

LEACH, EDMUND

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Abstract:

In an era when anthropologists defined themselves as either functionalists or structuralists, Edmund Leach (1910-1989) declared that he had consistently been both at once. For him ethnography and introspection were the solid grounds for theoretical innovation. He developed his most creative insights by engaging in theoretical debates among his colleagues, both past and present. Though he rejected any suggestion that he had founded a school, he authored some of anthropology's most influential monographs of the 1950s and inspiring essays of the 1960s. His work continues to inform and motivate current debates.

Main text:

In an era when anthropologists defined themselves, for better or worse, as either functionalists or structuralists, Edmund Leach (1910-1989) declared in 1975 that he had consistently been both at once. For him ethnography and introspection were the solid grounds for theoretical innovation. He developed his most creative insights by vigorously engaging in theoretical controversies and debates among his colleagues, both past and present. He rejected any suggestion that he had founded a school, but nonetheless he authored some of anthropology's most influential monographs of the 1950s and inspiring essays of the 1960s. His work continues to inform and motivate current debates.

Edmund Ronald Leach was born in Lancashire, England, on November 7th, 1910. He studied at Marlborough College and later read Mathematics and Mechanical Science at Clare College, Cambridge, obtaining a BA degree in 1932. During the early 1930s, after four years working in business and administration in China, he returned to England to study social anthropology at the London School of Economics under Raymond Firth and Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski's seminar was famous at the time and Leach was an active participant. While he was on an extended trip to Burma in 1939, the Second World War broke out. Leach prolonged his stay until 1945, serving as an officer in the Burmese Army. It was during this time that he gained an unparalleled ethnographic expertise of the Kachin, one of the hill populations of northern Burma. After receiving his Ph.D. in 1947, he remained at the LSE as a Reader until 1953, when he returned to Cambridge. In Cambridge, he was first a Lecturer, subsequently a Reader, and, in 1972, appointed to a chair. During his career, his increasing academic standing was recognized through numerous prizes

and distinguished lectures, along with his service in high academic posts, culminating in a knighthood in 1975 and his election as Trustee of the British Museum.

A staunch defender of ethnography, even when proposing abstract models, Leach's inclination was to seek similarities among different peoples rather than marvelling at their distinctive traits. His interests were wide, beginning with his encounter with the Yami, in the island of Botel Tobago, to whom he paid a short visit in the mid 1930s, and ending with the analysis of his own family's photographs. In between, he engaged in two prolonged periods of fieldwork in Burma (1940s) and Ceylon (1950s) and, from the 1960s on, experimented with different subjects related to Western cosmology. For instance, he examined the Bible as mythical material, comparing the idea of "virgin birth" among the Trobrianders and Christian theology; he also analysed English words of abuse and compared them with their Kachin counterpart. He provided a novel analysis of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. The topics he touched upon during his career included, among others, kinship and social organization; land tenure and peasant economy; myth and ritual; binary thought and liminality; information theory, semiotics, and symbolic communication; art and aesthetics; structural-functional method and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; Biblical materials and the myths of Classical Greece.

His probing of areas outside the main concerns of classical anthropology provided an affirmation that anthropological styles of analysis could always be tested on different materials, whether distant or close to the analyst; and that they were best applied when developed through debates with predecessors and contemporaries. In this way, he was constantly examining and questioning anthropology's scope and limits. Leach observed that the kind of reasoning common to the humanities frequently appeared to be circular, but was, in fact, dialectical. "You are not just back where you started. You have moved on a bit, or you have moved somewhere else," he asserted in an interview (Kuper 1986, 380).

Given his temperament for being both flexible and adamant in pursuing theoretical arguments, Leach argued with and learned from his colleagues: (i) Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955) was the leading adversary in *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Leach's classic monograph published in 1954. The Kachins' unstable and dynamic political system was far from the classic model of societies as organic and integrated systems existing in functional equilibrium; (ii) The disagreement continued with Radcliffe-Brown's former student Meyer Fortes (1906-1983) in Leach's second monograph from 1961, *Pul Elyia, A Village in Ceylon*, in which, refusing to consider kinship "as a thing in itself", he argued that locality (rather than descent) could form the basis of corporate groups; (iii) At various points in Leach's writings, Raymond Firth (1901-2002) was mentioned as a positive influence, giving him confidence that a dynamic vision of social processes and the inconsistencies generated by choice and individual action were principal elements in social life; (iv) Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) was one of Leach's major influences. Although fiercely critical of functionalist dogma widespread at the beginning of his career, by 1977 Leach considered Malinowski "the greatest and most original of all social anthropologists" (Tambiah, 1989, 311); (v) During the 1960s Leach was especially receptive to Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1908-2009) structuralism in part owing to his prior training in mathematics, but he later criticized structuralism's disregard for the

empirical behavior of individuals. Leach mostly approved of Lévi-Strauss's idea of "*sauvage*" as the order of human "undomesticated" categories such as in myth, art, totemism, thus overcoming the idea of exoticism for the promise of a horizontal approach to diversity (Leach 1968, 1).

While structuralism's emphasis on myths led directly to speculations over the character of the human mind, Leach's focus on ritual revealed a fundamental dimension of his theoretical orientation, which always advocated the combination of thought and action. Ritual is not seen as a counterpoint to belief systems; instead myths and rituals say equivalent things and must be observed in action. Of the three types of behavior Leach contemplates, the "rational technical" is directed towards specific ends by our standards of verification; "communicative" behavior follows a culturally defined code; and "magical" behavior is potent in itself but not in a rational-technical sense. The term ritual embraces all except the first case.

His last conference paper, delivered in 1986 and published posthumously, stands as testimony to Leach's widening scope of anthropological interpretation. In "Masquerade," examining the topic of ancestor worship, Leach (1990) makes a final statement by aligning himself with Malinowski instead of Lévi-Strauss. He analyzes a series of nineteenth-century portraits of his own family as well as a few ethnographic group portraits, in particular inserting some of Malinowski standing in the midst of the Trobrianders. Disregarding the distinction dear to Lévi-Strauss between history and myth, he names as his own ancestral *deities* a great uncle, Henry Howorth, the author of a five volume History of the Mongols, and Malinowski himself. The conference displayed many of Leach's lasting lessons: that there are no predetermined limits to anthropological inquiry; that anthropology is as much about "us" as about "them;" that to engage with predecessors is a productive path to greater insight; and that theory cannot be separable from ethnography.

See Also

Ethnography; Lévi-Strauss; Malinowski; Radcliffe-Brown; Theory

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Further Readings

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