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978-0-521-04072-3 - Why Marry Her?: Society and Symbolic Structures

Luc de Heusch

Excerpt

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Introduction: travel memories

Through the dark years of the Nazi occupation I discovered, one after the other, Rimbaud, Freud, Malinowski, Frazer and the poetic brilliance of surrealism. In 1947 I rushed to Paris to meet André Breton. I was twenty years old. He received me in his customary grave, friendly way, surrounded by Hopi dolls and marvellous paintings that, in my eagerness, I scarcely noticed. Unhesitatingly, he directed my hesitant steps in the direction of the man who was, in a way, the shaman of the group: Pierre Mabilie, doctor, psychologist, sociologist and seer, and just back from Haiti, filled with wonder at the diversity of the human race, whether seen individually or collectively. It was he, with his supremely liberated spirit and an intelligence never divorced from sensibility, who more than anyone else cultivated my burgeoning taste for anthropology while at the same time putting me on my guard against an excessive solemnity.

I spent very little time in the University of Brussels, preferring the company of the painters and poets who had grouped themselves together under the geographical and mythical sign of COBRA.¹ Rashly, I undertook to defend a lyrical totemism, as a reaction to my aversion to industrial society. After all, had not René Char written: 'Long ago the grass was good to fools and hostile to the executioner' (*Jadis l'herbe était bonne aux fous et hostile au bourreau*)?

I decided to travel. In those days escape led, alas, to the colonies — or rather, *the* colony, the Belgian Congo. In the early fifties, the Institute of Scientific Research in Central Africa, recently created, was recruiting its first professional anthropologists. Frans Olbrechts, the godfather of this emerging Belgian school, generously asked me where I would like to pursue my scientific education.² Maquet, Vansina and Biebuyck had all three decided on London. I chose Paris. And so it was that I became a pupil of Marcel Griaule, who himself had recently trained under Ogotemméli.

I was fascinated by the teaching of Griaule, who, scorning all theories, was engaged in revealing the sinuous paths by which the creation of the world had proceeded. Jacques Maquet, recently hailed as grand master in London, suggested that my young wife and I should drive with him from Brussels to Bukavu. In those days this represented quite an adventure, despite the robust nature of our

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reinforced and specially outfitted 1952 Studebaker. For reasons that will ever remain a mystery, the British consul refused me a transit visa for Nigeria. We decided to take a chance with fate, if not with the authority of the young queen of England, who was certainly not aware of the injustice being done to me, and to cross the Sahara. Jacques Maquet, even while at the wheel, proceeded to initiate me into the work of Radcliffe-Brown and filled in a number of sociological lacunae for me. I for my part tried to pass on to him some of my enthusiasm for Dogon thought which was at that time considered in London to be some kind of anthropological mystification. In short, we attempted over a whole month to set up a dialogue between the venerable British school of social anthropology and the young French school of ethnography – each equally entrenched in its rebarbative isolation – meanwhile admiring the changing scenery through which we passed without significant mishap. The doors to Nigeria opened before us. It turned out that I was innocent after all.

My orders were to proceed to the Tetela of the Kasai, where a Catholic bishop had produced a dictionary which my linguist colleague, John Jacobs, had the task of perfecting. On the subject of colonisation, Monsignor told me bluntly, ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs.’ I was the first white man in living memory who declined to go to Mass at Tshumbe Sainte-Marie. I got a cold reception, for I was compromising the colonial order. My wife’s hair was red and the rumour went round that she was the devil. I was saddened by the stupidity of the *pax belgica* which had put an end to the never very dangerous warlike ardour of the Tetela, although I certainly suffered less from it than did an obscure employee in the postal administration, a native of the region, who eight years later was to become the first prime minister of the Congolese republic. Patrice Lumumba was at that time kicking his heels in Stanleyville, not yet caught up in his meteoric and tragic destiny. I tried, as conscientiously as possible, to describe the tradition bequeathed by his ancestors. I found myself plunged into an unexpected world of conflict that encompassed genealogical quarrels, an intense circulation of bride-wealth, competition for prestige and justifiable dissatisfaction with the enforced cultivation of cotton. This ‘educational work’ was regarded by the Tetela quite purely and simply as slavery. Their religious preoccupations were decidedly embryonic. In reply to my incessant questions on cosmogonical matters, one sage replied, during a burial, ‘If you really want to know what the moon is, take an aeroplane and go and have a look.’

I was intrigued by some mysterious figures who, despite the fact that the savanna was crossed only by a few thin strips of trees, declared themselves to be the masters of the forest (*nkum’okunda*). Neither their necklaces made from leopard teeth – the traditional attribute of lineage chiefs – nor their chants, whose rhythm was beaten out by drumsticks sounding upon a clapperless metal bell (*ehundja*) regarded as their own particular attribute, were taken very seriously by the Tetela. But they all agreed that this male society, with its jealously guarded secrets, wielded considerable authority further to the north, among the

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Hamba. One member of this brotherhood of ill-determined status was Okito-sumba, a most intelligent man. He had been a village chief but, for reasons none too clear, he had lost this function. It was to increase his prestige that, having become an initiate in a neighbouring group, he had introduced the *elundja* bell in Kalema. I determined to follow his example in order to learn more about it.

The Hamba comprise a group of small tribes closely related to the Tetela. At some point in the past, they separated from their brothers on the savanna and went off into the forest. I journeyed north as far as I could into a cul-de-sac. In this geographical position I enjoyed the illusion of having reached the end of the world, of having gone back through time right to the threshold of primitive life. But it was only an illusion. The Djumbusanga, who make up a small community of some two thousand souls, were as welcoming as they were cheerful and still liked to wear the traditional raffia garments that had disappeared among the Tetela of the savanna. They delighted in adorning themselves with copper bracelets and covering their bodies with red powder. The *nkum'okunda* did indeed wield great authority. They often met together to settle disputes and to dance in imitation of the animals of the forest. They would willingly travel to visit their colleagues in distant villages, so that this association was rather like an intertribal freemasonry. But it was just as much a male recreational club as a collective organ of power. In order to climb up through the hierarchy and gain the right to wear some new insignia of dignity, it was each time necessary to make a solemn offer of a considerable quantity of riches to the assembled body of the brotherhood, gathered in a circle in the shade of a palm tree. Was I confronted with a plutocracy? Or with an assembly of priests with some secret knowledge?

One day I was at last allowed to enter their sanctuary; the entry to it was barred by a palm leaf placed across a path which gave on to the road some kilometres from the village. We went in backwards and found ourselves in a first enclosure. In the centre there stood a mast topped with a spike stuck into a lump of the red paste extracted from the ngula tree and used for body painting. The neophyte is told to climb up and get this mysterious object, but he must be sure not to comply with this order. What he must do in order to be allowed to proceed further is approach the palms of his two hands several times towards the mast without touching it. As far as I can judge, after having visited a large number of lodges, no esoteric teaching lies behind these signs of recognition. Confronted with this enigma, the question rather seems to be whether one does or does not belong here among the powerful.

I was both disappointed and amazed. Normally, some preliminary rough joking takes place in this first enclosure. I was grateful to my guide for sparing me this. A second palm leaf separated us from the larger enclosure where the masters of the forest were awaiting me, singing joyfully. My heart was beating fast. I thought I was passing through the door into another world, penetrating to the heart of the sacred. I was mistaken yet again. However, more and more signs

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were manifesting themselves. Perhaps strangest of all were the leaves and feathers stuck into the ground, which were mechanically waving to and fro in a mysterious fashion. I was very frightened (and I had to be to play my role correctly) when my initiator lifted up a lump of termite's nest, revealing a hole into which he invited me to plunge my arm. Luckily, a substitute was designated to take my place, to whom, happily and cravenly, I agreed to pay a goat. His arm was seized and soon he was writhing in pain, pinned to the ground, in the power of some invisible force. One or two initiates of high rank soon let me into the secret. A tunnel had been dug under the enclosure, emerging on the other side of the wall of foliage which marked out the zone for the mysteries in which we were absorbed; a fellow member of the brotherhood was acting in the name of the spirits of the underground world. And it was also he who was shaking the leaves and bird feathers. I will at this point cut short this list of signs or symbols, call them what you will; they varied from one lodge to another, as did the arrangement of the enclosures. Instead of acceding to a myth – or at the very least to the first stage of an initiatory questioning – I had discovered a lighthearted political mystification. The power it served was, however, a most respectable one. For these masters of the forest (who had for the first time agreed to accept a white man among them, being correctly convinced that I was in league with neither the government nor the clergy nor the detested cotton company) wielded with moderation and wisdom a collegial power from which no tyrant could possibly emerge. The joking did not prevent them from dispensing justice correctly or from maintaining peace across the tribal boundaries.

From then on, I shared appreciable hunting dues with my colleagues, but I was in despair at their lack of metaphysical concern. They purveyed no teaching and practised no magico-religious rites. They were content simply to introduce a measure of lighthearted ceremonial into collective life, leaving the relentless task of pursuing sorcerers to the *wetshi*, the diviners and healers. No more than the Tetela of the savanna were the Hamba concerned to organise rites of passage in accordance with the precepts of Van Gennep, nor to set up an ancestor cult or even rites for the increase of game, as one might have expected. There were no masks, no sacrifices, no possession. No symbolical activity at all. I wondered anxiously what Griaule would think of the report of such an insignificant mission. The points of reference he had taught me to look for seemed to have been effaced from my territory by some mischievous spirit whom I persisted in pursuing over a wide area. Once I had been initiated among the Djumbusanga, I enjoyed an international passport permitting me to visit a large number of lodges. Each one has elaborated in its own way secrets and signs which depended at least in part on an esoteric code of circulation that made it possible for those in the know to avoid falling into a trap as they entered the enclosure.

But I persisted in my quest for a meaning, a quest which, in the eyes of the Hamba, had no meaning at all. Step by step, I worked my way back to the presumed origins of the institution which had, over the last months, become the

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main focus of my attentions. All the threads in this piece of detective work led to the Nkutshu. They raised no difficulties in accepting my status as a 'full' (*manyi*) master of the forest. Here the tunnel that I had first learned to recognise among the Djumbusanga changed its function, but was just as worrying. Instead of being the secret place *par excellence*, hidden from the sight of the neophytes, here it became the compulsory way in. You had to crawl along it, confronting naked, threatening men there, in order to accede to the sanctuary under the open sky, protected as always by a circular palisade of foliage. Here the newcomers were subjected to practical joking of a somewhat rougher kind than I had seen inflicted more moderately elsewhere. Two wooden statuettes, one male and the other female, bearing the insignia of power, were enthroned in the centre of the enclosure. Among the Djumbusanga, the masters of the forest had contented themselves with exhibiting in a miniature hut a single statuette referred to as the elder (*enundu*). More or less everywhere these quite crudely carved objects constituted the centre of the initiatory mystery. Nothing was said about them at all. They were the mystical masters of the brotherhood, and that was enough.

After all my investigations, I had not discovered mythical thought, but I was learning to discover history. What confronted me was the recent political history of the Tetela and the Hamba. Faithful to the teaching of Boas, I had worked my way back along the development of a new institution of social control, introduced only a few generations ago, which had rapidly eclipsed the traditional power of the lineage chiefs, still alive among the Tetela of the savanna. The Nkutshu claimed that an ancestor had instituted the association of the masters of the forest so as to impose male law, judged to be natural, more successfully upon the women, who had become very unruly. This sociological fable is easy to decipher. All these mysteries, which I knew to be no more than tricks, signs of recognition, made it possible to operate a distinction between the men, who were included, and the women, who were excluded, to oppose the forest and the village. Both the hidden explanation for the paucity of symbolism and its *raison d'être* at last dawned on me: the initiation simulated an alliance between the male power, the strong men, and the powers of the forest even though the beliefs of the Hamba and the Tetela exclude the possibility of any ritual pact with the disquieting world of the spirits (*edimu*). Perhaps in this way the *nkum'okunda* managed to persuade others that they were making effective interventions with the spirits in order to ensure success in hunting, but I never heard them make such extravagant claims in my presence.

While the association of the masters of the forest spread among the Hamba tribes, creating new bonds between them, magnificent dancers, their faces painted with many-coloured, perfectly symmetrical designs, appeared on the ceremonial scene, there to embody the 'total social reality' so dear to Marcel Mauss.³ When mourning for one or several great *nkum'okunda* comes to an end, these figures appear out of the forest wearing headdresses of eagles' feathers, their torsos covered with red powder. Amid the din of the drums beating out the

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lukutu rhythm, they make no sound: a needle stuck through their lips forces them to keep silent. They make their way, in little leaps, to the centre of the village. After this choreographic display they go and sit quietly upon upturned mortars set up by the elders of the maximal lineages. Then follows a veritable potlatch. Over the past few days all those who have received in marriage a daughter belonging to one of the organising lineages have gathered in the village. At this solemn moment these sons-in-law arrange themselves in a single file, accompanied by their wives, and each in turn presents himself before his father-in-law, his arms laden with gifts. They place at his feet copper bracelets, banknotes and bales of cotton, in the presence of a herald whose function is to make known to the crowd the generosity of each son-in-law. All quarrelling is forbidden. The beauty of the dancers, now sitting motionless on their lineage thrones, sets the seal upon the fragile equilibrium of a society founded upon the interplay of matrimonial alliances. Here art is hyperfunctional and ceremonial is fully significant. I felt myself at peace with Durkheim. My enquiry was certainly taking a new turn. Was I about to be converted to functionalism?

Let us take a look at the economics of the situation.⁴ Up until the installation of a number of European shops in the region, the Hamba and the Tetela had disdained any form of market economy. The circulation of rare wealth objects was their passion: in addition to the traditional goats and iron and copper 'currency', these now included the colonial money that a powerful cotton company was dispensing in dribs and drabs. This company enjoyed a comfortable monopoly over the purchase of the cotton: it enjoyed the support of the administration, which had decreed cotton cultivation to be compulsory in order to advance these 'savages' along the road to civilisation. The government, the church and the business world had, it goes without saying, defined the path to be followed once and for all. This noble educative effort was, in fact, extremely profitable for those in control. For their part, the Tetela–Hamba were not interested in investments (how could they have been?); they were content simply to introduce the Congolese franc into the matrimonial circuits, and this occasioned formidable inflation. The capitalist economy in no way altered the status of the son-in-law, who remained permanently in debt to the relatives of his wife. Wives simply started to insist on imported cotton fabrics from their husbands. The young men, who in the old days were condemned to a prolonged celibacy, became the rivals of the older, polygamous, men, and the demand for women went through an inevitable crisis about which the older men openly complained. The divorce rate increased. The structure, however, stood up to this crisis admirably.

Vastly oversimplifying, you could say that both the Tetela and the Hamba constitute in different but comparable forms small societies based upon potlatch and big-men (in the Melanesian sense of the word). In both cases what matters most is the acquisition of prestige. How should we interpret this system of values, for which I know of no other example so radical in Africa? Is this an economic-

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political strategy susceptible to Marxist analysis? That seems very doubtful despite the fact that the masters of the forest who have honoured all the payments demanded by their colleagues are assured of a relative material comfort: the many hunting dues that they receive are augmented by fines that they collectively impose when they preside at tribunals . . . and then there are also the contributions from new members or from those acceding to new levels in the hierarchy. A curious plutocracy this, where accession to power involves squandering one's wealth. My old friend Edinga was well aware of the dilemma. Although he was a member whose opinion was respected in the brotherhood of the *nkum'okunda*, he preferred to help his sons to marry rather than to accede to a higher level.

The personal ambitions of the Tetela of the savanna take a quite different form. They can only be realised within a strictly lineage structure, not in a brotherhood theoretically open to any head of family. The figure of the chief takes on a certain importance in these southern tribes where huge communities sometimes comprising several thousand men and women, all actually or fictitiously the issue of a common ancestor, consider themselves to be autonomous groups.⁵ Here political organisation depends upon the common genealogical charter. In theory, seniority defines the locus of power. But this must be confirmed by potlatch. The chief of a political-cum-family community is chosen from the eldest segment of the eldest lineage descended from the common ancestor; but at each level in the lineage segmentation the man who occupies a homologous position may be defined as the elder (*enundu*) of the group, or as its chief (*owandji*). The chiefs of the maximal lineages then compete for prestige. When it comes to his investiture, the chief of the largest independent unit (or tribe) can only win public ratification for his title at the cost of a fantastic outlay of wealth through which matrimonial wealth is redistributed throughout all segments of the society. The candidate then has the right to dance the dance of the leopard in the company of his close relations. However, the prestige thus won does not confer upon him any rights over agricultural production. As a 'master of the earth', *owandji wa nkete*, the main chief (elder of the eldest lineage) can only demand a hunting due. To consolidate his position he must also demonstrate another talent, on which he is constantly expending his energies. The extensive polygamy of the chief is explicitly thought of as the means of ensuring this statutory generosity, 'the chief's work', which is proverbially represented as never-ending (*nkumi hashile*). However, he receives no wives as tribute. The chief, just like any other man, is permanent debtor to his father-in-law and his brothers-in-law. The chiefs of the other senior lineages who are in a junior position to their genealogical elder may set themselves up as his rivals. They, in their turn, try to organise a great potlatch of outstanding proportions which will establish their prestige in the region: the chiefs of neighbouring communities are invited as well as the elders of the various lineage segments of their own tribe. This institutional rivalry clearly accounts for the permanent

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scissions that continuously fragment Tetela society, which, in fact, sees itself as one vast family that has burst apart but that stems from a single genealogy.

The acquisition of prestige appears, in the last analysis, to be functionally dependent on the circulation of the rare wealth objects distributed by the matrimonial chain. Elders who are ambitious capitalise on their wealth for a while but then redistribute it throughout the society as a whole. Here again, the introduction of the currency issued by the colonial power has had no effect whatsoever upon this remarkably stable aspiration. At this point we notice a basic structure that is common to the Tetela and the Hamba. The appearance of the *lukutu* dancers, the impassive inaugurators of a peaceful potlatch, gives a ceremonial impetus to the process of distributing matrimonial wealth in the same way as does the leopard dance which the Tetela chief has the right to perform once he has dispensed a veritable fortune previously accumulated through the combined efforts of the family as a whole together with its various networks of matrimonial alliances.

There are many points of correspondence between the two institutions: the *lukutu* dancer of the Hamba is chosen from a junior segment, and the Tetela chief belongs to an elder branch, but each represents his lineage. The former appears at irregular intervals, before the potlatch is organised; the latter makes only one ceremonial appearance, surrounded by his wives and relatives after having distributed all his capital. In the first case, the beneficiaries of the operation are all the individual members of the lineage (enriched by a direct and personal acquisition of matrimonial wealth publicly handed over by their sons-in-law); in the second, the wealth distributed by the lineage chief is diffused throughout the lineage community as a whole through the intermediary of the elders of the various constituent segments. During a recent visit to the Kasai, after an absence of twenty years,⁶ I noticed that the dramatic economic crisis that Zaïre is experiencing and that has had the effect of isolating the Tetela–Hamba communities from all the commercial networks set up by colonisation has brought about a reduction in ceremonial life. These communities are no longer fuelled by money. It is strange that the decomposition of capitalism should affect the non-commercial traditional circuits that had allowed themselves to be flooded by its currency even though those who manipulated it were unaware of its particular economic significance. For the Tetela and the Hamba it was indeed all a nonsense.

A time for reflection

I was confronted with societies whose passion was for the circulation of rare wealth objects devoid of any economic meaning. The significance of Marcel Mauss's and Lévi-Strauss's theses concerning archaic exchange became increasingly evident to me. The constant circulation of matrimonial wealth belongs to the complex structure of marriage, which ethnographers in the past were over-

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hasty in defining as ‘marriage by purchase’, if indeed they did not appeal to the fallacious concept of the ‘dowry’. Among the Tetela, power rests on the rules of filiation and the interplay of alliances: it is a function derived from these two indissociable structural phenomena. The great polygamy of the chiefs is explicitly conceived as the instrument *par excellence* of a political system based upon generosity rather than domination or control over rituals. Among the Hamba, the rare wealth objects are redistributed periodically within the lineage framework through the *lukutu* festival and within a closed male society, the *nkum’okunda*. In both cases the institutions oppose both the formation of any dominant social class and the exercise of political tyranny, whatever the gerontocratic tendencies of the system.

I had long been intrigued by the fact that religious activity hardly existed (with the exception of investiture rites for the diviners, involving blacksmiths). I now believe that social life among the Tetela–Hamba belongs more to ceremonialism than to ritualism. By ceremonialism I mean a certain codified presentation of social roles, in the sense used by Max Gluckman.⁷ Comparing this state of affairs with that which prevails in the other societies that belong to the great Mongo linguistic group, it is impossible not to come to the following conclusion: that the Tetela–Hamba’s almost all-engrossing passion for the manipulation of rare wealth objects and their considered desire to convert these riches symbolising women into signs of prestige, without bothering to establish communication with their ancestors or with the spirits of nature, involve a loss – a loss which cannot be explained by colonisation alone. I must confess to having felt a certain lassitude when it came to recording the minute inventory of gifts and counter-gifts stored for as long as possible in the family memory in the way that, elsewhere, the exploits of the gods or civilising heroes are collated. Here, despite the dearth of epic brilliance, the interminable genealogical charter and the account of migrations and segmentations assume the function of myth.

This situation is all the more remarkable given that, at that very period, Mary Douglas and Victor Turner were discovering the richness and complexity of the magico-religious thought of other Bantu societies, the Lele and the Ndembu. The society of the Pangolin Men, who control fertility rituals among the Lele, in no way resembles the Hamba brotherhood of the masters of the forest. The latter treat the pangolin (and the leopard) with a ceremonial respect, while the former make this animal the primary symbolic focus for ritual activity that demands a full exercise of classificatory thought (see Chapter 2). Most investigators who have studied the Bantu linguistic zone in central Africa are in agreement in recognising that mythical discourse constituted as such is rare. But today we know that this does not necessarily imply an impoverishment of symbolic thought. Lévi-Strauss has made the timely suggestion that we should describe as ‘implicit mythology’ this speculative backcloth to which the commentaries and interpretations of the ritualists refer.⁸

I had already been aware of the presence of this latent discourse at the time I

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was preparing my doctoral thesis on the subject of royal incest in Africa, in particular in the civilisation in the Great Lakes region.⁹ I had pursued my investigations by examining the epic accounts relating to the founding of the state bequeathed by the oral traditions of the Luba, the Bemba and the Kuba. As I did so, remarkable symbolic relations between these epics and the body of rituals and beliefs as a whole became apparent. The application of the structuralist method in central Africa which I attempted in *Le roi ivre, ou l'origine de l'Etat* turned out to be fruitful.¹⁰

At a time when many scholars in France were striving to show that structuralism was a dangerous philosophy – putting the independence of the movers of history at risk in favour of a blind, anonymous system or, on the contrary, threatening the determinism of history seen as the bearer of a meaning – I myself persisted in seeing it as nothing but an innocent method that was extraordinarily effective in the understanding of kinship, myths and rituals. In my view, the structuralist hypothesis did not exhaust the entire anthropological field of investigation nor, *a fortiori*, the sociological one. I did not believe it had any terrorist intentions. Even the historians were becoming interested in it: André Burguière concluded a serious article with the words: 'A little structuralism leads us away from history; more of it leads us back' (*Un peu de structuralisme éloigne de l'histoire; beaucoup de structuralisme y ramène*).¹¹

As is well known, this intellectual adventure has made little impact in the Anglo-Saxon circles to which this book is directed. Divergent philosophical traditions have certainly not made scientific relations between the two sides of the Channel – that imposing cultural frontier – any easier. How can we make ourselves understood to one another when there have been so many misunderstandings despite an increasing number of translations? I should like to try to dispel a few of them, at the risk of sometimes displeasing and mindful of all that I owe to the critical, courteous, if sharp, minds of the many colleagues with whom I established friendly relations in the course of two fruitful visits to England: in 1973, at the invitation of the British Academy, and in 1975, as the Simon Visiting Professor at the University of Manchester. I should also like to express my gratitude here to Mary Douglas, Jack Goody and the friendly shade of the great Max Gluckman.

To be honest, I must confess that I do not really understand the preoccupations of those who propose to 'rethink' kinship. All theory appears to be systematically banned – and reviled – by the very heirs to the great school of anthropology which, from Frazer to Meyer Fortes, was bold enough to carry out a number of comparative studies. The fact that these were undertaken from very different points of view could only be stimulating. No doubt Leach was right to tax certain English typologists with having collected into the same boxes butterflies of the same colour under the illusion that they were constructing a natural science of societies. But was the ambition of Radcliffe-Brown (whose advocate, in opposition to his own lineage, I now paradoxically find myself to be) funda-