

“Just a passing fashion” . . .

Edmund Leach, ed.: *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, A (ssoc. of) S(social) A(nthropologists of the Commonwealth) Monographs 5, London: Tavistock Publications; second impression 1968 XIX + 185 pp. Introduction by E. Leach.

The volume presents itself as the result of a symposium held by members of the Association of Social Anthropologists at Cambridge, 1963. The entire session was devoted to the work of Levi-Strauss and the book concentrates on his structural approach towards an understanding of primitive myths and thought.

In so far as the book does not offer any alternative procedure of structural analysis (not based on Levi-Strauss), the title is misleading. Since one can only criticize or evaluate in the light of alternatives, it should have been of considerable interest to include other formalistic methods. In his introduction, Edmund Leach does away with Propp's method of morphological analysis as belonging to “a respectable ancestry of Levi-Strauss' arguments”. This clearly does not help to produce an unbiased critique or appreciation and the volume appears rather one-sided. For the student approaching Levi-Strauss or the reader who wants to inform himself about the basically different points of view held by English empiricists and French intellectuals, the book, however, should prove very interesting and helpful.

The volume is divided into two parts, the first dealing with myth-analysis is the subject of this review, the second part is dealing with totemism. A very good translation from the French of Levi-Strauss' “*La Geste d'Asdiwal*” by Nicholas Mann appears as the headpiece of the 1st part. The following papers by Douglas, Yalman and Burrige form a critical review of Levi-Strauss' approach as presented in “*The Story of Asdiwal*” and of his ideas

expressed in “*La Pensee Sauvage*”, “*Le Cru et Le Cuit*”, whereas the contributions of Mendelson, Worsley and Fox comment on his work about totemism. I shall leave the critique of Levi-Strauss to the various contributors and concern myself with the differing views as expressed in their papers.

Edmund Leach, who declares himself greatly influenced by Levi-Strauss' work, takes the point of Levi Strauss in his critical remarks to the papers he introduces. In his effort to support the arguments of his French colleague, he sometimes tends to reduce the whole problem to a kind of misinformation on the side of orthodox British anthropologists and to an impossibility of correct translation. Stating that “Levi-Strauss often manages to give me ideas even when I do not really know what he is saying”, Leach argues, that it seems to be precisely this metaphysical value of Levi-Strauss' ideas which makes him so suspect to British empiricists. He is therefore mainly interested in illuminating to his fellow-contributors some of the more sophisticated passages of Levi-Strauss, which in his mind had remained rather obscure to them. His complaint about the “English arrogance”, which declares Levi-Strauss' structural analysis to be “just a passing fashion”, is, however, genuinely felt.

The very value of M. Douglas' paper lies in her detailed analysis and interpretation of Levi-Strauss' method as presented in “*The Story of Asdiwal*”. The comparison between her precis and the original should prove especially useful for a better understanding of Levi-Strauss. In her critical comments, she is mainly concerned with Levi-Strauss' rejection of the idea, that myth is a kind of primitive poetry. It seems that Dr. Douglas has missed the point here. Levi-Strauss clearly stated his views in his brilliant essay on the structural study of myth (*Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1958): poetry rests on style and therefore loses its value by translation, whereas myth rests on unities of action, elements which can be recognized” even through the worst translation”.

For Dr. Douglas, there does not exist any difference between a poet's and myth-maker's job (is there anything like a myth-maker?) The whole argument suffers from a confusion of the unities of action clearly stated in the myths with the symbolic value of those actions as conceived by the interpreter. There is surely no end to the number of symbolic meanings which may be put into a good myth. But there is only a very limited number of objectively recognizable units of action in a myth, whether one proceeds according to the method of Levi-Strauss or prefers the approach of Propp and Dundes.

Nur Yalman offers some critical comments on Levi-Strauss' "Le Cru et le Cuit" in his paper. The attempt to present a lucid and concise outline of so sophisticated a book as the 1st volume of the "Mythologiques" comes out as the incoherent discussion of some passages spotted over the whole range of the book. Yalman reproaches Levi-Strauss of formalism. But it is exactly the formal structures of myths which Levi-Strauss wants to reveal. Although Yalman seems furthermore genuinely concerned with the absolute lack of reference to ritual in Levi-Strauss' work, the discussion as a whole emerges as an extensive praise of Levi-Strauss' work.

K. O. L. Burridges' contribution is divided into two parts, the first of which concentrates on the examination of the influence Hegel and Marx had on Levi-Strauss. For Burridge Levi-Strauss' approach is coloured by an intermediary position between Hegelian and Marxian thought on the one hand and Darwinian evolutionism on the other. While taking over Hegel's method of dialectic Levi-Strauss dissociates himself from his transcendentalism, putting "nature" as his widest context of relevance on the place of Hegel's "god". For him, the primacy and priority of thought remains untouched but he assumes an evolutionist's position in relation to the ontology of the problem of thought. The empirical facts of observation are transcended not in the light of "god", but in a particular view of "nature", which is a return from Marx to Hegel in Levi-Strauss' own terms. For Burridge, there remains the conclusion that Levi-Strauss is "absolutely his contrary self": in a hopeless and inconsistent attempt to combine within a notion of structure contradiction and conflict in terms of content (Marx) and the Hegelian system of logical contraries, Levi-Strauss employs an ad hoc and

arbitrary mixture of both systems of thought.

Burridges' brilliant analysis of Levi-Strauss' philosophical background culminates in the suggestion of an alternative method of structural myth-analysis based on the model of the French ethnologist, but taking into account the resonance of words in a particular culture. An extensive knowledge of the culture involved as well as an examination of the myth on its own terms within the context of a corpus of myths are the prerequisites of the method developed here. It is a pity that Burridge has not been able to fully demonstrate his alternative method within the scope of his paper. It remains a lucid, if all too abbreviated and over-simplified sketch of the possibilities inherent in Levi-Strauss' approach. If developed rigidly, Burridges' method could perhaps prove of real value closing the gulf between pure formalistic procedures and symbolic interpretations, which can hardly ever be validated by the ethnographic material.

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Folktales from the Warao

Textos Folclóricos de los Indios Warao - Johannes Wilbert, Latina American Center, University of California in Los Angeles, Los Angeles 1969

Almost simultaneously with the publication of Padre Basilio de Barral appeared the Spanish version of Dr. Wilbert's collection of the oral literature of the Warao (Guarao). The material for this book was gathered by the author already more than 15 years ago, when he first came to Venezuela to do some field-work among the Warao, who then were not yet acculturated as much as they are today. The material was first published in 1964 as a Monography (No. 9) by the Instituto Caribe de Antropología y Sociología, Fundación La Salle, Caracas with the texts translated into English, translated by Henry Osborn, who also collaborated with Padre Barral. The new book contains more or less the same texts, this time, however, translated into Spanish by Father Antonio Vaquero, who himself gathered a great deal of material among the Warao and is fluent in their language. The
