ON BEING ONE'S OWN GRANDPA: THE CONTEMPORARY ANCESTOR REVISITED

> 'I have heard a Fijian elder narrate the doings of his ancestral lineage over several generations *in the first person pronoun.*'
> Marshall Sahlins (1981:13)

The striking image of the Contemporary Ancestor, dear to the nineteenth-century evolutionist anthropology, deserves re-examination. For certain of our own intellectual ancestors appear to have inhabited a relativistic space-time continuum analogous to that familiar to present-day astrophysics: the further away your observations, the further back in a universal time-dimension. From a European perspective, the earliest social forms were to be found in Australia, among the Bushmen of South Africa, in the Amazon forests and in the South Seas. The Arunta appeared, to Durkheim and Frazer, much as those enigmatic objects called quasars, visible at the outermost limits of telescopic observation, appear to 1980s astronomy: as representing the very same processes that gave rise to our own galaxy. Viewed from an immense cultural distance, these were Contemporary Ancestors.

For nineteenth-century anthropological theory, then, both observers and observed were assumed to belong to a world governed by the same sociological laws, as yet undiscovered though these laws were. And, of course, it was the famous Comparative Method, inspired as it was by the successful examples of zoology and archaeology (cf. Harris 1968: 150-3) that was to reveal those laws. And just as modern science assumes space and time to be uniform throughout the Universe, just so did nineteenth-century social science envisage itself and its object.

Such a unitary vision has an intrinsic appeal and it is hardly surprising that social evolutionism, though officially assumed to have been superseded in most anthropology courses taught in Western universities, still persists in scholarly discourse. Even the Contemporary Ancestor, in his full-blown Victorian epiphany, is frequently to be encountered in both anthropological and journalistic writings, as Nickerson has underlined:

> With the revival of central elements of the Comparative Method in the 1950s, anthropology had come full circle within about half a century with respect to reassertions of notions relating to 'contemporary ancestors' and increased usages of ethnographic analogies. Paralleling this shift in anthropology and other social sciences, theories relating to modernization and development also began to appear in the 1950s, typically with evolutionary implications, especially with regard to a refurbished idea of progress. (1984: 18) [1]

The association of evolutionism and 'development' theory is most explicitly asserted by Harris, for whom the Contemporary Ancestor is an ethnographic fact:

> The issue to be confronted is whether the cultures of contemporary primitive groups can be used to orient our understanding of chronologically earlier socio-cultural arrangements. Are there such things as surviving stone-age cultures? The answer, as undeniable today as it was in 1860, is yes. (1968 : 154)

But for most of us today, reared on cultural relativism and the nominal equality of all socio-cultural arrangements as long as they do not affect us personally, Harris must himself count as a Contemporary Ancestor. Yet I am here going to argue for the present relevance of that old concept - though in a form quite other than that envisaged in Harris's retrospective optic.

For in officially abandoning Evolutionism, anthropology has itself evolved through a process that is amenable to analytic description. The nineteenth-century paradigm went through two phases of deconstruction. In Diffusionism, the formerly dominant temporal dimension became subordinate to the spatial dimension, the former unity of which was decomposed into a congeries of 'culture regions' (*Kulturkreise*). Then in the second, more complex and longer-lasting Functionalist paradigm, the process of decentring was completed with the emergence of the epistemologically sovereign tribal-territorial group, ideally (as in the Trobriand and Tikopia cases) an island. In this second and decisive phase the temporal dimension effectively disappeared into the newly sovereign space of the self-contained tribal universe.

---

[1] Nickerson quotes a number of recent anthropological works, including Marshall Sahlins' *Stone Age Economics*.

But this extreme position, while reconstituting in drastically altered and structurally inverted form the simplicity of the Victorian model, was inherently unstable. Comparison, as Evans-Pritchard observed, is a basic faculty of the human mind, the necessary beginning of all science (Evans-Pritchard 1963). Officially excluded by the functionalist model, comparison returned in the form of Radcliffe-Brown's naturalistic typologies. The occluded temporal dimension has also reappeared in anthropology in the past few decades in the guise of a dualism.

Dualist theories of time have been notably formulated in contributions by Leach (1961), Lévi-Strauss (1967) and Bloch (1977). These dualist models themselves fall into two categories, according to whether, as in Lévi-Strauss, they see the temporal dualism as setting one category of society ('cold', unstratified, atemporal, history-less) against another ('hot', class-structured, immersed in time and history), or whether they see the temporal division as dividing societies internally, as in Leach's contrast of ordinary, linear and unidirectional time with the circular and repetitive time associated with rituals, or Bloch's similar distinction between 'ritual' and 'mundane' time. These various models have more the status of interesting and suggestive hypotheses than of proven facts. Here I want to argue three points: first, that the opposition between 'linear' and 'circular' concepts of time is misleading and can be resolved; second, that such a resolution provides us with a new and improved version of the nineteenth-century Contemporary Ancestor; third, that evidence is accumulating that monistic time, combining linear and circular modes, is characteristic of many societies studied by anthropologists, notably, though not exclusively, in Black Africa.

Conversely, the monistic time posited for these African and other societies - what I shall provisionally call Human Standard Time or the Resonant Present - has implications for the understanding of time and time perception in other global cultures, including both Lévi-Strauss's atemporal, 'cold' societies and our own 'hot' and 'Western' civilization. As for the latter, temporal mode, it seems to me that it is not only linear, as is often said, but is also *segmented*, giving rise to the sense of being 'cut off' from the past - and from one's self - that is characteristic of the modern epoch. This temporal segmentation would appear to reflect the dominant impulsion in the physical sciences to reduce the phenomenal universe to its smallest units.[2]

As de Heusch, Feierman, Adam Kuper and the present writer have shown, many of the non-literate societies of Black Africa are susceptible to structural analysis of the kind Lévi-Strauss has explicitly reserved for his supposedly ahistorical 'cold' societies; these African groups with complex social structures and often with state-like organisation are manifestly the products of comp-

[2] 'It was believed that complex phenomena could always be understood by reducing them to their basic building blocks and by looking for the mechanisms through which these interacted' (Capra 1982: 32).

lex historical evolutions. Referring to the vast Southern Bantu cultural region, Kuper notes 'not the absence of change but a tendency for change to take related forms throughout the region.... The process by which modifications develop is regular and rule-bound' (1982: 5, 157).

Let us consider the implications of Kuper's work and findings. Most importantly, it appears that in these societies *time is integrated with social structure* in the total transformation group constituted by the cultural region. This is not the same as Evans-Pritchard's reduction of Nuer history, in *The Nuer*, to an epiphenomenon of Nuer social structure, a view that does little more than restate Malinowski's presentistic theory of myth. On the contrary, it asserts the reality of time and history as a fully paid-up member of the society wherein the Present includes the Past and produces the Future. The first theoretical formulation of such a society, and of such a temporal mode, was proposed by Feierman in 1974. This American student of Jan Vansina who learned his social anthropology at the feet of Evans-Pritchard included in his widely and justly praised study of the Shambaa Bantu kingdom of northern Tanzania the boldly heretical statement that:

> ...the social utility of traditions, which is so often taken as evidence that they cannot be true accounts of historical events, is precisely what gives the traditions their historical value. (Feierman 1974: 10)

This was so, Feierman asserted, because in societies like that of the Shambaa, there was a tripartite interdependence between oral tradition, history and social structure (ibid.). Perhaps it was fortunate for Feierman's reputation in orthodox anthropology that these outrageous propositions were tucked away in the preface to his monograph and not elaborated in the substantive text. However, what could be termed Feierman's Triangle is the formulaic essence of the temporal monism I am seeking to demonstrate. Lévi-Strauss, in his enthusiastic endorsement of Richard Wagner's brilliant aphorism on myth, 'Here, time turns into space' (*'zum Raum wird hier die Zeit'*), forgets that the converse is also, and equally, true, and that mythical space is also time, and history (Lévi-Strauss 1984: 219). Thus, in Ufipa, does the centrally situated village of Milansi evoke, in its stationary position high on Itweelele mountain in relation to the numerous and traditionally warring royal villages of the surrounding plains, at once a historical panorama and a structural model of society, polarized between central and established Settler and peripheral, incoming Stranger (cf. Willis 1981). In yet another part of Tanzania, the archaeologist Peter Schmidt has successfully used structuralist methodology to unite the oral history of the Haya and the archaeological evidence from the sites of royal villages (Schmidt 1978). He notes:

> If through archaeological evidence, mythology can be concretely affirmed to contain an order of historical reality that has usually been denied it by most historians,

> then it is incumbent to develop methodologies that can continue to test this basic proposition. (p. 6)

Other American scholars, particularly oral historians associated with Joseph Miller, another former student of Vansina, have combined structuralist analysis with more established historical techniques in their endeavours to reconstruct the histories of a number of Central African Bantu kingdoms, mainly in Zaïre. The results of their labours were published recently under the significant title of *The African Past Speaks* (Miller ed. 1980). In Britain, the present writer has described for the Fipa of southwest Tanzania a tripartite structure of historical tradition under the overall hegemony of the sovereignty myth with its dual reference to present social structure and historical evolution (Willis 1981). In another part of the world altogether, Lévi-Strauss has described for the Kwakiutl Indians of the northwest coast of North America what appears to be a similarly tripartite organisation of oral tradition, including a group of texts intermediate between 'the stationary structure of myth and the open becoming of history' (1984: 155).[3]

In yet another culture region unrelated to either Africa or America, the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has noted in his study of Hawaiian history that

> Polynesian cosmology may lend itself in a specially powerful way to stereotypic reproduction. Strong logical continuities link the earliest elements of cosmogonic myths to the chiefly heroes of the latest historical legends. (1981: 13)

However, there may well be nothing specifically Polynesian about the fusion in Hawaii of cosmological (including social) structure and evolution: it could simply be the morm in all sociocultural entities defined by Feierman's Triangle. And such societies, I am suggesting, probably constitute the normative majority world-wide.

The problem for anthropology is that its theory has not caught up with the substantive findings of such researchers as Feierman, Kuper, Miller and Sahlins. Caught between the atemporal, synchronic bias of classical structuralism *à la* Lévi-Strauss, the neo-evolutionism of Parisian anthro-marxism and the fetishization of Malinowski's doctrine of the 'mythological charter', anthropology can, it seems, find little new to say. It seems significant

---

[3] According to Lévi-Strauss, 'this combination produced mythical history or, if you prefer, historicized myth, by juxtaposing or superimposing with great freedom of choice elements which are themselves strictly defined' (ibid.). This narrative formula appears to resemble what Miller (1980) calls 'cliché' and Willis calls 'symbolic image of social process' and describes as typical of the intermediary stratum between myth and history proper in Fipa oral narrative (1981).

that the crucial debate between Kuper and de Heusch in the pages of *L'Homme* on the epistemological status of the structural changes in Southern Bantu society described in Kuper's *Brides for Cattle* has excited, as far as I know, nary a flicker of interest in British anthropology. In effect, Kuper maintains, as well he may, that the changes he describes are 'real' and that the Southern Bantu societies possess a historical dimension as valid, albeit as structurally constrained, as our own. De Heusch - 'of all structuralists ...the most faithful to the method of Lévi-Strauss' (Vansina 1983) - argues to the contrary and sees the 'reality' of Southern Bantu society as contained in the original,atemporal structure of an elementary system of exchange of women between groups (de Heusch 1983; Kuper 1982).[4]

It may well be some time before this theoretical impasse is overcome, particularly having regard to the post-imperial malaise affecting British anthropology (in the double sense of loss of national and loss of disciplinary world hegemony). Yet critical voices have been raised against existing dogmatic constraints. In a different context from our present concern, Ruth Finnegan has protested against the restrictive effects of the British Malinowskian obsession (1969). In Africa, the Swedish political scientist Goran Hyden has issued a direct challenge to anthro-marxism and its basic axiom, the foundation of a complicated scholastic edifice of intercalated 'modes of production' that assumes the effective dissolution of indigenous African social structures under the combined influence of capitalist penetration and colonial rule.

Hyden's book is important because it appears to identify the techno-economic basis of the temporal monism we are attributing to social formations in Black Africa and elsewhere in the non-Western world. In effect, Hyden's copper-bottomed materialist analysis of what he rather perversely insists on calling the 'peasant' mode of production in Black Africa demolishes anthro-marxism in its Parisian epiphany while providing a needed general theoretical justification for those who, like Feierman, Kuper and the present writer, have found evidence for structural continuity between pre- and post-colonial African social formations at the level of local communities. It also explains, and more convincingly than theories invoking either rural 'backwardness' in the old colonial style or the dominance of a centre-periphery structure in the modes of Frank or Wallerstein, the recurrent failures of officially sponsored 'development' initiatives in Africa:

> Unlike industrial societies, capitalist and socialist alike, where the base is solidified and integrated but the superstructure is fragmented into a pluralist pattern, in the

---

[4] The magnificent fury of Vansina's polemical onslaught (1983) on de Heusch seems curiously out of proportion to the limited and equivocal claims to derive historical information from structuralist methodology put forward by de Heusch (1971, 1982).

> agricultural societies of Africa, the economic base is fragmented. (Hyden 1980: 26)

Hyden is the first theorist of modern rural Africa to have based his analysis on the blatantly obvious fact that typically a local group of co-residents, the 'household', is in effective control of the material means of production (land, tools, livestock). What Hyden's analysis does not do - and nor was it his aim in any case - is explain how socio-economic relations are co-ordinated above the level of the household, the locus of what he calls the 'economy of affection'. That is a task for social anthropology. But what Hyden *has* done is to outline the economic dimension of the socio-historical formation I have dubbed Feierman's Triangle. In relation to that economic basis, the structure of clan, age organisation or indigenous state is no less ideological than the origin myths and the whole structure of legitimating traditional histories. To understand those socio-historical structures needs more than new terms: a new anthropological way of seeing is called for.

Sahlins' Fijian elder who proclaimed himself to be experiencing history in the present had his earlier anthropological counterpart in Cunnison's Luapula chief of northern Zambia who similarly recounted the deeds of his ancestors in the first person pronoun:

> It will be noticed in the texts...that the first person is normally used. In the story of Chisamamba, which is given as related by him, 'I' is not only the man who is speaking but also the first Chisamamba and all those who have held the name in succession. (1951: 33)

Among the Fipa of south-west Tanzania, as I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere (Willis 1981), the key sovereignty myth invokes at one and the same time a paradigmatic form of social relations and a fundamental and definitive historical transformation. Soon after birth, every Fipa infant is the object of a divinatory ritual which determines the name of the ancestor he or she will thenceforth be known by. '*Unnsimu waaweela!*', 'The spirit has returned!', the parents are said to explain when learning this name, a reference to the belief, common in this part of Africa, that the dead ancestor's spirit or essence (*unnsimu*) has returned from a sojourn in the underworld to dwell in the body and person of the newborn (1982: 229).

When our own intellectual forebears of a century ago invoked the concept of the Contemporary Ancestor, they were expressing in the idiom of their own epoch - an idiom which has by no means entirely lost its hold over the popular and academic imagination - the perennial and worldwide idea of the mystical co-presence of past, present and future. The idea also appears to involve a concept of human beings as consisting of relatively defined multiple selves, rather than the substantive, concrete and theoretically unique **Self** or Person of Western ideology. On the synchronic plane, such a multiple self would be defined in terms of the totality of its significant social relations; and on the diachronic plane

by its affinities with other selves living in other times.

I see no reason why a domain of experience our culture chooses to label 'metaphysical' should not be amenable to scientific investigation. Recent works in physics and biology have presented pictures of the cosmos and the organism that radically challenge our concepts of space and time and ask us to think of both in terms of 'timeless', unbroken webs of interconnections.[5] Social science may need to do likewise, notwithstanding the perilously 'magical' implications.

ROY WILLIS

---

[5] Notable among a veritable flood of popularizing works that have recently sought to present new developments in physics and cosmology to the lay public are those of Zukav (1979) and Bohm (1980). In biology, Sheldrake (1981) was described by John Maddox, the distinguished editor of *Nature*, as 'the best candidate for burning there has been for many years'.

REFERENCES

BLOCH, M. 1977. 'The Past and the Present in the Present', *Man* n.s., Vol. XII, no.2, pp. 278-92.

BOHM, D. 1980. *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, London: Ark Paperbacks.

CAPRA, F. 1982. *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, London: Wildwood House.

CUNNISON, I. 1951. *History on the Luapula* [Rhodes-Livingstone Papers no. 21], Cape Town etc.: Oxford University Press.

EVANS-PRITCHARD, E.E. 1963. *The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology* [L.T. Hobhouse Memorial Lecture], Manchester: Manchester University Press.

FEIERMAN, S. 1974. *The Shambaa Kingdom*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

FINNEGAN, R. 1969. 'Attitudes to the Study of Oral Literature in British Social Anthropology', *Man* n.s., Vol. IV, no.1, pp. 59-69.

HARRIS, M. 1968. *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

DE HEUSCH, L. 1971. *Le Roi ivre, ou, l'origine de l'Etat*, Paris: Gallimard.

... 1982. *Rois nés d'un coeur de vache*, Paris: Gallimard.

... 1983. 'Du Bon Usage des femmes et des boeufs: Les transformations du mariage en Afrique australe', *L'Homme*, Vol. XXIII, no.4, pp. 5-32.

HYDEN, G. 1980. *Beyond Ujamaa: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*, London: Heinemann.

KUPER, A. 1982. *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

... 1983. 'Des Femmes contre des boeufs: Une réponse à Luc de Heusch', *L'Homme*, Vol. XXIII, no.4, pp. 33-54.

LEACH, E.R. 1961. 'Two Essays Concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time', in his *Rethinking Anthropology*, London: Athlone Press.

LEVI-STRAUSS, C. 1967. *The Scope of Anthropology*, London: Jonathan Cape.

... 1984. *Paroles données*, Paris: Plon.

MILLER, J.C. (ed.) 1980. *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History*, Folkestone: Dawson.

NICKERSON, G.S. 1984. 'Civilization and Other Cultures: The Vicissitudes of "The Comparative Method" in Anthropology', *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*, Vol. IX, no.1, pp.12-21.

SAHLINS, M. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

SCHMIDT, P. 1978. *Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in an African Culture*, Westport: Greenwood Press.

SHELDRAKE, P. 1981. *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation*, London: Blond and Briggs.

VANSINA, J. 1983. 'Is Elegance Proof? Structuralism and African History', *History in Africa*, Vol. X, pp. 307-48.

WILLIS, R.G. 1981. *A State in the Making: Myth, History, and Social Transformation in Pre-Colonial Ufipa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

... 1982. 'On a Mental Sausage Machine and Other Nominal Problems', in D. Parkin (ed.), *Semantic Anthropology*, London: Academic Press.

ZUKAV, G. 1979. *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*, London: Hutchinson.