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978-0-521-10538-5 - Quadripartite Structures: Categories, Relations, and Homologies in  
Bush Mekeo Culture

Mark S. Mosko

Excerpt

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## 1

Introduction: the problem  
and the people

This account of a Papuan culture is avowedly structuralist. In this view, ethnographic description and explanation essentially consist of translating the meanings of indigenous culture categories into our own language, and constructing in the process a model of the total culture (Schneider 1972, 1980). For non-Western cultures like the Bush Mekeo, meanings cannot be assigned or adduced either a priori or ad hoc from Western concepts. Rather, meaning, as argued by Saussure in terms of linguistic value (1959), is neither random nor piecemeal, but systematic and logical. It resides in the interrelations among indigenous categories, in their relations of difference and similarity, in the underlying structure of ideas. Moreover, the meanings of particular cultural elements are inseparable from the wider synchronic “whole” or “totality.”

The notions of *meaning*, *indigenous category*, *structure*, and *cultural whole* are thus central to my treatment of Bush Mekeo traditions.

In the current “post-structuralist” era (Kurtzweil 1980; see also Friedman 1974) there has been a tendency for these conceptions to be superseded by reemphases upon social action, history, and diachrony. Undoubtedly, the revival of Marxian approaches (e.g., among others, Friedman 1974; Worseley 1968; Harris 1968; Sahlins 1972; Bourdieu 1977; Godelier 1977) is largely responsible. Although certain elements of this development are necessary and welcome, others are premature if not regrettable – premature in that some of the most valuable and useful insights deriving from the structuralist perspective have been passed over without yet receiving adequate opportunity for empirical verification, and regrettable in that the risks have consequently increased of seriously distorting our conception and understanding of the essential nature of cultural systems and how they are constituted. Namely, the contemporary historicist approaches tend implicitly or explicitly to deny or ignore both the analytical validity of indigenous categories and that cultures can profitably be seen to consist of total integrated systems of ideas.

#### Quadripartite structures in anthropological perspective

It is also in response to these challenges, then, that I offer the following structuralist interpretation of Bush Mekeo culture. Through the sequence

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of my chapters, that culture unfolds as a synchronic whole. In the process, I focus upon the replication of a particular quadripartite structure evident among the categories impinging upon various cultural and social contexts or domains of village life. By unearthing this replicative structure or pattern as I move from one context to another, the culture of the Bush Mekeo and the meanings embodied in it are represented as a series of homologies or metaphors.

The notion of structural replication has a long tradition in anthropological theory and can be traced back to the very founding of the discipline late in the nineteenth century. The systematic replication of relationships within a single culture is fundamental, I think, to Durkheim's conceptualization of "collective representations" and Mauss's idea of "total social phenomena." It is also central to Hertz's classic studies of religious polarity and mortuary ritual. Structural or patterned replication is implicit as well in the Boasian tradition, as evidenced by Benedict's "configurationalist" theory and its intellectual cognates. More modern and explicitly structuralist anthropological insights following chiefly from the works of Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss, and Leach have sustained and refined the pursuit of culture's systematic nature through the internal replication of form. Noteworthy examples of this approach include Douglas (1966), Bulmer (1967), Burrige (1969a), Strathern and Strathern (1968, 1971), M. Strathern (1981), Fernandez (1974), J. J. Fox (1971a, 1971b, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1980a), Ostör (1980), Jamous (1981), Gell (1975), Schneider (1969, 1972, 1980), Kelly (1977), S. Hugh-Jones (1979), C. Hugh-Jones (1980), Needham (1962, 1973, 1979), Dumont (1970), Tambiah (1968a, 1968b, 1983), Gudeman (1976), Vogt (1969), Sahlins (1976), Bourdieu (1973), and Shapiro (1981). My description and interpretation of Bush Mekeo culture in the following chapters should be generally viewed, then, as a continuation of this core anthropological tradition.

It is probably fair to say that the greater share of anthropological studies in this tradition has focused on binary or dualistic forms. Nature/Culture, Sacred/Profane, Right/Left, Male/Female, Life/Death, Above/Below, This World/Other World, and Wife-Giver/Wife-Receiver are among the more familiar (Durkheim 1915; Hertz 1960; Needham 1973; Leach 1954, 1964, 1966a; Lévi-Strauss 1969a; J. J. Fox 1971b, 1973, 1974, 1975; Lancy and Strathern 1981). Indeed, of considerable significance here, one recent observer has noted that the culture of the neighboring Central Mekeo is particularly marked by a wide and complex assortment of binary-category oppositions (Hau'ofa 1981:289–91). Nonetheless, replicative structures with more than two elements or relations have also been proposed (cf. Needham 1973, 1979). These more complex structures, although still formally reducible to binary oppositions, have been in terms of their cross-cultural significance predominantly either tripar-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

3

tite (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1963a, 1966b; Leach 1964; Douglas 1966) or quadripartite (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1963a; Foster 1974; Leach 1958a, 1961). With triadic structures, the third element is typically added to the binary pair in order to “mediate” or “resolve” the opposition between them. With quadripartite structures, a similar function is performed by the inversion or reversal of the initially opposed binary pair. Obviously, binary, tripartite, and quadripartite structures are not mutually exclusive in a formalistic sense (Hammel 1972). Clearly, also, the notions of contrast, opposition, contradiction, reversal, and inversion are implicit in all three kinds of structure. Unfortunately, as it has been noted, the theory of reversal in anthropology “is still rather more random than formal” (Foster 1974:346; cf. Geertz 1972:26; Leach 1954, 1961:132–6; Lévi-Strauss 1963a; Gell 1975:335–8; Fortes 1970; Kelly 1977).

In any case, the kind of structure that I show to be replicated throughout Bush Mekeo culture is not simply binary nor triadic but quadripartite. Categories distinguished and mutually defined as belonging to the same set systematically come in *fours*. Each fourfold category group is initially composed of a single binary opposition ( $X' : Y''$ ), which is itself bisected by its own inverse or reverse ( $Y' : X''$ ). The complete category set can thus be expressed in terms of a double analogy:

$$X' : Y'' :: Y' : X'' \quad (1)$$

This is the structure of bisected dualities that, I shall argue, systematically underlies the category distinctions of Bush Mekeo culture and that constitutes the homologous or metaphorical relations among the culture’s varied contexts.

It is of some considerable significance to indicate preliminarily that this particular structure of bisected dualities is isomorphic with several other important quadripartite structures that have been proposed both within and without anthropology. First, Lévi-Strauss’s cryptic formulation of the underlying structure of myth corresponds almost precisely with my notion of bisected duality:

$$F_x(a) : F_y(b) = F_x(b) : F_{a-1}(y)$$

Here, with two terms,  $a$  and  $b$ , being given as well as two functions,  $x$  and  $y$ , of these terms, it is assumed that a relation of equivalence exists between two situations defined respectively by an inversion of *terms* and *relations*, under two conditions: (1) that one term be replaced by its opposite (in the above formula,  $a$  and  $a - 1$ ); (2) that an inversion be made between the *function value* and the *term value* of two elements (above,  $y$  and  $a$ ) (Lévi-Strauss 1963a:228; see also Lévi-Strauss 1967; Leach 1970:62–86).

The only major difference between Lévi-Strauss’s equation and my own concerns their respective ranges of application. Lévi-Strauss has re-

stricted his efforts in this context largely to mythological or narrative texts (cf. Maranda and Maranda 1971). Furthermore, he has characteristically dealt with the mythical literatures of many societies – all of Amerindian myth in his *Mythologiques*, for example – as a total corpus rather than with the myths alone (or, more preferably perhaps, the myths alongside the related institutions) of a single cultural tradition. The most noteworthy exception here is probably his celebrated essay on the Tshimshin myth of Asdiwal (1967). As convincing as Lévi-Strauss's general approach to mythology might appear to some (to others not), it has nonetheless tended to leave aside the structural integrity of separate cultural traditions. Also, because he draws the myths for his transformational groups from across cultural boundaries, Lévi-Strauss's efforts have too often suffered for lack of empirical verification by comparison with nonmythical materials of the same traditions (Maybury-Lewis 1969; Burrige 1967; Willis 1967). My own exploration of structures of bisected dualities, by contrast, is initially restricted to a single cultural system, the Bush Mekeo, and involves comparisons between mythical as well as non-mythical contexts: conceptualizations of space and time, physiological process, gender roles, social organization, leadership and authority, ritual, etc. Geertz (1973, 1974; see also Schneider 1972), for one, has argued for such a hermeneutic for similar reasons, but he stops short of seeking formalistic interconnections in favor of highly elaborated exegesis, or “thick description,” of native text. Inasmuch as the ideas impinging upon these various contexts of Bush Mekeo culture all conform to the quadripartite structure of bisected dualities, the total culture – not merely its parts in isolation nor in comparison with analogous parts of other traditions – constitutes a “whole” or transformational group in its own right.

In another theoretical treatment of mythical thinking, Godelier (1971) posits a similar structure, but one of substantively specific elements, namely, the possible “trajectories of analogical linkage” between Nature and Culture (Figure 1.1). The form of these relations, however, is still that of a bisected duality. The trajectories are thus four in number. Combined in a kind of vectorial algebra of the imagination, “[they confer] on mythical discourse and mythical thought their inexhaustible polysemia and symbolic richness” (1971:100). Any particular mythical projection can be thereby plotted along one of the indicated trajectories of the graph. In this way, all the possible kinds of understanding that can be mythically created between Nature and Culture may be characterized:

- I. Culture  $\longrightarrow$  Nature
- II. Nature  $\longrightarrow$  Culture
- III. Culture  $\longleftrightarrow$  Culture
- IV. Nature  $\longleftrightarrow$  Nature

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Mark S. Mosko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

5

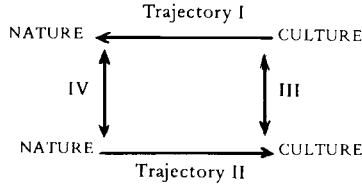


Figure 1.1. The trajectories of Nature and Culture. (From M. Godelier, "Myth and History," *New Left Review*, vol. 69, p. 100. Reprinted by permission.)

such that

$$I : IV :: II : III$$

Of course, one has to accept here not only the universality and significance of the Nature/Culture dyad (Lévi-Strauss 1969b; cf. MacCormack and Strathern 1980), but also, in Godelier's handling, the reality of such reified entities as Myth, Society, and History. The alternate and empirically verifiable notion of a structurally integrated cultural whole is thus still lacking. Nonetheless, Godelier's formal convergence with Lévi-Strauss upon the structure of myth in terms of bisected dualities is provocative.

Attempting to overcome empiricists' critiques of structuralism generally and Lévi-Strauss's handling of myth in particular, Willis (1967) has examined the systematic distinctions embodied in Fipa mythology against the backdrop of the wider system of Fipa social organization. He discovers that the mythical structures are homologous with the more readily verifiable structures of the sociopolitical system, and the form they share in this instance is that of bisected dualities. In both contexts, relations of complementary opposition are systematically inverted through being attributed contrasting values, positive (+) and negative (-) (Figure 1.2). Mythically and socially, Fipa sometimes attribute the "Head" positive values (maleness, intellect, authority, seniority) and the contrasting "Loins" negative ones (femaleness, sexuality, reproduction, juniority), whereas other times the "Head" receives the negative values (lightness, fewness, weakness, constraint) and the "Loins" the positive ones (heaviness, numbers, strength, fellowship). Thus,

$$(+)\text{ Head} : (-)\text{ Loins} :: (+)\text{ Loins} : (-)\text{ Head}$$

This represents a decisive step in the directions I am suggesting. First, Willis is struggling to make structural models more empirically satisfactory. He is notably successful in this particular case because, second, he

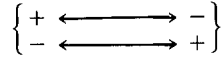


Figure 1.2. Fipa mythical and social values. (From R. G. Willis, "The Head and the Loins: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond." *Man* [n.s.] 2:524.)

deals with diverse contexts of the culture together as if that culture were a total system. And third, the exact structure he posits for the Fipa is convergent with that characteristic of the Bush Mekeo culture, that is, as a system of bisected dualities.

In his essay "Structure and Dialectics," Lévi-Strauss (1963a:232–41) gives at least a passing indication of these possibilities. Exploring the relation between myth and ritual, *contra* Malinowskian wisdom, he most vigorously advocates the comparison of myths and rituals from different societies out of their respective contexts (see also Foster 1974:346–7). Nevertheless, he does briefly mention the possibility of establishing structural homologies between myths and rituals of a single society. Moreover, in the two ethnographic cases of this sort he discusses, he finds just such a correspondence between the structure of twofold opposition that generates the myths – his analogic model given above – and the patterning of the rituals (cf. Gell 1975:341–6). Unfortunately, Lévi-Strauss has never fully developed this specific procedure elsewhere.

The study of ritual separate from myth has of course also preoccupied generations of anthropologists. To many today, the foremost classical authority on ritual is Arnold Van Gennep (1960). Van Gennep observed that rituals in different societies frequently followed the general pattern of "rites of passage," characterized by a tripartite sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation. Modern symbolist explorations of ritual largely continue to follow Van Gennep's formula, as, for example, in the splendid works of Victor Turner (1967, 1969). However, it is Leach (1961:132–6) alone who so far has recognized the essentially *fourfold* character of rites of passage in the form of a double opposition – sacred (transition) time versus profane time, and separation (sacralization) versus aggregation (desacralization) – or, in my terms in the form of a bisected duality:

sacred : profane :: separation : aggregation

The structures of myth and rites of passage can thus be seen as homologous. Foster (1974) reaches virtually the same conclusion with respect to myth and ritual generally in her comparison of Navaho and American sacred activity. This heretofore barely recognized convergence could well have a major bearing on the classical issue of the relation between myth and ritual. Although such prominent figures as Robertson Smith (1957), Jane Harrison (1903, 1912), Durkheim (1915), Radcliffe-Brown (1939),

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Mark S. Mosko

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

Malinowski (1948), Kluckhohn (1942), and Spiro (1964) have argued as to the relative priority of one over the other, all have been taking predominantly substantive elements only into consideration. Neither viewpoint has been satisfactorily supported with ethnographic materials (Lévi-Strauss 1963a:232–41). And this, I strongly suspect, is because the perceived congruities are *structural* rather than substantive, and empirically verifiable perhaps only in the context of comparing rituals and myths of the same tradition, at least in the preliminary stages of research.

Several modern descendant adaptations (acknowledged or otherwise) of Van Gennep's original formulation, which have received considerable recognition, exhibit the same logical scheme. By what amounts to projecting rites of passage onto the level of whole societies or major segments of societies undergoing "millenarian movements," for example, Burridge isolates three phases additional to a fourth period of stable tradition and old rules: (1) doubt and uncertainty (old rules in doubt), (2) orgiastic and other activities (no rules), and (3) new rules (1969b:165–70). Thus, the phases of millenarian movements are homologous with rites of passage:

sacred : profane :: segregation : aggregation  
no rules : old rules :: old rules in doubt : new rules affirmed

To take a second example dealing with the same class of phenomena under the alternate rubric of "revitalization movements," Wallace (1956) develops virtually the same quadripartite<sup>1</sup> temporal ordering:

period of : steady : period of : period of  
cultural distortion : state :: increased individual stress : revitalization

Still other quadripartite structures have been proposed by anthropologists for application to non-Western materials. Douglas's (1970) graph of "grid" (private vs. shared classifications) and "group" (control of other people vs. being controlled by other people) is one recognizable instance of a double opposition. The evident intent in this case is to plot and classify the overall comparative similarities between different cultural traditions rather than to portray the homologous relations between categories indigenous to particular cultures as the logic by which the very nature of those separate traditions is made manifest (i.e., as wholes). Significantly, also, part of the meaning of Douglas's "group" dimension had been explored elsewhere by Hohfeld with his four fundamental types of legal relationship (Figure 1.3). However, Hohfeld's quadripartite formulation is composed of substantive elements that of course are very likely not to be found all together beyond the boundaries of Western jurisprudence. And in any case, it constitutes only one part of the totality of Western culture.



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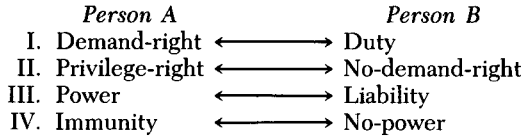
[More information](#)*Quadripartite structures*

Figure 1.3 Hohfeld's fundamental legal relationships. (From E. A. Hoebel, *The Law of Primitive Man*, p. 48. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954. Reprinted by permission.)

The possibility inevitably arises that these several instances of bisected dualities in the theory of social anthropology are logical devices specific to our own manner of viewing the world, including the perception of other cultures, rather than inherent in the nature of those other systems. Are we as anthropologists, in our efforts to interpret other cultures free of ethnocentric distortion, ourselves guilty perhaps of inadvertently imposing upon them the very forms of logic and order characteristic of our own culture (Hallpike 1976)? All the versions of quadripartite structures I have mentioned are in essence compatible with the theory of the transformational or “Klein group” in mathematics (Figure 1.4). The suspicion increases still more because other social sciences have also fixed upon the same class of transformational structures in the contexts of their investigations: the relations of phonology, syntax, and semantics in linguistics (Jakobson 1948; Chomsky 1957), and the INRC (identity, negation, reciprocity, correlation) group of operations of Piagetian developmental psychology (Piaget 1949, 1970:31n), for example. Closer to home, Andriolo (1981) has recently shown by applying ethnosemantic techniques to myth and history as a single domain that conventional anthropological contrasts between these two in dualistic terms are inadequate for capturing the full breadth of issues involved. Specifically, two intersecting dimensions – replication versus differentiation and vector versus field – are required. In this one critical context, then, anthropology is revealed to be itself built upon a foundation of bisected dualities. In a more comprehensive examination, Augé (1982) plots the whole of modern and traditional anthropological theory along two cross-cutting axes constituted of the oppositions “symbol versus function” on the one hand and “evolution versus culture” on the other.

The ultimate significance of these several structural parallels in anthropology and related disciplines, and the philosophical implications of reflexivity to which they give rise, go considerably beyond the ethnographic limitations of this work. But still they bear upon it. Although, indeed, in the process of interpreting the culture of the Bush Mekeo it will be (as it always is) impossible not to draw upon constructs of our own



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Mark S. Mosko

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

9

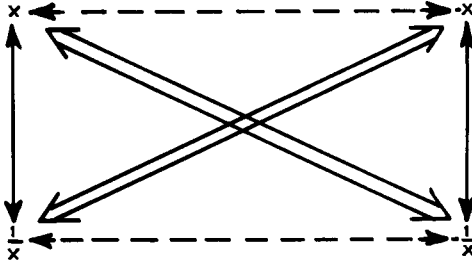


Figure 1.4. The structure of the Klein group in mathematics. (After M. Barbut. From Michael Lane [ed.]: *Introduction to Structuralism*, p. 368. Introduction and compilation © 1970 by Michael Lane. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.)

tradition, it nevertheless remains at least partially an empirical question. This can be briefly illustrated here with an example taken from the recent literature pertinent to the Bush Mekeo and other Melanesian cultures.

Brunton (1980) attempts to cast doubt upon the various symbolic interconnections in *ida* ritual that Gell establishes in his book, *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries* (1975), dealing with the Umeda culture of Papua New Guinea. Gell elicits the meanings of the *ida* on the basis of two kinds of “lexical motivation”: “sematic motivation” or polysemy, where a word has multiple meanings, metaphorical or metonymical; and “morphological motivation,” where a meaning is obtained from the compounding of distinct lexical elements (Gell 1975:121–3; cf. Ullmann 1963). Conceding that Gell produces the most sophisticated and detailed attempt of this sort to date, Brunton is still not convinced. In the process of questioning some of the ethnographic instances of motivation posed by Gell, Brunton focuses upon the issue of formulating a convincing picture of the cultural whole, as I have argued earlier in this chapter. He emphasizes that Umeda villagers themselves, on the one hand, offer few reliable clues; they typically do not engage in exegesis of their rituals and whenever pressed give highly individualistic, tentative, and varying interpretations. And, he argues, on the other hand, that additional rituals of the same system, by which Gell’s symbolic analysis through comparison might be empirically verified, are lacking (cf. Geertz 1974). Thus, judging Gell’s account deficient on these counts, Brunton proposes that this and other extreme instances of presumed logical order in cultural and religious systems are the product of imposing an Aristotelian discipline foreign to many Melanesian situations. Presumably, should an account of impressive logical ordering in a Melanesian culture be offered, supported by both sufficient native exegeses and a broad range of diverse rituals, and

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[More information](#)

supplemented with analyses of even additional contexts of that culture, then the sort of skepticism voiced by Brunton should be overcome. In any case, the question of the relative orderliness and structuring becomes one of empirical investigation as well as theoretical presupposition.

My interpretation of Bush Mekeo culture is intended to answer this challenge on both counts. I shall show, first, that meaning and order are intrinsic to the very nature of the culture-as-constituted (Sahlins 1976); second, that meaning resides in the relational values (including, in Gell's terms, the lexical motivations) of the indigenous culture categories; third, that the order consists of a total system of conceptualizations ramifying throughout the culture structured in the form of bisected dualities; fourth, that because these relations are comprehensive of diverse contexts or domains of the culture, they are not merely artifacts of the outsider's or analyst's thought processes; and fifth, that comparisons with other historically related cultures as analogous wholes suggest the widespread distribution of this particular structure in the Oceanic cultural sphere. As Willis aptly puts it, "What is needed . . . is not less structuralism but more – at the 'grass-roots' level of ethnography" (1967:531).

Overall, then, my aim is to unravel the structural relations and replications among the indigenous categories of Bush Mekeo *culture* as a total, unified system. Nonetheless, I do ultimately focus upon the categories and relations underlying Bush Mekeo *society*, particularly as they are represented in gender roles, kinship, clanship, and marriage, and in rituals and feasts of death and mourning. To reach this point, however, it is necessary to elucidate certain categories from other spheres that are preliminarily invoked in the cultural ordering of social distinctions and relations. Also, as implied here, the numerous contexts of the culture as I describe them become increasingly complex. Therefore, it will prove useful first to articulate fully the basic structure in one beginning context of the culture and then to move on to others related to it. Not arbitrarily, I have selected indigenous conceptualizations of space and time to serve in the next chapter as this beginning context. Some of the key oppositions in Bush Mekeo culture that express categories of space and time are village/bush, inside/outside, resource/waste, ordinary/extraordinary, above-ground/belowground, and, very importantly, the bisected subdivisions of these.

Chapter 3 proceeds to reveal similar classificatory distinctions among material things as they are ideally situated with respect to categories of space and time, and especially the human body. In addition, the notion of transformability expressed in terms of hot and cold will be introduced here. Some of the relevant contexts that will be discussed in this chapter include culinary procedures, work and nonwork, eating, digestion, excretion, health, illness, and curing. A few of the pervasive categorical opposi-