stuff of poetry; its power to stir the imagination and generate "meaning" depends upon its unexpectedness and the chains of implied metonymic associations, which are unstated, and optional to the listener.

Just to be difficult, the structuralists, who refer to melodic sequences as syntagmatic chains, refer to the kind of shift of register which occurs in metaphor and harmony as "paradigmatic."

I think I have said enough now for you to see how the convinced structuralist approaches his data. He assumes that the cultural stuff within his field of observation, which consists of man-made things and customary behaviours, is all conveying information "like an orchestra." That being so, he assumes that it is possible to record the significant patterns in this cultural stuff on some kind of multidimensional orchestral score. As with orchestral music proper, the "meaning" that is conveyed by the totality of cultural stuff results from a combination of two major types of association: (i) association by contiguity and sequence, melody, syntagmatic chains of data, (ii) association by metaphoric analogy, harmony, switches from one line of the score to quite a different line of the score, paradigmatic links of perceived similarity, e.g. "My love is like a rose."

And let me repeat again: there is a *major* difference between these two kinds of association. With syntagmatic chains you can set up rules which will distinguish between meaningful and non-meaningful combinations, for example in normal English, "if a combination of three letters c.a.t. is to make sense, the letter *t* must come at the end." But if I resort to metaphor I am asserting that  $x=y$  and the number of entities which can be represented by either  $x$  or  $y$  is infinite and subject only to the control of my private imagination. I must emphasize that we are always using both modes of communication all the time, but the mix keeps changing.

But it is high time that I tried to show how this abstract theorizing may be applied to the normal subject-matter of social anthropology.

When I myself started out as an anthropologist as a pupil of Malinowski the fashion was to emphasize that cultural materials must satisfy biological needs.

Human beings cannot survive as individuals; they survive as members of communities, knit together by bonds of reciprocal obligation. To be viable, the cultural systems which generate these networks of interdependence must satisfy the biological requirements of the constituent members, notably those of food, sex, and shelter. Malinowski's style of anthropological thinking is now very unfashionable but its links with structuralism are closer than some of my colleagues seem to appreciate.

Ordinary spoken language is superimposed on a physiological essential, namely breath. In a comparable way the other major codes of human communication are superimposed on other physiological essentials, namely Malinowski's "primary needs" of food, sex, and shelter.

I have already twice mentioned the case of food. All of us must eat, but under normal social conditions no human beings just eat indiscriminately. Cultural rules prescribe a classification which distinguishes between food and not-food. Other cultural rules specify how food shall be collected and prepared and how and when it shall be eaten. In every cultural system there is a "grammar" of food behaviour which is as complex and specific as the grammar of speech.

This is equally true of sexual behaviour. Just as there is cultural discrimination between what is food and what is not food, so also there is cultural discrimination between what is sexually permitted and what is sexually forbidden. These are distinctions of culture and not of nature; they result from rules and conventions, not from inborn animal instincts.

In point of fact, the ordering of these two frames of reference—food and sex—is so similar that metaphoric cross-reference from one to another is almost universal. Even the details of the metaphors are repeated over and over again, e.g. sexual intercourse is "like" eating; parturition is "like" vomiting, and so on.

The fact that such symbolization occurs has been long recognized; it was the original basis for most psycho-analytic theorizing concerning dream interpretation and verbal free association. But the structuralist view of the process seems to be a good deal more sophisticated than that propounded by either Freud or Jung, or even Melanie Klein.

The structuralist proposition is that, in any one cultural system the structure of ideas which relate to food is coherent by itself; similarly the structure of ideas relating to sex is coherent; likewise the structure of ideas relating to space and orientation or, for that matter, the structure of ideas relating to interpersonal relationship—submission and dominance, respect and familiarity, and so on.

But the human brain which generates these coherent sub-systems is itself a unity; hence the structural coherence which is generated in the products of human brains, whether it is manifested as, speech behaviour, or food behaviour,

or sex behaviour, or whatever, must be general and mathematical. Metaphorical cross-reference becomes possible and appropriate only because the "structure" is common. Each mode of communication is a transformation of each of the others, as in my example of the music on the gramophone record.

I shall try to give you some examples of how this theory can be applied to empirical anthropological data in a few moments but first let me go back to the source of these ideas—structural linguistics.

Structural linguistics started out as an explanation of phonology. Sound elements such as those we represent by the letters of the alphabet have no meaning in themselves; they acquire meaning only when they are strung together in chains. But how does the human brain distinguish between one sound element and another? Structuralist theory maintains that what we discriminate are not the sound elements (phonemes) as such, but the distinctive features which underlie the sound elements, such distinctions as vowel/consonant, compact high-energy sound/diffuse low-energy sound. These distinctions are, in effect, second-order data, "relations between relations." One merit claimed for this theory is that a small number of distinctive features may account for all the observable sound elements used in all natural languages. If this were true then distinctive feature theory ought to make it feasible to explore the possibility of language universals in a systematic way.

It is this "distinctive feature" version of transformational phonology which has been mainly exploited by Lévi-Strauss in his application of structuralist ideas to social anthropology.

Lévi-Strauss's selection of culturally significant binary oppositions, the equivalents of vowel/consonant, compact/diffuse oppositions in phonology, often seems rather arbitrary but they fit with the ethnographic data surprisingly well. Here are some of them:

I. *Left hand versus right hand.* Every human individual is aware of the difference between his left hand and his right. He cannot describe with any precision what the difference is; one hand is, in fact, a complex, topological, transformation of the other. My two hands are alike in being hands; opposite in being left and right. This provides us with a useful basis of metaphor, and it was long ago observed that the usage which makes "*left*=sinister, evil, clumsy, mysterious" as opposed to "*right*=correct, good, and so on" is very widespread and not confined to any language area. Structuralism provides us with a clue as to why this should be so.

II. *Raw versus cooked.* Human beings characteristically eat part of their food cooked. The use of fire for cooking is what distinguishes men from beasts.

Lévi-Strauss has argued that the worry about what it is that distinguishes true men—"people like us"—from mere beasts is an anxiety shared by all humanity everywhere. If this is true, then concern with the opposition Culture/Nature is basic even when the concepts as such do not exist. Lévi-Strauss postulates that *Raw* versus *Cooked* is a universal metaphor for *Nature* versus *Culture*. The opposition *wild* versus *tame* is very similar.

III. Spatial opposition. Structuralists find significance in such binary pairs as: Earth/Sky // Earth/Underground; This side of the river// The other side; Land // Sea; Dry // Wet; The City // The Desert. The point about such oppositions is that they are aspects of the non-living world external to man which present themselves directly to the senses but which are particularly appropriate for the crucial *social* opposition Us/Other. Of especial significance are those category pairs which can serve as a metaphoric bridge for the distinction between Culture and Nature since these serve as crucial pivots for religious thinking. In particular, "Life/Death" becomes transferred by metaphor to "This World/Other World" and to "Man versus God."

IV. *Sister* versus *Wife* (see Fig. 1). If we accept the proposition that a sister can never be a wife, then  $x/y$  forms a binary dyad and the social relationship A/C (+) will always be in some sense opposite to B/C (-). If we then observe how these two relations A/C and B/C are expressed in customary behaviour we shall get a guide as to the coding involved. For example in some cultural systems A/C=blood (common substance) and B/C=metaphysical influence. This allows us to predict that when A/C=metaphysical influence, then B/C=Common substance. On the whole, empirical ethnography confirms this expectation.

But what, you may well ask, is the point of all this? Well first of all it is characteristic of this kind of argument that it is assumed that the elements of symbolism are not things in themselves but "relations" organized in pairs and sets. Let me give an example. Fifty years ago in the first flush of Freudian enthusiasm it was seriously argued that it is universally the case that elongated objects are treated as penis symbols, while oval and circular objects serve as vagina symbols. The structuralist admits that there is substantial ethnographic evidence for this kind of generalization but makes the interpretation more abstract. The category opposition long/round is part of a much more general structure (Fig. 2).

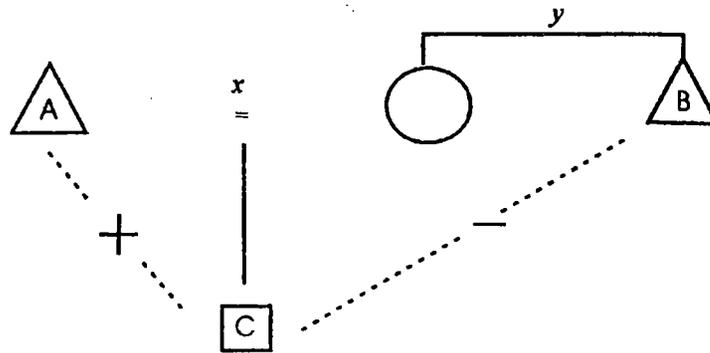


Figure 1

**A. For simple-minded Freudians**

long object= penis

round object= vagina

**B. For structuralists**

$$X = \frac{O}{I} \text{ or } \frac{+}{-} \text{ or } \frac{O}{\Delta} \text{ or } \frac{\text{round}}{\text{straight}} \text{ or } \frac{\text{female}}{\text{male}} \text{ or } \frac{\text{vagina}}{\text{penis}}$$

Figure 2

The crucial point is that the “element of structure” is not a unit *thing* but a relation X.

Applied to ethnographic data this more abstract approach encourages the social anthropologist to perceive that cultural phenomena which he had previously thought of as quite separate are really variations of a common theme.

It is difficult to exemplify this point in detail to a partly nonanthropological audience but here is an example. The fact that some human societies trace

descent through the mother and others through the father has been known for centuries. In the mid-nineteenth century this became a central pivot of evolutionary thought. It was argued that since the child's connection with its mother is "more obvious" than its link with its father, therefore **matriliney** is more primitive than **patriliney**. Hence matrilineal societies and patrilineal societies came to be thought of as entities of quite different kinds but no one really bothered to think about just *how* they were different.

According to this traditional classification the Kachins of north Burma are a patrilineal society. The Garo of Assam, who are located about 100 miles further west, are a matrilineal society. Both groups have been known to Western ethnographers for over a century. Both are distinguished by what appear to be rather peculiar marriage rules.

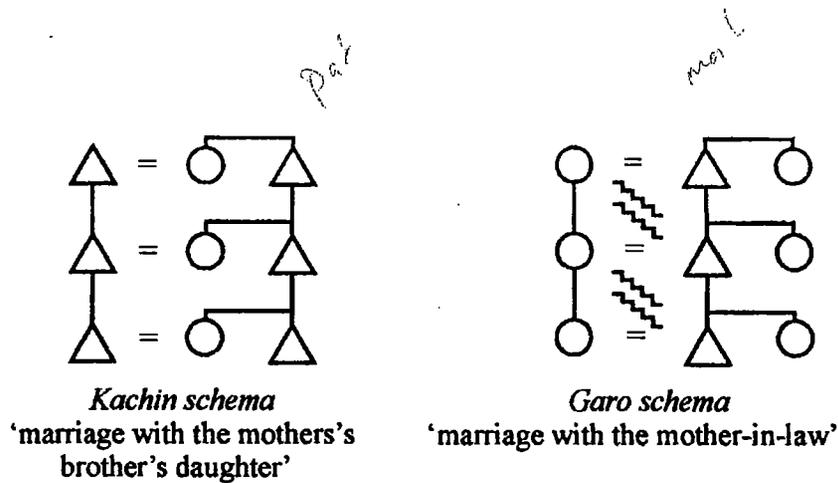


Figure 3

Garo men were reputed to marry their mothers-in-law; Kachins allegedly always married their mother's brother's daughter. No one before Lévi-Strauss ever detected any similarity between the two systems.

But a structuralist way of looking at things shows that these two marriage rules are versions of the same principle (Fig. 3), and modern fieldwork has shown that the two cultural systems are in fact remarkably similar right across the board. The contrast patrilineal descent/ matrilineal descent being the only major difference between them. A structuralist therefore regards the two systems as transformations of a single structure.

The "variation on a theme" argument is also the key characteristic of the structuralist analysis of mythology which is the aspect of Lévi-Strauss's work which looms largest in bulk (if not in quality) in the total Lévi-Straussian corpus.

In this field the essential innovation in Levi-Strauss's approach is the recognition that mythological stories always exist as sets rather than isolates. The individual members of the set constitute permutations of the same theme. The moral implication of the mythology, what Malinowski called its force as "a charter for social action," can only be fully apprehended when we take the total set of stories into consideration simultaneously. Once again you need to think of the instruments of an orchestra combining to produce a unitary piece of music.

Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth takes up four very fat volumes of closely argued text. To give a "summary" of that argument seems to me almost impossible. What I propose to do instead is to illustrate the argument by applying it, in very cursory form, to a theme from the New Testament of the Christian Bible. But first some points of general theory about the relationship between mythology and moral precept.

Among human beings, as among other animals, the three primary drives governing the interaction of individuals are hunger, sex, and physical aggression. Among species *other than* man these drives are very largely determined by genetic factors, or by conditioning at a very early stage in the individual's development. As I have already emphasized, in man the rules and conventions which determine with whom we may eat and what we may eat, with whom we may sleep and where we may sleep, whom we may assault with impunity and under what circumstances, are all arbitrary, culturally determined matters. Taken together, these rules and conventions serve to carve up the social environment into a vast array of cross-cutting classes of things and persons in terms of which we organize our daily lives. The tidy ordering of these categories is something to which we all attach great importance. Any infringement of the standard conventions generates a sense of emotional shock which we experience *either* as embarrassment *or* as excitement.

And even in a story, any reference to a transgression of taboo, however oblique, creates vicarious excitement. In this respect the myths of our own society have quite a different quality for *us* from the myths of other people. Myths everywhere make constant reference to moral offences, but unless, as listener or reader, you share the same moral assumptions as the myth narrator, you will not be "shocked" by what he says and you will then have difficulty in picking up the message. For it is the *shock* effect of references to breaches of moral taboo which gives myth its "meaning." That is why the myths which are most

widely recognized as powerful and exciting are ones which harp on themes of a very basic moral kind, themes which crop up in all kinds of cultures and not just as local peculiarities.

These *primary* myths are always centrally preoccupied with persons and creatures who are wrongly constructed or wrongly born or in the wrong place, and with such universal moral offences as homicide, sexual misdemeanours, and abnormal food behaviour. Such myths exhibit the limits of normality and the potent dangers of otherness by turning normality back to front.

Men and animals are normally different, so, in myth, the serpent who is abnormally constructed, talks with Eve like a human being; normal boats float on the sea, so Noah's Ark comes to rest on the top of a mountain; parricide and incest are the ultimate sins, so myth tricks Oedipus into killing his own father and marrying his own mother. The moral point is made clear by emphasizing the overwhelming disasters which are directly associated with the mythical breach of normality.

Perhaps *normality* is not quite the right word. The topographical space in which mythical events take place is metaphysical rather than physical. It consists of "the world of common experience," which is *normally* inhabited by normal men and by *tame* animals, plus "the other world" of imagination which is *normally* inhabited by supernatural beings and *wild* animals. But there is also a very important "intermediate world" which is neither here nor there. In myth it is this liminal zone which receives the greatest attention.

*Normality* and *abnormality* must therefore be viewed in context. Other world beings are "abnormal" when they behave like normal beings of this world; normal men are "abnormal" when they behave like gods; beings of the middle zone, who often appear in myth as deified ancestors (part man, part god), become "abnormal" whenever they lose their ambiguity. The mediating hero is, in all religious systems, a being of the middle zone. One aspect of his essential ambiguity is that he (or she) is always, at one and the same time, impossibly virtuous and impossibly sinful; it is a definitional characteristic of the hero that he is "abnormal when judged by ordinary criteria."

There are dozens of familiar Biblical examples of this principle. The myth makes Abraham marry his half-sister which is incest and it makes Solomon, the Great King, take seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines all from the nations with whom the Israelites were formally forbidden to intermarry. Notice how, on this issue of marriage, the stories of Abraham and Solomon form a contrasted pair. They are concerned with two aspects of the same problem, the *overemphasis* and the *underemphasis* of the same rule of endogamy. This is an example of what I mean when I say that myth stories do not occur as isolates but in sets; the message of the myth is made obliquely by repetitive,

yet contrasted, references to the *same* moral injunction which is transgressed in *different* ways.

This sounds all very well in theory, but if I am to show *you* just how myth actually works by storing up emotional feelings of shock and contradiction so as to reveal a religious message, then I have to work through an actual example which you yourselves, or some of you anyway, are liable to find shocking. I must take a myth which is part of *your* own religious background. Hence my choice of Christian New Testament material. The theme which I propose to tackle is that which is implicit in the myth of the birth and death of the paired hero figures, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

First you should notice how although the gospels link the careers of these two heroes together in the most emphatic way, the heroes themselves are treated as opposites. In both cases, conception is abnormal, but where John's mother Elizabeth is a woman past the age of childbearing, Jesus' mother Mary is a virgin. Then again the two mothers are cousins, but whereas John belongs to the priestly line of Aaron, Jesus belongs to the royal line of David.

Let me elaborate further some of the structural transformations of this similarity-difference relationship. John is a prophet living in the wilderness, that is to say on the margins of this world and the other; he dresses in animals' skins and feeds off locusts and wild honey; he abstains from alcohol; his companions are wild animals; he is thus a man of *Nature*. Jesus is repeatedly declared to be a king; he lives on normal food in the normal world of the city; he is the son of a carpenter; he fraternizes with publicans and sinners; he is thus a man of *Culture*. Jesus submits to baptism by John yet at this instant John expresses verbally his subordination to Jesus.

Eventually John dies by *decapitation*. Throughout the Old Testament this is a death reserved for kings and princes. In contrast Jesus dies by crucifixion. This is an alien form of execution introduced by the Roman conquerors and reserved for criminals. John's death is brought about by the conspiracy of a wicked Princess Herodias and the sexual guile of her daughter Salome. The women around Jesus play an entirely virtuous sexual role, yet one of them, Mary Magdalene, has been a prostitute.

The context of John's death is a royal feast at which John's severed head is served up on a dish as if it were food. The context of Jesus' death is a Jewish feast of the Passover at which Jesus himself identifies his own body and blood with the food and wine.

I think you must agree that, when the stories are summarized in this selective way, the symmetry of the contrasted patterns is very striking. But what does it mean? We can get an answer to this question by extending the set of stories under examination. For example, we might notice that in the Jewish myth,

the *original* Passover commemorated the liberation of *Israelites* from domination by the *Egyptians* and their escape through the *wilderness* to the *Promised Land of Canaan*.

In contrast, the Christian myth of the Last Supper, which is explicitly identified with the Jewish Passover, commemorates the liberation of all *Mankind* from domination by *the cares and suffering of ordinary worldly life*, and *Man's escape*, through the *mysterious wilderness of death* to the *Promised Land of God's Heavenly kingdom and eternal life*. In the *Jewish* myth the final signal of release is the *divine* destruction of all the first born sons of the *Egyptian oppressors*. In the *Christian* myth the final signal of release is the *human* destruction of the first born son of *God*. Thus, the Christian story is, in a quite explicit sense, a new version of the much earlier Jewish story but generalized on to a more metaphysical plane with certain key elements reversed.

If you consider the material in this way you will realize that part at least of the "message" in the New Testament story is that the symbolic heroes John and Jesus exchange their roles. John starts out as a being from the other world; he is "filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb"; he is a "voice crying in the wilderness"; but he dies in a city in a kingly palace, executed as a king.

Jesus starts out as a being of this world; he belongs initially to the city not the desert; his royal status is emphasized from the start but he becomes filled with the Holy Ghost only when he is baptized by John; he then immediately goes out into the wilderness, but when he does so he is in communication not with God but with Satan; nevertheless Jesus ends up as a being of the Other World. John is a prophet, a spokesman of God, who becomes a murdered king; Jesus is a king who becomes a murdered prophet.

This role reversal is reinforced by many other incidents in the Jesus myth which repeatedly reverses the roles which orthodox Jewish belief seems to offer to the Messiah. For example, where the ancient *Israelites* had escaped from *Pharaoh* by flight *from Egypt into Canaan*, the infant Jesus escapes from Herod by flight *from Canaan into Egypt*. When Jesus dies he is *not* in a palace but outside the city on a gibbet. He dies *not* as a king, but as a mock king, wearing a crown of thorns. Indeed he dies as a common criminal. Yet, by thus dying, he achieves the status which John had at the beginning; he forms a bridge with the other world and life everlasting.

The drama of the Christian mass, the communion service, recapitulates the myth of the Last Supper. The communicant, by identifying himself with Jesus through the food of the sacred meal, assures himself of life everlasting in the other world, but in doing so, he *also* identifies himself as a criminal and miserable sinner in this world. But the communicant also aspires to improving his personal spiritual status; he seeks to become on some spiritual plane more

king-like. But does this mean more like Jesus or more like King Herod? The ambiguity of implication is quite typical of all mythological structures.

Notice that in the process of dramatization the historical context of the story becomes entirely irrelevant. It really does not matter in the least whether *any* of this “actually happened in history.” The message of the myth is true in its own terms, not in historical terms.

I realize that such a web of references, cross-references, identifications, inversions, and transformations is difficult to follow. Indeed, if structuralists are right about how myth works, it is an essential feature of the matter that, at a conscious level, the logic of the transformations should be ambiguous. The message of the myth is full of paradox, and it only becomes acceptable as a religious injunction because we do *not* quite understand what is being said.

This is just as well because in this, as in all major myths, the literal sense of what is being said is very terrible. If we leave the metaphysics on one side, we are being told that, in order to achieve the God-like quality of immortality, we must first kill and eat God himself. But we miss the point if we try to constrain our material by imposing any such *literal* interpretation. As a German theologian has put it, “Myth is the expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena.” Myth possesses an *inner* sense which underlies a superficial *non*-sense; we can understand it only as we might understand a kind of universalized poetry.

This I am afraid has been a rather crowded paper. Clearly my Biblical example, if it were to be fully justified, would need much greater elaboration. But I started out by saying that structuralism in social anthropology is a distinctive way of looking at things. I felt that I needed to exemplify this point. Whether, at the end of the day, we have or have not gained any insights which we did not have before will be a matter of opinion.

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### Study Questions

1. How does Leach employ the metaphor of an orchestra to describe the project of structuralism?
2. What are some of Lévi-Strauss’s “binary oppositions” that Leach discusses?
3. How does Leach employ Biblical mythology to illuminate structural analysis?

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### Further Readings

Leach, Edmund R. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. London: G. Bell and Sons.

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