BOOK REVIEWS

Elementary Structures Reconsidered: Lévi-Strauss on Kinship

Francis Korn. Tavistock Publications, 1973. £2.90.

There has been a need for a book like this. It is unlike other works which have appeared on the Lévi-Straussian bandwagon that the publishers have gleefully been trundling along. It is not one of those highly sycophantic or mildly disapproving commentaries in which the author gives his version of what he thinks Lévi-Strauss means. This is a profound criticism of the empirical and logical foundations of Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté. A book of extreme technical complexity, it has possibly had more words written about it by people who have never read it than any work in literary history. This state of affairs has not been improved by the relatively recent publication (1969) of an English translation because the translation is not of the original (1949) version. In the interim Lévi-Strauss changed his mind about what he was talking about and the resulting confusion has been enormous. In France this situation has been happily resolved by seating him among Les Immortels and thus elevating him beyond criticism. This fine Gallic solution carries little weight with the crude Anglo-Saxon empricist who still wants to know what Lévi-Strauss said and meant, if anything.

Dr. Korn does not give much attention to this particular difficulty although she does devote a brief chapter to showing how Lévi-Strauss's later pronouncements concerning the distinction between 'prescription' and 'preference' makes a nonsense of his earlier argument. She follows this up with a brilliant analysis of the Iatmul, people who do not figure in The Elementary Structures but who provide an excellent test case for an examination of Lévi-Strauss's distinction or lack of distinction between prescription and preference.

Wisely, however, Dr. Korn has chosen to deal mainly with the original version of Les Structures élémentaires and her book is mainly composed of the most detailed re-examination of aspects of that work. She begins right at the beginning with Lévi-Strauss's claim that incest prohibitions belong to the domains of both nature and culture and demonstrates how meaningless such a proposition is. This chapter is a little laboured and one of the weaker parts of the work, but this is speedily rectified by Chapter Two in which the purported relationships between types of exchange, residence rules and regimes come in for a close inspection. An analysis of the Aranda case, the one employed by Lévi-Strauss himself, shows that no necessary relationships exist and that the Frenchman's argument is tautologous. This is one of the best chapters. In later chapters Dr. Korn submits both the Dieri and the Mara to a re-analysis and in both cases arrives at different conclusions from Lévi-Strauss, let alone more convincing ones. In a final chapter, not including the brief conclusions, is assessed the claim that an algebraic treatment of marriage rules has some definite advantages: Dr. Korn is unable to find them.

This book first came together between two covers as a doctoral thesis (at Oxford) but before that four of the seven chapters (once again excluding the conclusions) had appeared in various publications. This is just discernible in the tendency for certain lines and quotations to re-appear rather too often. This, however, is a minor fault compared with the book's virtues. One cannot fail to be impressed by the author's great analytical skill and attention to detail as over and over again she shows up Lévi-Strauss's analytical in-

competence and what would appear to be his wilful disregard for the facts. She is totally unrelenting in her criticisms - too much so in my opinion since she was, and perhaps still is, quite unwilling even to acknowledge that her work only saw the light of day because it followed Lévi-Strauss's efforts. But it is a useful and salutary work since it brings nearer the day when Les Structures élémentaires can be struck off reading lists and become an historical curiosity for specialists in the development of social anthropological thought.

Peter Rivière

Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion. Roy Wagner. Chicago University Press, London. 1973. £5.40p.

Roy Wagner's new work is as stimulating, original, and wide-ranging as his first, The Curse of Souw: Principles of Daribi Clan Definition and Alliance in New Guinea (1967, Chicago University Press). Like the latter, Habu offers us a general sociological or anthropological theory worked out and presented in the Daribi context. This fine balance between theory and example, between anthropology and ethnography, and the interpenetration of each by the other, is in the tradition of the great works of our subject. Naven, Nuer Religion, and Nupe Religion spring to mind as examples of the successful use of this interpenetration.

And there is no doubt that in Wagner's case the technique has added to his ethnography a rare degree of liveliness and significance. For this reason the two books on the Daribi interest and illuminate the reader to an extent not usually associated with 'factual case-studies', or 'mere reporting'; and for the same reason the Daribi seem infinitely more real and human than the vast majority of anthropological tribes.

But while one can extol the effect of Wagner's general theories on his exposition of the Daribi material, the general theories themselves are disappointingly limited and often simplistic. This may well be because the author has not abstracted enough from the Daribi case, but rather has simply found significant-sounding English labels for Daribi categories - a fault unfortunately all too common among returned fieldworkers.

Habu is, in classical terms, the religious ethnography to follow the social structure of The Curse of Souw. But one of the advantages of Wagner's theoretical approach is that he has broken clear of these restrictive categories, and Habu treats of a pleasantly wide range of phenomena: from Papuan 'hero tales' to Daribi naming processes; from the relations between men and spirits to the relations between men and women.

The theory of cultural meaning which it is the book's main aim to create revolves round a set of key concepts: metaphor, innovation, impersonation, dialectic, ideology. Only the last of these, however, is used at all constructively and carefully, and this because he defines it explicitly in a somewhat technical or restrictive sense. So that even 'ideology' loses a good deal of the power available in it.

'Metaphor' and 'metaphorization' are used where most people would be content with 'symbol' and 'symbolization' (indeed, at times they are used even more extensively than those usefully broad terms). The philosophical ramifications of the concept of 'metaphor' are never properly considered,

and the same is true of 'dialectic' and even 'innovation'. This leads Wagner to the view that cultural meaning in symbols (all action being meaningful insofar as it is symbolic) derives from their metaphoric quality. And the essence of this quality is that it partakes of similarity and contrast at the same time. Thus far the argument is unobjectionable, if a little unsophisticated and unoriginal (for it dates back at least as far as Aristotle's Poetics).

But at this point the argument starts to go astray. Wagner assumes that this co-presence of opposites creates a tension from which the power of 'metaphors' derives. This may be so, but as a mere assumption it is unwarrantable. The next step is to assume that this tension is a dialectic, presumably because the two elements are opposites. But this opposition alone does not justify the application of what is a carefully delineated philosophical concept, especially when he extends the application of the term to cover the relationship between the symbol and the signified, as well as the metaphoric process itself. Had the author operated with the terms generally associated with 'dialectic' this would immediately have become apparent; but Wagner chooses to offer us a dialectic without theses, antithesis, or synthesis (for these terms are never used).

'Metaphor' and 'dialectic' have at this stage already lost much of their conceptual power and significance; this is even more the case when Wagner allies them to 'innovation' in his conceptual tool-box. For him societies' rules are ideologies, within which individuals operate to assert their personalities and identities. This they do by 'metaphorizing upon' those ideologies, and this is the process of innovation. What Wagner forgets is that a very part of those ideologies is the idioms from which the individuals draw their metaphors; in other words, he is so intent on the fact that individuals are operating upon the system that he forgets that they are also operating within it, indeed that the operation itself is a part of that very system. This failure to acknowledge the distinction between creativity within the rules, and a breach or alteration of the rules, is the major error of the conceptual framework the author so lovingly erects; and it is an extremely telling one, for it turns what attempts to be original theory of cultural signification into mere pomposity and a slavish addiction to terms rather than concepts.

It would be unjust, however, to end on a note of criticism, for any failings the book has result from over-ambition. It is only because the author is dealing with such important matters that it is possible to say so much about the work. And for the most part it is characterised by a lucidity of expression and a skillful use of material which make it appealing as well as enlightening reading.

Martin Cantor

In the Life of a Romany Gypsy. Manfri Frederick Wood.
Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1973. £2.50.

The popular image of the Gypsy lies suspended between pole and tropic, between that of the dirty, thieving, irresponsible vagabond, and the romantic myth of the carefree wanderer of hill and dale inspired by the writings of such notables as Borrow, Hugo, Merimée and Baudelaire. It is only recently that this romantic myth has been forced to admit, in serious publications, that here and now on the edge of our towns and our culture, Gypsies do exist. There has been little written in this country on traditional Romany culture and Fred Wood's book is an attempt to fill this gap while at the same time attempting to demolish the popular Gorgio image of the Gypsy.

Fred Wood is a Romany born and bred, and proud of it. The book is largely autobiographical, the material ranging through his own family history, traditional occupations, religious beliefs and mythology, through herbal folklore to marriage ceremonies and funeral rites. Though he attempts no analysis, he presents some fascinating data for further study. What makes this book so alive is the author's commitment to his aims, but these seem too disparate, and in pursuing them all he fails to present a convincing picture of the true Romany and merely creates another myth. Thus he upholds the merits of traditional Romany culture while making it 'respectable' to the reading public. His father becomes the 'ideal Romany' - hardworking, a brilliant craftsman, hard but honest. Wood emphasizes the cleanliness and integrity of the true Romanies, contrasting them with the Pikies (Travellers exiled from a Romany tribe for breaking its codes) and the Tinkers. But he has to admit that now the Romany way has degenerated through an increased dependence on and persecution by the state system. So with these escape clauses he can maintain his idealised myth of the traditional Romany. At the same time he emphasizes the strictness of the Romany tradition and the lack of personal freedom allowed within such a society.

Fred Wood's own position shows the same disparate themes. Though a Romany by blood, he rejected, and was rejected by, the Romany system when he chose to marry against his father's will. He is painfully aware of the repressive aspect of the system, and yet in his self-styled role as 'King of the Gypsies' he continues to idealise the Romany way, and he serves to protect its image as an official of the Gypsy Council.

In spite of the rather confused ideology underlying this book, there is plenty of material which could valuably yield to anthropological analysis. As several foreign anthropologists have discovered, Romany is a particularly rich and complex culture, reflecting the processes of incorporation, elaboration and adaptation of cultural elements as the Gypsy peoples have wandered across Asia and Europe. Perhaps in this country anthropologists have been wary of tampering with something so close at hand lest it should reveal too many problems of a practical rather than academic nature.

John Hill

Gypsies by Jeremy Sandford

1973. Secker & Warburg, London. £3.00

A housed Gypsy tells Jeremy Sandford:

> "If you went to a Traveller's house and asked somebody to sing they wouldn't do it. And they're very good singers too you know, so they'll get round a fire at night and get one person to sing and they'll all sing. That's the only way you can get them to sing."

Sandford's democratic intention is to give the Gypsies a chance to 'indicate some of their own decisions, to speak for themselves'. Their camping grounds are being increasingly closed and the government's policy of site provision has the unstated aim of assimilation. Sandford has gone on a nationwide tour to elicit the Gypsies' views. This he does by interviewing them one-to-one with a microphone - thus unwittingly restricting. Often he records simply the first encounter. Only three women are briefly heard. The content of his interviews is sparse and subdued - verbiage which Gypsies need so often to rehearse with their inquisitors. Those more willing to give specific answers in this setting tend to be active members of the London-based pressure groups and housedwelling Gypsies. A number of interesting things are said but these are generally lost in the padding. Otherwise the reader learns that Gypsies eat hedgehogs, handle horses, sometimes sleep in tents and can speak like us. Perhaps Sandford deliberately connives with their elusiveness, protecting their vigorous society from invasion by the reader.

Fred Wood's In the Life of a Romany Gypsy has an alternative to bland evasion. He gives the outsider an exotic ideal, undiluted. A striking contrast to both of these is the Irish Traveller, Johnny Connors' brilliant autobiography written in prison. The unconfiscated portion, Sandford has incorporated as a major section of his book. In a mode of unsolicited story-telling, Connors conveys the hardship of his travelling life, offset by wit, resiliance and cunning.

Sandford also gives summaries of government reports and statements by voluntary organisations. One statement, presented without criticism, reiterates the myth that Gypsies are locked in a golden age of horse breeding and rural crafts, with no alternative but wage labour and sedentarisation. But Gypsies have always adapted to the host economy. Now motorised, they work with scrap iron, antiques and tarmacadam. The suspect nostalgia is reinforced in Sandford's Introduction: 'They represent our remote past in human form'.

But when leaning on the N.C.C.L. and Gypsy Council, his political recommendations are excellent. The majority of Gypsies have no difficulty in earning a living. What they need - and what government policy with its emphasis on settlement denies them - is legal access to camping land when travelling. If Sandford's book contributes to a greater realisation of this then any criticism is subordinate.

Judith Okely

Symbols: Public and Private. Raymond Firth.
George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1973. £6.60p.

Sir Raymond Firth has been admirably energetic since his retirement. One would not have guessed, even five years ago, that he would be writing a book on symbolism. His latest work aims 'to help to give perspective to the anthropological study of symbolic forms and processes and the functions of symbolism', and he stresses that in such an endeavour the anthropologist should be familiar with the contributions of philosophers, psychologists, theologians, art historians, and others.

The book falls roughly into three sections. Firstly, a discussion of the term 'symbol' itself, which is unfortunately not very well organised. Secondly, there are three chapters devoted to the growth of interest in symbolism in anthropology from the nineteenth century up to the present. History is not, I think, one of Firth's main interests, and the account is very fragmentary. For instance, he speaks of the contribution of Tylor and Frazer, who have every right to be regarded as 'literalists', and Max Müller, one of the few persistent 'symbolist' critics of the Victorian ethnologists, is hardly mentioned at all. Likewise, in this century, Firth is overgenerous on the parts played in this growing interest by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, whereas justice is scarcely done to the immensely important contribution of the Année Sociologique. Structuralism is admitted to have advanced our understanding of symbolism, but there is no adequate account of this 'at times ... elitist' tradition. The third major section is a series of studies of individual topics; the symbolism of food, hair, flags, greeting and parting, and giving and receiving.

The whole work is very easy to read, and some will find its 'topicality' attractive. Unfortunately, the volume does not have an argument around which the evidence can be organized, and the fact that it is a descriptive, even monographic, book, leading to no particular conclusion and addressed to no specific problem, very much detracts from its interest. Even the curious subtitle does not lend it a theme. At least the topics one would have expected to be tackled under the terms of 'public' and 'private' are not systematically worked out. But there are, one would have thought, fairly obvious foci around which the whole work could have been built. For instance, that nineteenth century division between the symbolists and literalists has come to the fore again in controversies over 'virgin birth' and the meaning of 'twins are birds', and these are important matters to which Firth himself has made a contribution.

Part of this failure to write a well constructed book unquestionably lies with the fact that it is not the sign of a thorough-going change of outlook. For Firth, anthropology is still 'comparative, observationalist, functionalist...' and links symbolism 'to social structures and social events in specific conditions'. The real value of the anthropological attention to symbols is to 'grapple as empirically as possible with... /the/ gap between the overt superficial statement of action and its underlying meaning'. One reason, says the author, that a real attention to problems of symbolism was so delayed was that it was necessary first to achieve considerable understanding of the formal fields of social structure such as politics and kinship. For Firth, then, anthropology is not concerned with a subject matter which is wholly symbolic; rather there is a sociological reality in connection with which symbols play the very basic roles of convenience and simplification,' of giving scope for imaginative development,

of providing disguise for painful impact, of facilitating social interaction and co-operation.' Such are widely held views in our discipline, and when Firth asks 'Is modern social anthropology engaged in a retreat from empirical reality? We are concerned with 'deep structure' rather than with content; with models rather than with behaviour; with symbols rather than with customs', clearly the appearance of this work shows that its author has not parted company with most of his colleagues.

The book is not meant to be a comprehensive coverage of the topic of symbolism, and this will explain why, despite the impressively large bibliography, a great many potential sources of ideas go unmentioned. What is surprising is that along with a willingness to look to other disciplines, which one would certainly do nothing to discourage, is coupled an uneasiness with, perhaps even an unfamiliarity with, several recent movements in our own subject, which are all making a contribution to that general drift towards meaning, language and symbolism as the central concerns of anthropology. No doubt Firth views with some alarm these tendencies in which 'the autonomy, even priority, of the non-empirical is insisted upon', but if his work on symbolism is even the first faint glimmer of a sense that the micro-sociology view of the subject is inadequate, then it must be welcomed. Unfortunately, it is difficult to deviate from a line just a little, and the fact that this is what Firth has attempted to do is largely responsible for what is unsatisfactory in the book. But if, in retirement, Sir Raymond is beginning to have second thoughts one can only encourage him in the venture.

Malcolm Crick.

INDEX - Vol. IV, Nos. 1-3.