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978-0-521-38735-4 - Cosmologies in the Making: A Generative Approach to Cultural  
Variation in Inner New Guinea

Fredrik Barth

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A sacred meal where initiates and ancestors share the meat from a sacred hunt, in an ancestral temple in Bolovip village area.

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# **Cosmologies in the making:**

**A generative approach to cultural  
variation in inner New Guinea**

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## Foreword

### **Symbols and knowledge**

Fredrik Barth needs no introduction from me. He is already justly well known for his series of ethnographic studies on four different continents, which he has combined with an interest in theoretical problems relating constructively to his empirical enquiries. But I agreed to introduce the present volume both because the particular problem he analyses is one which goes to the heart of the comparative analysis of human interaction among neighbouring peoples, especially in societies without writing, and because it is a question that has also been one of my own implicit concerns. Like Barth in New Guinea, in West Africa I was struck by the degree of similarity that occurred between the economic, linguistic, and to some extent, cultural aspects of LoDagaa society and that of the peoples surrounding them, while at the same time there was a great diversity in other elements, especially the religious and magico-ritual domains. In the latter there were the same kinds of dramatic variation that Barth found among the mountain Ok, where, as he points out, the differences are apparent not just to external observers, but, some of them, indeed, shock the actors themselves, who view them as not merely 'ungrammatical', but as actually objectionable. Other differences are more neutral, while yet others are tacit (that is, unperceived or unelaborated). But none of these differences is simply 'symbolic', however deeply felt; rather they involve differences in bodies of knowledge 'about the world'. Even 'the major modes in which religious and cosmological ideas are expressed' differ between mountain Ok communities. And the fact that their languages have not greatly diverged suggests that such variations have emerged in a relatively short time period.

The problem Barth tackles in this book is how best to approach a situation of this kind. Anthropology's historical emphasis on fieldwork, and on functional or structural analysis, has meant that, unlike the comparative approach adopted by Frazer and his contemporaries, beliefs and practices have subsequently tended to be analysed solely in terms of a cultural system. The basic procedures of such analysis involve first making a series of functional or logical models which can be interwoven, then, second, constructing a single model

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which can generate the different forms. But, Barth suggests, if one wants to look at a wider range of data, the approaches available in contemporary anthropology are very limited. Indeed, this limitation applies even internally to a particular system. For all variants of functional and structural models assume a high degree of order, of unity, either in terms of their isomorphy with other aspects of the socio-cultural system, or with respect to an underlying model. From this standpoint the substance of local variation is essentially ignored.

For Barth, on the contrary, internal variations provide an entry into the actual processes by which wider 'cultural' variations occur. We need to examine these internal variations carefully if we are 'to get our ontological assumptions right'; that is, to make a realistic analysis of the changes we can reasonably expect to take place. That means not only making an appeal to *bricolage* (as Lévi-Strauss has done) or to creativity (as I have done – wanting to set the general cognitive process in a wider transcultural context), but also examining the use and elaboration of metaphor (as any literary critic might predict). For 'ritual builds on metaphor'; or, to put it more concretely, and perhaps more generally, leading actors in ritual and myth elaborate the performance, partly because in oral societies there can be little precise verbatim transmission of complex thought or action, especially when this is thought or acted intermittently.

Consequently, we find a situation where as Barth puts it, 'the cultural content' of Ok cosmology is distributed between 'many sub-traditions located in numerous villages and temples' which are 'further subject to a constant oscillation between public performance and personal safekeeping in the care of a small number of ritual experts'. Clearly, in this light, what is called 'culture', as distinct from its sub-traditions, tends to be arbitrary. And since in conditions of creativity, 'culture' is always 'in the making' and rarely a set of collective representations in the sense that much sociology and anthropology assume, the distinction between the social and the personal, the cultural and the individual, becomes more blurred. Indeed, the very concept of a culture as a tidy bundle of meaningful traditions handed down by a particular social group must be open to question, except for relatively small and isolated groups. And even among the latter, the processes of communication both within and between generations act in generative ways, creating variants which are not simply substitutes, except in a purely formal sense, of what went on before.

While we can describe this as a process of 'subjectification', it is also one of the 'objectification', of developing the possibilities inherent not only in a specific cultural situation, but in the human condition itself, especially in its creative manipulation of linguistic concepts. An analysis of this process is advanced not so much by the examination of 'logical' as of empirical and historical transformations.

The way in which different interpretations are developed or constrained is

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well illustrated in Barth's discussion of the varying uses of the concepts of water and the wild boar in ritual situations, as metaphors and as instruments in the communication and development of knowledge. These variations sometimes develop of 'inherent' characteristics of these natural features and sometimes assign them more 'arbitrary' meanings. But their cognitive potentialities are elaborated by various ritual exponents, giving rise to subtraditions and cultural differences.

Barth compares the development of such variations with the emergence of different traditions within a scholarly field, that of social anthropology itself. The comparison may seem far-fetched, but it is important to stress that differences must emerge by some general mechanism that operates throughout the range of human societies. For there are times when ritual specialists in oral cultures are involved in activities essentially similar to those of a poet or novelist in our own (albeit always allowing for differences in context as well as of media).

Only by recognizing the process of creativity can one bypass the over-determined notions of the nature of human interaction that fail to account either for internal changes or for external differences. In many parts of the world, considerable variations, especially in the religious action of oral cultures, occur between neighbouring groups, alongside great similarities in other domains. This situation in a small corner of Highland New Guinea is Barth's starting point. Similar circumstances exist in northern Ghana, where Fortes drew attention, as Barth has done, to the very different attitudes towards aspects of sexuality in two neighbouring groups, despite the apparent similarity of relations between men and women therein. In myth and ritual the differences were yet more marked. When I first recorded a version of the *Bage*, Fortes thought he might have missed a recitation of this kind among the *Hill Tallis*. But in fact these long recitations of a 'mythical' kind are distributed very unevenly over the cultural landscape of West Africa, as they are among the *Ok*, and there is every reason to regard them as specific products of a specific set of localized circumstances which, building upon more general elements, then come to characterize one set of people rather than another. Not a 'culture' in the Ghanaian case, but the members of the association that cuts across 'cultural' boundaries, such as they are. Many of these variations, as Barth stresses, cannot be seen as 'isomorphic differences' between societies. On the other hand, the existence of such long myths, for example, may in some cases have consequences for the organization of society (as Barth argues in the case with certain forms of ancestor worship); in other instances the variations may be related to differences in social organization that could well be regarded as 'prior'; and in yet others there may be little or no link with social organizational features. A satisfactory theoretical scheme has to allow, willy nilly, for all three types of relation between the variables.

The process of trying to specify, define and analyse the nature of cultural



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transmission also raises the question of the more general differences between western and non-western traditions of knowledge. Here, as Barth suggests, the mode of communication is significant. It is not simply a matter of distinguishing the West from the rest. For example, in India, the twin processes of universalism and parochialization, identified by Redfield and others with the Great and Little Traditions, are associated respectively with the written and oral as the dominant channel of communication.

The nature of the media is relevant too in the tendency of the Baktaman, whom Barth also studied, to 'locate personally remembered events in terms of space – where they happened – rather than time – when they happened', reflecting, he suggests, 'the absence of any calendrical system for naming points in time'. While not necessarily connected with writing *per se*, this feature is closely linked, as I have suggested elsewhere, to the existence of graphic representation, to the absence of 'measurement', a point Barth stresses also when talking about the development of 'a universal science' as 'an elaborate tradition of knowledge built on consistency, generalisation, deduction, experiment and measurement' (p. 68). Again, the processes of generalization and abstraction, while not, of course, confined to societies with writing, are greatly extended by the ability to write.

Finally, the influence of the means of communication is seen at another very general level. Barth's argument is concerned with the circumstances of 'the storage in the individual mind, without literary aids, of complex cultural materials over a long time, followed by a demand for their manifestation in complex and vital performance of mystery cults', a process which 'must be highly evocative of personal involvement by the ritual expert in the cultural symbols in his keeping, and could be expected to result in his marginally reshaping them in form and content, in harmony with his own visions, at every new performance' (p. 30). This situation is clearly different from those in which a written text exists. At one level a published text, just because it is made 'public', does away with secrecy. Even when the text is restricted to the priesthood, while obviously excluding neither oral embellishments nor written commentaries, it does provide a point of reference for instruction and for control. 'Authorized versions' inevitably push creativity into other channels.

Secret knowledge is not exclusive to the oral register, but it is encouraged by it, especially where only a few individuals are thought to hold that knowledge in their memory store. And the fact that it is they rather than a text who are seen as responsible for its retention and reproduction is at the heart of the nature of the process of 'cultural genetics'. Not only does the mind fail to store such material in verbatim form over long (or even over relatively short) periods, but the absence of texts means that ideas of what is the same and what is not take on a different perspective. Notions of 'truth' depend upon the touchstone.

The question with which Barth is, as I have been, concerned is not only of

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storage, of retention, but of reproduction – by whom and under what circumstances. Whether or not the ‘knowledge’ is held by one or more individuals, what matters more is who reproduces it in the ceremonial situation. In this context the recitation is neither a repetition nor yet an alternative ‘reading’, but an authoritative statement for all those present which they themselves will modify and elaborate in their turn. What matters culturally is what is transmitted. Silent knowledge is lost knowledge. The spoken continues rather than endures – in similar forms in the versions of one reciter, and with greater modifications when the next reciter takes up the duty of ‘memorizing’, reconstructing, and reproducing the utterance. We fail to understand the nature of this knowledge if we view it in fixed, textual terms, even as an underlying ‘structure’ of an architectural kind – the metaphor is inappropriate to the generative process involved, adequate as it may be for linguistics in the more restricted sense. The *parole/langue* distinction may be satisfactory for the basic linguistic ‘code’, but it is too restrictive for what you do with words.

On one level this process of transmission is connected with the problem of the *loss* of knowledge as well as its increment, the danger of entropy involved in ‘guarding knowledge and revealing it only slowly and late in the life of new men’ (p. 48). Since knowledge is held largely in the minds of men, rather than being stored in a book or a computer, the older are inevitably at once the most experienced, and the most privileged communicators, as well as the most likely to die, taking their knowledge with them to the world of the ancestors. The dead must therefore know more than the living; the forefathers are also the forebearers, the carriers of ‘tradition’. And it is in the cult of the ancestors that the dead reveal some of their superior, more comprehensive, knowledge.

Barth’s concern not simply with systems of knowledge at any one point in time and space, but with their distribution among individuals, and the existence and generation of variants (and sometimes similarities) both within and between social groups, raises fundamental questions about the nature of ‘culture’ which have been glossed over, set aside, or misunderstood, by many theorists and analysts. His text is one I urge the reader to read with great attention, for it makes an important contribution to these issues, even if much still remains to be done in the field of comparative studies, which in turn will redirect in more specific, more productive channels the intensive work of the field ethnographer.

Jack Goody

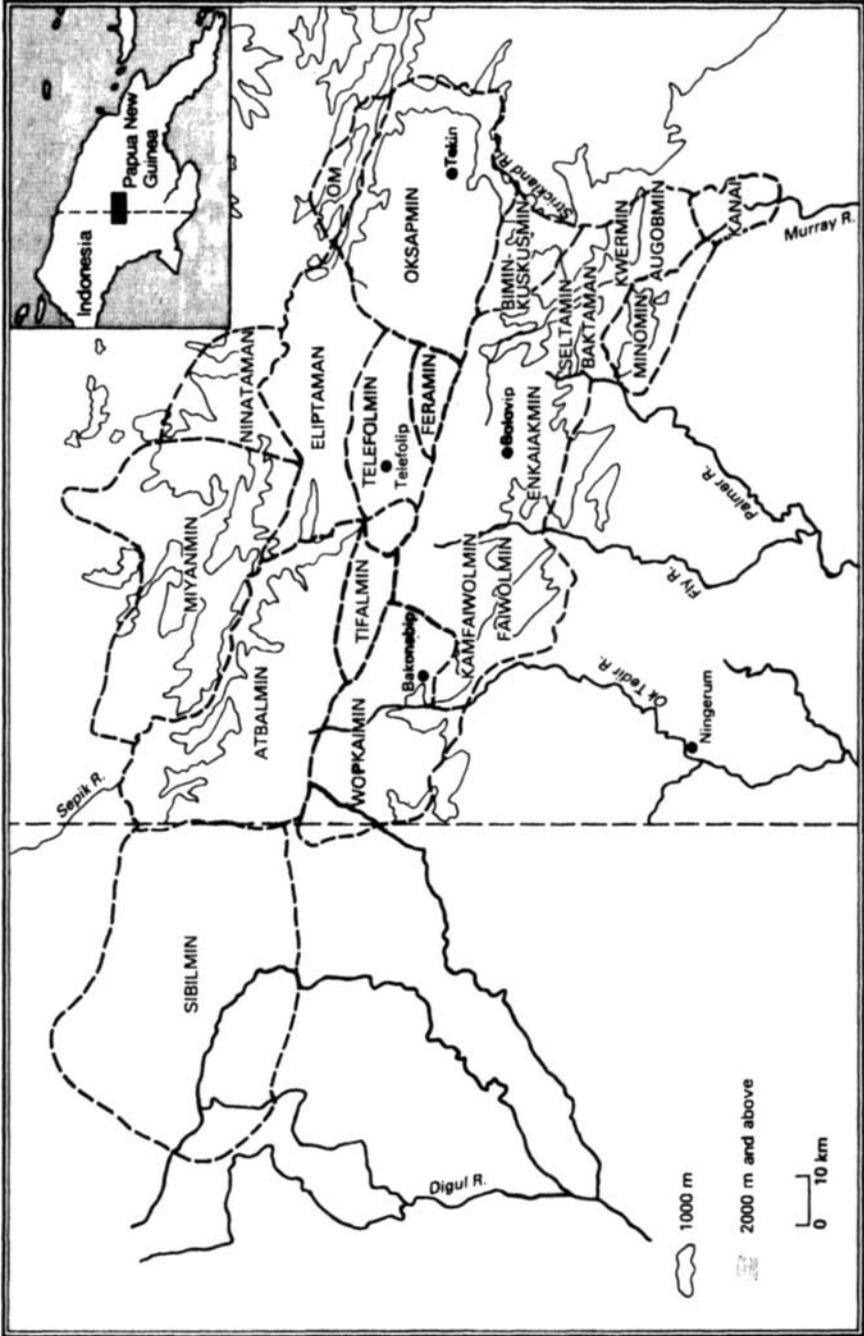
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Major territories of the mountain Ok