



EDMUND LEACH

# Edmund Ronald Leach

## 1910–1989

### 1. Achievements

EDMUND LEACH was born in Lancashire, England, on 7 November 1910. He went to school at Marlborough College and later entered Clare College, Cambridge, as an Exhibitioner and read Mathematics and Mechanical Sciences, obtaining a First in the BA degree in 1932.

After some years of civilian life in China he returned to England and studied Social Anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics. He was an active member of Malinowski's famous seminar. An abortive field trip to Kurdistan in 1938, frustrated by the Munich crisis,<sup>1</sup> was followed by a prolonged trip to Burma in 1939 in the course of which the Second World War broke out. From autumn 1939 to the summer of 1945 he served as an officer in the Burma Army. He saw much of Northern Burma, and he gained an unrivalled knowledge of its hill tribes, particularly the Kachin, on whom he was an undisputed authority.

He took his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics in 1947 where he also obtained his first teaching appointment. He carried out a survey in Sarawak and his report entitled *Social Science Research in Sarawak* (1950) set out the guidelines for subsequent investigations by a number of distinguished anthropologists (particularly Derek Freeman, William Geddes, Stephen Morris).

Edmund Leach relinquished a Readership at the LSE in 1953 in order to

<sup>1</sup> On the basis of this aborted field trip, Leach wrote *Social and Economic Organization of Rowanduz Kurds*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 3, London, 1940.

*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 97, 293–344. © The British Academy 1998.

return to Cambridge as Lecturer (1953–8). In 1954 he published *Political Systems of Highland Burma* which embodied some of the results of his work in Burma. A field trip to Ceylon in 1953, supplemented by another made in 1956, provided the information for a second work of distinction: *Pul Eliya, A Village in Ceylon* (1961). In due course he was promoted to Reader, and in 1972 the University honoured him by appointing him to a personal chair. His research and writing vigorously continued throughout his career, despite mounting administrative and other responsibilities.

His escalating academic recognition was sign-posted by his twice winning the Curl Essay Prize (1951, 1957). He also won the Rivers Memorial Medal (1958). He delivered the Malinowski Memorial Lecture (1959), the Henry Myers Lecture (1966), the Mason Memorial Lecture (1970), the Cantor Lectures at the Royal Society of Arts (1973), the Munro Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (1977), and the Huxley Memorial Lecture (1980). He spent a year in the United States in 1961 as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, and a term at the Johns Hopkins University in 1976 as John Hinkley Visiting Professor.

In the United States, Edmund Leach delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester in 1975, the Hinkley Lectures at Johns Hopkins University in 1976, the Harvey Lecture Series, University of New Mexico (1983), and the Patten Foundation Lectures (1984–5) at Indiana University. I have most probably missed some other instances, but one might say that Leach accomplished a grand slam of distinguished lectures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

He is the first and only anthropologist so far invited by the BBC to deliver the Reith Lectures (1967), *A Runaway World?*, which notably brought him to the attention of the general public.

Leach's wide-ranging substantial contributions to knowledge are attested by his impressive bibliography.<sup>2</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that in sheer versatility, originality, and range of writing he was and still is difficult to match among the anthropologists of the English-speaking world. His contributions have touched on kinship and social organisation; hill tribes and valley peoples; land tenure and peasant economy; caste and class; myth and ritual; binary thought, classification, and liminality; information theory, semiotics, and symbolic communication; art and aesthetics; ethology and archaeology; computer technology and model building; British structural-functional method and the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; and Biblical materials and the myths of Classical Greece.

Altogether Leach was the author of some eight books, co-author of one,

<sup>2</sup> See *Edmund Leach. A Bibliography*. Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Occasional Paper no. 42, 1990.

and editor of several essay collections. A hallmark of all his writings was a forceful, vigorous, direct, and clear prose, effective in exposition as in debate. He was a tireless reviewer of books in anthropology and a variety of cognate disciplines, and a prolific essayist not only in professional journals but also in publications for the general reading public such as *The Listener*, *New Society*, *New Scientist*, *The Spectator*, *Encounter*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*, and *New Republic*. He in fact wrote for and spoke to a much wider public and audience than the vast majority of social anthropologists, and positively sought to have a dialogue with specialists in other disciplines. All this added to his fame in mature years both as a notable spokesman for the discipline and as a commentator on general contemporary issues.

Apart from a distinguished academic career as a social anthropologist, Edmund Leach rendered noteworthy services to education, knowledge, and professional societies in general. In 1966, he succeeded Lord Annan as Provost of King's College, a college which counts in this century among its galaxy Lord Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Lowes-Dickinson, Rupert Brooke, Arthur Waley, Pigou and Lord Kaldor. As Provost of King's until 1979, he also served as Fellow of Eton College. In addition to being Head of a famous College, he served at the highest levels in the administration of the University itself. His fellow anthropologists honoured him by electing him Chairman of the Association of Social Anthropologists (1966–70) and President of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1971–5). His gaining a wider academic recognition was signified by his election as President of the British Humanist Association (1970) and as a Fellow of the British Academy (1972). He was a member of the Social Sciences Research Council for a number of years beginning in 1968. He was elected Honorary Fellow of the London School of Economics (1974), Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies (1974), Honorary Fellow of Clare College (1986), and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1968).

A high point of Leach's career was reached when he was knighted in 1975, and also elected a Trustee of the British Museum (1975–80). In 1976 the University of Chicago conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, and Brandeis University honoured him in the same way.

This enumeration of achievements might unproblematically convey the idea that Leach by virtue of his own capacities, his social background, comfortable circumstances, public schooling and Cambridge education, and his considerable writings quite naturally ascended the ladder of achievement to become a much honoured member of the British Establishment.

The canonised Leach himself would not have settled for a hagiographic narrative, nor did he want himself to be considered as aspiring and conforming

to the career of an honours list grandee. We have before us a complex person, subject to tensions and frustrations, blessed with a creative experimental and reflexive mind that was more concerned with restlessly probing rather than with consolidating knowledge. While he tested the presuppositions and limits of orthodoxy, he was deeply protective and conservationist about the institutions he valued.

## 2. Childhood and Youth

Leach's family home was located in Rochdale, Lancashire, and it was established by his grandfather Robert Leach, 'wealthy flannel manufacturer, a product of the English industrial revolution'.<sup>3</sup> Leach had a lively sense of his family background as a descendant of closely intermarried Rochdale mill owners. All four of his great grandfathers were mill owners who lived within four miles of one another, and they were all related by marriage. The changing fortunes of his extended family led to the dispersal of his own father and his nine brothers in search of their own fortunes in the far flung empire; six of them, including his father, regrouped to make their fortune in sugar in Argentina. Born last, Edmund was, unlike his older bilingual Anglo-Argentine brothers and sister and many cousins, solely brought up in Rochdale, the favoured child of his mother, Mildred.

### **From public school to coming of age in Cambridge**

Mothered with singular affection and tolerance and encouragement, the youngest Leach would in any case have found Marlborough a trial, but life was made more difficult by the fact that being the twenty-first in a line of Leaches sent to that school, all of whom had automatically played in the cricket eleven, he was the odd man out. 'Much later, when I had made my way into the Upper Sixth, I was ruthlessly coached so that I could bring honour to the school by winning a mathematics scholarship to Clare College, Cambridge.'<sup>4</sup> He was quite unhappy at Marlborough.

But Cambridge proved to be 'a glorious experience'. He had won a Mathematics exhibition to Clare College where he went in 1929, and perhaps he was disappointed to find that he wasn't a real mathematician and changed to the Mechanical Sciences Tripos. While in the usual Oxbridge style claiming to

<sup>3</sup> Adam Kuper, 'An Interview with Edmund Leach', *Current Anthropology*, 4 (August–October 1986), 375.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

have ‘spent a blissful two years of practical idleness’, he must have studied conscientiously, knew he could get a First, and ‘damned well got it’. But one can sense that the blissful Cambridge years were also a time of searching and questioning about art, music, sex, literature, films and theatre, politics, and morals. The privileged undergraduates of Cambridge largely selected from a limited range of private schools and sharing social class conventions were in the early thirties not blithely unconcerned with questions regarding sexual norms, gender relations, and morals in general. They felt stirrings of class injustices and conflict, and the forebodings caused by the Nazi movement in Germany.

One of the main issues which no doubt had great personal relevance for young people who in one way or another had been exposed to Victorian conventions and religious orthodoxy was where they stood in relation to organised religion. Of his own religious legacy Leach not entirely jokingly remarked: ‘In practice I was brought up a hard-boiled Christian, and mud sticks if you throw enough.’<sup>5</sup> Though he had a distaste for organised religion (and doctrines such as papal infallibility) he at the same time wrestled with the question that civilised society necessarily depends on morals and ethics, which had their basis in human judgements of value, and in the case of religion, rested on faith.

### **The gathering of stormclouds**

Leach’s Cambridge years, 1929–32, were also the time of emerging rifts in the British class system. The General Strike of 1926 had already signalled a steep class divide. The Great Depression had epidemic global repercussions—very high unemployment, long lines of workers, their families living on the dole and queuing for everyday necessities. And menacing in this context was the rise of Hitler’s party of National Socialism in Germany, its mobilisation of a youth movement, the spread of Nazi sentiments, the build up of armaments and the threat of aggrandising war. Leach had himself visited Germany in the summer of 1931 and had forebodings about the future.

In retrospect in 1986 Leach described the impact of these developments on Cambridge undergraduates and their mood as follows: ‘the more intellectual among us were almost all of a radical, near communist, political persuasion. We were already coming to hate the social rigidities of the system in which we had been reared, the injustices of which were visible on every side. By comparison with the present generation of Cambridge undergraduates, we were very politicized. We had no use for compromise.’<sup>6</sup> It was in this environment that Leach’s own socialist sympathies were crystallised.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Firth, ‘A Cambridge Undergraduate: Some Early Letters from Edmund Leach’, *Cambridge Anthropology. Special Issue: Sir Edmund Leach*, 13: 3 (1989–90), 10.

<sup>6</sup> In Edmund Leach, ‘Glimpse of the Unmentionable in the History of British Social Anthropology’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13 (1984): 1–23; 9.

### **The Chinese interlude**

The next phase was his trip to China and this adventure is well told by Stephen Hugh Jones. On graduation he went to China on a four year contract with the trading firm of John Swire and Sons (Butterfield and Swire), a move he put down to a combination of the family characteristic of wanderlust, his own love of travel, and his need for a job. He served in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Chungking, Tsingtao, and Peking and there acquired skills in business, financial dealings, and administration, activities he thoroughly enjoyed and which he used to such good effect in later years.

Leach was delighted by China; off duty from business, he spent his time exploring with fascination its cultural system, learning something of the language and collecting jade sculpture and ancient pottery. On holidays he travelled widely, travel which included climbing four of the five sacred mountains of the country.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of his assignment he had planned to travel home to England via Russia by way of the Trans-Siberian railway, but his plans were thwarted by political turmoil in Russia. By chance encounter in Peking he met Kilton Stewart, a psychiatrist and former Mormon missionary with an interest in anthropology who invited him to join an expedition to the island of Botel Tobago off the coast of Formosa to visit the Yami. The Yami, who at first sight, appeared to be 'real primitives' made an indelible impression upon him. Using his engineering training, Leach made meticulous drawings of their boats and technology and these were the subjects of his first anthropological publications.

## **3. Apprenticeship and the Second World War**

### **Malinowski's seminar**

Although he had read some of Malinowski's early writings as an undergraduate, Leach did not meet Malinowski until after his return from China in 1936. By that time Malinowski, famously established at the London School of Economics, had acquired a great reputation not only as the most exciting author of anthropological works but also as a great teacher.

Leach was introduced to Malinowski by Raymond Firth and he joined Malinowski's seminar at the London School of Economics in 1937. Malinowski obviously made an enormous impression on him, and in retrospect Leach eulogised him as one of his two 'supernatural beings' or 'deities', the

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Hugh-Jones, *Edmund Leach, 1910–1989*. (Privately printed for King's College, Cambridge 1989), pp. 10–11.

other being his mother's uncle, Sir Henry Howarth. In his own words, Leach was 'converted' to anthropology in 1937.<sup>8</sup> The extraordinary career of Malinowski has been recorded: notably his origins in Poland, his change of discipline from physics and mathematics to anthropology, his passage to England and training at the LSE, his fieldtrips to Melanesia, and his election to the first chair in Anthropology at LSE in 1927. Although an outsider, Malinowski had within a few years risen to preeminence in London, interacting with British anthropologists such as the Seligmans, Frazer, Haddon, Rivers, Marett, and Westermarck, and perhaps even more impressively, as time went on developed a large personal acquaintance with scholars in various other fields.<sup>9</sup> Aside from his influential connection with the International African Institute, Malinowski also participated in the work of the British Social Hygiene Council, and Mass Observation.

In addition to being an articulate propagandist for his own 'Functional School of Anthropology', Malinowski was an impresario adept at popularising and demonstrating the relevance of anthropology to other professional groups and to the public at large. These feats certainly must have impressed the members of his seminar in the late thirties, and set for at least some of them a pattern to follow. Edmund Leach, by his own activities later, suggests such an emulative response.

In his colourful way Leach has conveyed the euphoria and sense of special occasion he associated with the seminar group, focused on the charismatic Malinowski and enhanced by a coterie of about a dozen or so anthropologists most of whom were drawn from the British Commonwealth, the British Empire, and South Africa. They were a 'pretty exotic group' who were certainly not upholders of the colonial regime. And then there were some others as well from Europe and China.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See Leach, *Social Anthropology* (Fontana Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 7–8.

<sup>9</sup> 'In Britain alone he co-operated with or was influenced by a range of men including Richard Gregory, Havelock Ellis, A. H. Gardiner, Julian Huxley, C. K. Ogden, Cyril Burt, C. S. Myers, J. C. Flugel, W. Powys Mathers, G. H. L.-F, P. H. Rivers, J. H. Oldham—all of whom were interested from different angles in the wider implication of his science.' Raymond Firth, 'Introduction: Malinowski as Scientist and as Man', pp. 1–14, in Raymond Firth (ed.), *Man and Culture. An Evaluation of the World of Bronislaw Malinowski* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> S. J. Tambiah, 'Personal Accounts: Edmund Leach Situates Himself', *Cambridge Anthropology. Special Issue: Sir Edmund Leach*, 13: 3 (1989–90), 37. Leach explained that Malinowski's *Coral Gardens* had been published in 1935, Firth's *Tikopia* in 1936, and Bateson's *Naven* in 1937. Leach mentioned the following as being at various times members of Malinowski's seminar: Raymond Firth, Evans-Pritchard, Fei Tsiao Tung, Francis Hsu, Kenyatta, S. F. Nadel, Audrey Richards, Lucy Mair, Phyllis Kaberry, Ian Hogbin, William Stanner, I. Schapera. In this non-exhaustive listing one notes the absence of Radcliffe-Brown, whose career has a different trajectory, and who had recently arrived from Chicago to take up his Oxford chair. London and Oxford would develop into the two rival foci; but Malinowski did interact with Radcliffe-Brown. It would seem that Leach's own contemporaries included Phyllis Kaberry, Ian Hogbin, William Stanner, Nadel, Kenyatta, Fei Tsiao Tung, and Francis Hsu.

In the summer of 1938 Leach visited Iraq, planning to write a thesis on the Rowanduz Kurds. 'It came to nothing. After the Munich crisis and Chamberlain's gesticulations about "peace in our time" I was back in London with an aborted project. I spent the next academic year, 1938–39, working as Raymond Firth's research assistant, an extremely valuable experience from my point of view. Malinowski was on sabbatical leave at Yale (he never returned), but Meyer Fortes came back from West Africa at that time and taught me during the spring and summer semesters.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Burmese days (1939–45)**

Then, in the summer of 1939, the Firths left for Malaysia to conduct the research which produced, among other things, Raymond Firth's *Malay Fishermen* (1946), while I left for north-east Burma to undertake field research among the Kachin. The monograph that I had planned to write would not have had the quantitative detail which characterises Raymond Firth's book, but it was to be a socio-economic study of the same general kind. I hoped to display the organisation of the local community in terms of domestic production and the network of trading. Segmentary lineages and cross-cousin marriage didn't come into the story at all.<sup>12</sup>

There seems to have been an additional stimulus and agency in Leach's choice of Upper Burma for his fieldwork:

In Malinowski's seminar he had met Noël (H. N. C.) Stevenson, a member of the Burma Frontier Service then home on study leave and whose book *The Economics of the Central Chin Tribes* Edmund later made us, his undergraduate students, all read. This link now came in useful. At Stevenson's suggestion, he set off for the village of Hpalang in the Kachin Hills of north-east Burma to carry out field research and to monitor the effects of Stevenson's social uplift project dubbed the 'Kachin regeneration scheme'.<sup>13</sup>

Leach arrived in Burma in August 1939, just about the time that Hitler had launched his awesome war. There was no going back to England this time

<sup>11</sup> *Current Anthropology*, 4, 376.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Hugh-Jones, *Edmund Leach*, p. 14. I can confirm that those of us who attended Leach's lectures on Economic Anthropology in the sixties were told to read H. N. C. Stevenson's *The Economics of the Great Central Chin Tribes* (1943). Stevenson's discussion of the Tefa system ('debt' and 'bond' slavery) provided Leach with material for making a striking contrast with the conceptions surrounding classical Greek chattel slavery, and his discussion of 'feasts of merit' and the activities of the 'feasters' club' with material for explicating the manner in which 'tangible perishables' (like food and livestock) were converted to 'intangible imperishables' (titles, reputation and relations of debt and power). Leach had anticipated Bourdieu's now famous concept of 'symbolic capital'.

round, and so Leach signed up with the Burma army and went into the field to Hpalang to conduct his research.

Leach conducted fieldwork in Hpalang for nine months in the years 1939–40, and he also contrived to get married in 1940 to Celia Joyce, daughter of Henry Stephen Guy Buckmaster. Thereafter he was called to serve in the Burma Army. He was stationed in Maymyo from October to December 1940, and during this training period he had the time to complete a draft of what he referred to as his ‘functionalist’ monograph on Hpalang. News of the fall of France reached the Leaches and thinking that all was lost, they quickly packed up and went to Maymyo, where their daughter Louisa was born on October 31 1941. Subsequently, they went to Schwebo, north of Mandalay. Mercifully the child also helped to save Celia’s life because, as Edmund wrote, ‘when the crunch came in Spring 1942, nursing mothers who were wives of white officers were flown out, the rest walked and mostly died’. Celia and infant were flown to Calcutta, and subsequently they took a boat from Bombay to England. Edmund did not see them again for three and a half years.

The Japanese invaded in 1941, and in 1942 in the midst of derailments caused by their advance, Leach lost all his papers—the draft monograph, notes, photographs, etc. In July 1942 while on sick leave in Calcutta he reconstructed the monograph on Hpalang from memory. But during his subsequent extensive travels in the Kachin Levies operation he was fated to lose that document too. But the memory of Hpalang was not lost for ever—for he would reconstruct Hpalang again and present a distilled portrait of this ‘unstable Kachin *Gumsa* community’ as chapter IV in his post-war classic *The Political Systems of Highland Burma*.

When the Japanese arrived at the end of 1941, Leach was assigned to an intelligence outfit run by H. N. C. Stevenson, the Frontier Service officer who had had some training in anthropology under Malinowski.

I was supposed to hang around Hpalang (the base of my earlier fieldwork) with a radio set. My assistant lost his stores and the radio, and we had to head for home. It is a long story. I reached Kunming (capital of Yunnan Province) after many adventures and seven weeks of walking. I was then flown to Calcutta, very ill from dysentery. I tried hard to get back to regular soldiering, but my official unit had been disbanded, and, after a period of sick leave, I was ordered to report to Colonel Stevenson at a remote airfield in Assam. This was August 1942.<sup>14</sup>

Leach was sent back into Burma to create the Kachin Levies, but since Stevenson had met with an accident and was out of commission, a retired Australian Burma Military Police officer was put in formal charge of the Kachin Levies operation. Leach quarrelled with him, was reduced in rank

<sup>14</sup> The arduous retreat into China took its toll and it is surmised that his bothersome skin cancer on the head late in life was probably caused by the exposure to the sun.

from acting major to substantive second lieutenant, and was transferred to the Civil Affairs Service. 'Among other things the Civil Affairs Service had responsibility for the civil administration of "liberated" Burma as the British army moved back in. In this role I ended up as a staff major, deputy to the chief civil affairs officer at 14th Army Headquarters, an Establishment figure if ever there was one.'<sup>15</sup> The eminence he served under was General Slim and Leach had performed effectively in the civil administration of liberated Burma.

Leach would characterise his 'extraordinary series of war experiences' as a 'strange mixture of the absurd and the horrible'. But there was one benefit that he derived from it: 'I travelled very widely in the Kachin Hills and got to know a great variety of different sorts of "Kachin". This diversity provided the basis for my subsequent anthropological thinking.'<sup>16</sup> In fact his wide ranging recruiting trips and operations with the Kachin Levies had given him a panoramic and dynamic view of the connections between the varieties of hill tribes, and this knowledge would be the basis for a theoretical contribution of fundamental importance.

#### 4. The Anthropologist at Work: Teacher and Theorist

##### **The career start at LSE**

Leach returned to England in the summer of 1945, supposedly on short leave, but after Hiroshima all return trips were cancelled, and he was demobilised in January 1946. Raymond Firth was now professor and head of department at the London School of Economics and 'between us we agreed that I should reread all the literature of the Kachin (and of other Burma frontier 'tribes'), going back to the beginning of the 19th century, and reassess it in the light of my "on the ground" experiences'. He completed the thesis in the spring of 1947.<sup>17</sup>

After completing the Ph.D., pursuant to a proposal made to the Colonial Office by Firth, Leach went in 1947 to the newly acquired Crown Colony of Sarawak to suggest what kinds of research should be done to collect more information about the inhabitants. He carried out a survey in Sarawak and his report entitled *Social Science Research in Sarawak* (1950) which was gratifyingly accepted by the government set out guidelines for subsequent investigations by a number of distinguished anthropologists: Derek Freeman who worked with the Iban, Bill Geddes with the Land Dayak, Stephen Morris with the Melanau, Ju-kang T'ien with the Kuching Chinese, and Tom Harrison with the Coastal Malays.

<sup>15</sup> *Current Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (August–October 1986) 377.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

On his return from Borneo, Leach joined the staff at LSE as a lecturer, and one of his primary tasks was to be responsible for the teaching of 'primitive technology' then an integral part of undergraduate anthropology. 'But it soon appeared not only that his major interest was in social anthropology, but that with his usual devastating logic, he had concluded that what passed for primitive technology should properly be studied as examples of simple applied mechanics—or not at all. [This no doubt reflected his engineer's training.] So he turned to social anthropology completely, and also with his talent for administration, assumed responsibility for the general organization of undergraduate teaching in the department.'<sup>18</sup>

It was in this phase of his early career at LSE that he decided to resign his position in order to work full time for over a year on the book, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.<sup>19</sup> He then rejoined the LSE in a new appointment as Reader.

We may note that while his doctoral thesis was about 'the hill tribes of Burma and Assam' and was oriented, following Firth's interests, in socio-economic interactions and agro-ecological adaptations and practices, the book in question, more closely focused on the Kachins (and their Shan neighbours), while using the same information plus a great amount of archival and historical sources, was of a different genre.

By this time Meyer Fortes had become head of the anthropology department at Cambridge, and Leach could not resist the offer of a lectureship there even if it meant a demotion in rank.

Leach in due course became settled in Cambridge, and his reputation began to soar. He became Reader in 1957, and the Department came to be seen as the arena for a titanic debate between Fortes and Leach which assumed mythological proportions especially in the common room talk of outsiders. It was at Cambridge that Leach would develop his reputation as 'critical rethinker of anthropology' and as one of the 'most original minds in modern social anthropology'.<sup>20</sup>

### Early Cambridge years: forging a perspective

Leach's next fieldwork monograph, *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon*<sup>21</sup> appeared in 1961. This same year, Leach has said, was 'a kind of watershed' in that he

<sup>18</sup> 'Obituaries. Professor Sir Edmund Leach. Critical Rethinker of Social Anthropology', *The Times*, Saturday, 7 January 1989.

<sup>19</sup> E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 44 (University of London, Athlone Press, 1954).

<sup>20</sup> These evaluations were made by Raymond Firth in a letter to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Chicago when Edmund Leach was proposed in 1976 as a candidate for an Honorary Degree, which was duly conferred on him.

<sup>21</sup> *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: A Study of Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge University Press, 1961).

had brought out a book of essays, *Rethinking Anthropology*<sup>22</sup> ‘which showed much more clearly than anything I had produced before just how far I had distanced myself from my teachers’.<sup>23</sup> This was also the same time—the academic year 1960–1—which Edmund and Celia Leach spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, California—when he had a fruitful encounter and dialogue with Roman Jakobson and at the same time recovered a deeper consciousness of his own transformational bent *via* mathematics and engineering. Palo Alto had been a happy time. Leach’s sense of intellectual excitement (which was also heightened by his attending Gregory Bateson’s seminars on dolphin communication and ecological adaptation) was matched by Celia’s responding to the California light, weather, flora, and landscape with intensified painting and pleasurable outdoor living.

The year 1961 was also when Leach published two essays which signalled his fascination with Lévi-Strauss’s work on mythology. They were ‘Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?’<sup>24</sup> and ‘Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: An Examination of Some Recent Developments in the Analysis of Myth’.<sup>25</sup> This was the beginning of Leach’s own increasing preoccupation with what he called ‘the interface between art and religious mythology’.

The conjunction of all these influences, trends, different intellectual preoccupations and productions in the same year seems both unusual and improbable, and for orderly commentary we have to do some chronological sorting.

Leach did the field research in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on which *Pul Eliya* is based during the period June to December 1954, supplemented by a further brief visit in August 1956. He had from 1955 till 1957 begun to publish on his Ceylon materials,<sup>26</sup> and must have submitted his final monograph manuscript for publication before he went to Palo Alto in 1960, probably as early as 1957. *Pul Eliya* was theoretically primarily an argument mounted against the structural-functionalist approaches of Radcliffe-Brown and Meyer Fortes.

*Rethinking Anthropology*, although it came out in 1961, is actually a collection containing essays crafted over a period extending from 1953 to

<sup>22</sup> *Rethinking Anthropology*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 22 (University of London, Athlone Press, 1961).

<sup>23</sup> Leach, ‘Glimpses’, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Daedalus* (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) 90, no. 2 (Spring 1961), 371–87.

<sup>25</sup> *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, series 2, 23, no. 4 (1961), 386–96.

<sup>26</sup> For example, ‘Land Tenure in a Sinhalese Village, North Central Province, Ceylon’. Summary in *Man*, 55, article 178 (1955), 166–7; ‘Structural Continuity in a Sinhalese Village (Ceylon Northern Dry Zone)’, Proceedings of the Ninth Pacific Science Congress, 1957. It was also during this phase that he wrote ‘Polyandry, Inheritance and the Definition of Marriage, with Particular Reference to Sinhalese Customary Law’, *Man*, 55, Article 199 (1955), 182–6. Later reprinted in *Rethinking Anthropology*.

1961. The first essay was ‘Cronos and Chronos’, published in 1953<sup>27</sup> and the last was the capstone Malinowski Memorial Lecture (1959), which also provided the title for the collection. But the collection is given a unity by the fact that five of the six essays are concerned with issues relating to kinship and marriage. One central essay, ‘The Structural Implications of Cross-Cousin Marriage’, will be discussed later: it addresses the issue of representing Kachin marriage exchange and political hierarchy. Let me deal here with only two other essays pertaining to his call to his British colleagues to rethink anthropology, which included his urging the experimental trying out of new ideas even if they did not quite work out.<sup>28</sup>

An important essay contained in the collection is ‘Jinghpaw Kinship Terminology’, completed in Calcutta in 1943 during the war, and first published in a 1945 volume of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* which actually did not appear in print until 1948. This essay was innovative in that Leach attempted to uncover the ‘rules’ that organised the ‘superficially extremely complex’ terminology, and his approach foreshadowed an approach (which he would progressively refine) that seeks out the ‘structure of relations’ in a mathematical-logical or algebraic sense. The rules constituted ‘the ideal patterns of Jinghpaw society’, and he underscored the point that ‘any structural analysis of a kinship system is necessarily a discussion of ideal behaviour, not of normal behaviour’.

It is noteworthy that this mode of analysis was attempted many years before Leach encountered the writings of Lévi-Strauss, who in 1953 recognised Leach’s essay as having some affinity with his own structuralist approach. This is relevant to considering the thesis—which Leach himself wished to establish—that his own predilection towards a mathematical-transformational approach, stemming from his earlier training in engineering, preceded as much as it later converged with features of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism. It was in regard to this matter of intellectual affinities and influences that Leach would draw attention to his felicitous meeting with Roman

<sup>27</sup> ‘Cronos and Chronos’, *Explorations* no. 1 (1953), 15–23. Its companion, ‘Time and False Noses’, appeared in *Explorations* no. 5 (1955), 30–5. They were combined under one heading in chapter 6 of *Rethinking Anthropology*.

<sup>28</sup> In doing so, I do not wish to detract from the seminal ideas concerning the definition of marriage and the relations between bridewealth and marriage stability among the Lakher and Kachin treated in the two remaining essays in the collection. I may also mention in this context another essay in a similar theoretical vein, published elsewhere, ‘Concerning Trobriand Clans and the Kinship Category Tabu’ (1958), relating kinship terminology to the dynamics of marriage, residence, and affinal payments, and attempting to solve a classical puzzle about Trobriand clans. It is also a contribution to the complex issues of interrelations between linguistic and social phenomena. This essay is published in Jack Goody (ed.), *The Development Cycle in Domestic Groups*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology (Cambridge University Press, 1958).

Jakobson (and Halle) in 1960–1 at the Center for Advanced Study at Palo Alto. Leach was particularly taken with Jakobson's pattern of distinctive features in phonology—it rang bells of recognition that 'he had been there before'—and with Jakobson's search for linguistic universals. Leach had been initiated into linguistic theory, and he had begun to see that his 'deepest concerns were with what is now discussed under such grandiose labels as semiotics and cognitive science'.<sup>29</sup>

'Rethinking Anthropology' is the centre-piece in the collection which bears the same title. It was delivered with fanfare and expectation on 3 December 1959 as the first Malinowski Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics, and Leach did not fail both to stimulate and to provoke his British audience. With characteristic ebullience Leach reminisced in later years that on this occasion he had not only denounced 'butterfly collecting' but also 'to the mystification of most of my audience, I referred to the significance of binary arithmetic and computer machine code as devices for modelling sociological process'.<sup>30</sup> The lecture exhorted anthropologists to break out of the straitjacket of viewing 'societies' and 'cultures' as plural empirical wholes and as concrete bounded entities capable of being labelled as types. Rather than labour at sketching particulars in detail (this by the way was the target and context for understanding Leach's earlier notorious remark that he was 'frequently bored by the facts' and 'cultural peculiarities'<sup>31</sup>) anthropologists should search for *general* patterns—whether similar or transformational—that may turn up in *any* kind of society. The patterns he was offering were relations between terms symbolised as mutually connected and variable in a 'topological' or 'algebraic' sense. Relationships between pairs of opposites was a case in point. In the field of kinship for example this pattern was explorable in the relations between 'incorporation' and 'alliance', as variably contrasted in different 'societies', such as Trobriand, Kachin, and Tallensi, in terms of 'blood and appearance' or 'controlled supernatural attack' versus unconscious 'uncontrolled mystical influence'.

This analytic and interpretive perspective became a dominant theme which Leach would restate, refine, and elaborate in many of his subsequent writings. We encounter for example a further explication of the notion of 'relational structures' in his BBC Reith Lectures, *A Runaway World?* (1968).

<sup>29</sup> Leach, 'Glimpses', p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> *Political Systems* (1964), p. 227. 'I read the works of Professors Firth and Fortes not from an interest in the facts but so as to learn about the principles behind the facts' (ibid.). In fact, his extensive reviewing activity and his comparative essays show 'an unrivalled grasp of ethnographic detail' (Chris Fuller and Jonathan Parry, 'Petulant inconsistency? The intellectual achievement of Edmund Leach', *Anthropology Today*, 5(3) (June 1989), 11.)

## The Cambridge Don as teacher

In their obituaries and reminiscences, Leach's students at Cambridge have affectionately described his large and powerful presence in strikingly similar ways.

He consciously did not present himself as a model of sartorial fashion or high table wit with elegant gestures, but he certainly possessed the skills of an actor and orator, who in responding to audiences gave his well organised, provocative, vibrant lectures, illustrated with slides and graphic figures drawn with chalk of multiple colours. In fact he took pride in displaying his practical skills, and his being a competent mechanic who was way ahead of other academics in using a personal photocopying machine (his students were eager recipients of the acid-smelling notes and queries he liberally distributed), and in the appreciation of the uses of a computer—which, in time becoming antiquated, challenged his electronic skills.<sup>32</sup>

To return to his relationship with and impact on students. They crowded to hear him, sensing that they were participants in the breaking of new ground. Equally encouraging of students thinking for themselves were Leach's conscientious and informal supervisions: students both undergraduate and postgraduate marvelled, were gratified, and frequently overwhelmed by the numerous pages of written comments on their essays and chapters which they received from such a busy man.<sup>33</sup>

Leach's relationship with and impact on his postgraduate students in part bears witness to the British virtue (much in evidence among established academics) of allowing them to develop and express their views, and of tolerating eccentricity within implicitly understood limits. Although he did not aspire to be the founder of a school, there were at least three cohorts of students who in their own right achieved high reputation and who regarded Leach as *a* (for some *the*) primary teacher and with admiration and affection. The first includes<sup>34</sup> Frederik Barth, Jean La Fontaine, Nur Yalman, Anthony Forge, Martin Southwold, and Ralph Bulmer, and the second and third Adam Kuper, Geoffrey Benjamin, Stephen Gudeman, Andrew Strathern, Marilyn Strathern, Ralph Grillo, Ray Abrahams, Jonathan Parry, C. J. Fuller, Alfred

<sup>32</sup> Leach, 'Glimpses', 9–10. 'I tend to think of social systems as machines for the ordering of social relations or as buildings that are likely to collapse if the stresses and strains of the roof structure are not properly in balance. When I was engaged in fieldwork I saw my problem as trying to understand "just how the system works" or "why it held together"' (p. 10).

<sup>33</sup> A testimony to Leach's role as a supervisor, recognisable as authentic by other students as well, is provided by Ray Abrahams, 'Edmund Leach. Some Early Memories', *Cambridge Anthropology. Special Issue: Sir Edmund Leach*, 13: 3 (1989–90), 19–30.

<sup>34</sup> This listing is not complete, and I apologise to those who regard him in this light and have been missed out, owing to my ignorance.

Gell, Stephen Hugh-Jones, Christine Hugh-Jones, and Caroline Humphrey. 'Leach may not have created a school, but he certainly had many fiercely partisan students whose personal experience convinced them that they were working with one of the most exciting and creative intellectuals of his generation.'<sup>35</sup>

When I arrived in Cambridge in 1963 (to take up a Smuts Fellowship at the University and a Commonwealth Fellowship at St John's College) he already had the reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of the profession and stories circulated how he could be severe with shoddy work, sometimes had a scorching effect on this or that graduate student, had now and then explosive rows with some colleagues, and could be impatient with boring or stodgy seminar speakers, who might be treated to a disconcerting clinking of keys in his pocket, or in extreme moments, his turning away and reading a newspaper. It is in this state of demanding mind and stirred emotion, evoked by some writings he regarded as adversarial or incompetent that Leach wrote some of his most cutting and biting reviews, and forceful, even vitriolic, responses to those who ventured to take him on. British anthropologists who were more used to the thrust and parry of polemical review writing rather enjoyed and expected it of him, but many Americans mostly subject to the etiquette of sugar coated reference-writing, tended to approach Leach as an unyielding and aggressive defender of the faith, until he disarmed them with chuckling, even nonchalant, admissions of the vulnerability and impermanence of some of his past arguments.

One reason perhaps why students—who were his juniors—found Leach compellingly magnetic was that he never gave the impression that he was preaching a doctrine which they were obliged to accept. He did convey to them that he was on the attack, disputing orthodoxy and testing the limits of current knowledge. That may have been his hold on his audience, which listened attentively, even entranced, and went away encouraged to think for itself and to tackle the puzzles of the discipline on their own.

Leach reserved his greatest attention and affection for those doctoral students whose research particularly engaged him. As their supervisor and their friend he enthusiastically and conscientiously attended to their financial needs and communicated his assessments of their field research; he obviously enjoyed reviewing their field notes and texts in myths and rituals of the people being studied, and pondered their analyses and in turn offered his own analyses in an equal dialogue.

Many of his graduate students will enthusiastically testify to his ample and stimulating involvement in their fieldwork and thesis writing. At the same time it is crucial to recognise that Leach most definitely did not aspire to found a

<sup>35</sup> Fuller and Parry, 'Petulant inconsistency?'

school with pliant disciples attached to him. He likewise balked at others' efforts to monumentalise him. He fiercely rejected any effort by his former pupils (and other colleagues) to commemorate his career with a *festschrift*.<sup>36</sup> His position was that this genre of edited volumes containing disparate essays usually lacked coherence and never amounted to much as anthropology. In a curious way, such resistance also accorded with his own lack of enthusiasm for crafting a systematic totalising theoretical system, recapitulating his previous works and cumulatively built up piece by piece. In fact he readily acknowledged in informal exchanges with those with whom he was comfortable that he was aware of his inconsistencies. He would maintain that creative thinking was possible only if you were prepared to take the risks. Inconsistency did not worry him because he thought it was consistent with a Hegelian dialectical mode of thought. His impulsion was to 'experiment', 'probe', 'play' with new ideas, and push at the margins.

### Theoretical positioning

There were two sets of contrasts, or 'oppositions' in the structuralist sense, that Edmund Leach frequently employed to characterise the theoretical impulsions and tensions in his writings. One was that he was simultaneously a structuralist and a functionalist; the other was that he was attracted to mathematical equations of relations and transformations (as a schoolboy preparing to enter Cambridge he had concentrated on mathematics) but that having been trained as an engineer he had pragmatic concerns in how designs were drawn, implemented, adapted to context and put to use. He once said that there was a tug of war within him between a pure mathematician *manqué* and an empiricist engineer *manqué*, who, however, recoils from counting. 'I feel that sometimes I am on both sides of the fence.'<sup>37</sup>

The statement that he was simultaneously a structuralist and functionalist needs an extended gloss on what he meant by that self-definition. The following is a beginning. While rejecting the Radcliffe-Brownian (and Durkheimian) notion of 'function' as contribution of a component to the maintenance and integration of a social 'system' (itself viewed in organismic terms), and the Malinowskian notion of 'function' primarily in terms of serving individual 'biological' needs and, secondarily societal needs, Leach in various writings seems to have adopted the notion of function as connection between components, such that functional relations constituted an interconnected totality ('the total interconnectedness of things'). The 'interconnectedness' that

<sup>36</sup> Leach had scotched many attempts by his pupils and colleagues to do him honour in this way. I myself was the recipient of a quick and firm missive the moment a rumour reached him that I and certain others were contemplating a *festschrift*.

<sup>37</sup> Tambiah, 'Personal Accounts', p. 34.

Leach meant, however, comprised ‘relational systems’ in the sense that they were ‘transformations’ of one another.<sup>38</sup> This conception of functional relations thus rejects the Malinowskian notion of a cultural system as ‘a unique self-sufficient functioning whole’ and the Radcliffe-Brownian notion of ‘whole societies’, bounded and ‘distinguishable as species types and classifiable as such in a kind of Linnaean taxonomy’. These were the perspectives he rejected first in his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* and even more explicitly and unforgettably as ‘butterfly collecting’ in his famous Malinowski Memorial Lecture in December 1959, urging the view that anthropologists ought to be searching for generalisations for which cultural and social boundaries were quite irrelevant or impossible to impose. This view of function derived from mathematics and not from biology or psychology as was the case with the followers of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. ‘Consequently, from my point of view there was no inconsistency between “functionalism” and “structuralism” (in its then novel continental sense)’.<sup>39</sup>

Leach progressively clarified that his ‘structuralism’-cum-‘functionalism’ consisted in seeing ‘relational systems’ as ‘transformations’ of one another, that certain devices stemming from or assimilable to his mathematical and engineering training such as binary arithmetic, information theory, computer coding, could be deployed for perceiving patterns in classificatory thought, myth and ritual, and in social processes. More ambitiously, he saw the possibility of establishing ‘cross cultural transcriptions’ as the objective of his notion of the comparative method. These ideas gave an underlying unity and continuity to the way he would tackle many of the issues he undertook to investigate.

At the same time he also successfully exploited aspects of the ‘functionalist’ perspective he principally associated with Malinowski and Firth, and which dynamically focused on how individual actors (including groups) used and manipulated ideal categories and rules and norms of social conduct in contexts of action to further their interests and goals. Leach deployed this pragmatic instrumental or strategising perspective on many occasions—how mythological genealogical variants (in ‘structuralist’ terms variations on a theme) were manipulated by competing Kachin lineages to further their claims or more generally how myth variants were related to ‘function and social change’, how double descent systems might make sense if considered as networks through which different activities were channelled, or how an imposing, intricately carved, but densely populated Hindu temple façade whose details could not be distinguished by the worshipper was meant to convey a sense of

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Leach’s *A Runaway World?* This idea is elaborated in his later writings as we shall see.

<sup>39</sup> Leach, ‘Glimpses’, p. 19.

power and awe.<sup>40</sup> In this mood Leach would criticise on the one hand the formalism of some of the structural functionalists who reified social systems as organisations of social principles and, on the other, the non-contextualised abstract codes of some structuralist exercises divorced from social uses or lacking empirical grounding.

While remembering that Leach had many irons in the fire at any one time, I would risk a broad two-fold temporal division of his writings into those written and published from about 1940 to 1961, and those written from around 1962 (and especially after 1965) into the late 1980s. During the first phase he was primarily concerned with refining, extending and polemically criticising certain formulations surrounding kinship, segmentary descent structures and social organisation of 'tribal' societies made by the leading figures in British social anthropology — such as Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, who were his elders, and Meyer Fortes, Raymond Firth, Evans-Pritchard (who were senior to him), and Max Gluckman, Audrey Richards, Jack Goody and others who were his contemporaries. Of all these personages, Leach explicitly named on several occasions Malinowski and Firth as his teachers; less frequently, he also referred to Fortes as one of his teachers.<sup>41</sup>

One might say, to simplify and accent matters, that in his mind in the category of senior figures, Leach opposed Radcliffe-Brown, whose typing structural-functional organic systems he rejected and whom he personally disliked, and Malinowski, his charismatic teacher whom he liked, and whose ethnographic writing he admired much more than his theoretical contributions. At the next level, he positioned himself in contrastive relations to his part-teachers who were slightly older than him, namely Fortes and Firth. Though a participant in Malinowski's seminar, Fortes had gravitated towards Radcliffe-Brown, whose theoretical perspective he whole-heartedly espoused, and Leach saw Fortes as his sparring opponent and theoretical foil. Leach was benignly inclined toward Firth who was sponsor and friend and had initially taught him 'most of what I know about anthropology'.

While Leach repeatedly idolised his dead hero, Malinowski, it was also evident from his words and deeds, that initially he had imbibed much from his other teacher and friend and sponsor, Raymond Firth, who has outlived him. I would surmise that Firth's own dynamic treatment of the relation between normative rules and actor oriented usages first of all accorded with Leach's

<sup>40</sup> See Edmund R. Leach, 'The Gatekeepers of Heaven: Anthropological aspects of grandiose architecture', *Albuquerque Journal of Anthropological Research*, 39 (3) (Fall 1983), 243–64.

<sup>41</sup> In 'Glimpses', Leach states that 'Raymond Firth and Meyer Fortes were my teachers and closest associates throughout my academic career'. In *Custom, Law and Terrorist Violence* (Edinburgh at the University Press, 1977) Leach declares that he considered Malinowski 'the greatest and most original of all social anthropologists'.

own intuitions about how people acted, and secondly, provided fire power against the officialising doxa of Radcliffe-Brown and his followers.

I have mentioned certain British anthropologists who figured with varying significance in Leach's professional concerns in the first phase. There is another from across the channel in France whose writings as the leading French theorist increasingly became more and more important for Leach to take into account and come to terms with, but with whom he did not have a close personal relationship. This person was Claude Lévi-Strauss. Leach's intellectual engagement with and preoccupation with Lévi-Strauss's ideas in his own writings is a vital part of his biography. Admiration spiced with dissent, however, was not in this case a prescription that could bind the two in a relation of enduring 'alliance'.

## 5. The Political Systems of Highland Burma

Leach's first large work, *The Political Systems of Highland Burma*<sup>42</sup> is widely regarded as a landmark in political anthropology. It is a classic, still widely read and cited, and in the eyes of many arguably his best book. This masterpiece already contains many of the issues he grappled with throughout his career: his critique of many of the orthodoxies of 'structural functionalism' à la Radcliffe-Brown; his admiring engagement with Lévi-Straussian 'structuralism' as deployed in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and simultaneously his rejection of some of the substantive, methodological, and theoretical submissions in that book; and his attempt to straddle and combine some features of 'functionalist' empiricism and pragmatism with 'structuralist' rationalism and deductive formalism (an exercise with philosophical ramifications that engaged Leach more consciously in later years).

Leach has remarked that his first book, among other things, is 'organized as a kind of dialogue between the empiricism of Malinowski and the rationalism of Lévi-Strauss and these two contrasted strands of my thinking should be apparent to the reader in all my later writings'.<sup>43</sup>

One of Leach's achievements in *Political Systems of Highland Burma* was to argue against the view that 'the boundaries of society and the boundaries of culture can be treated as coincident' and thereby powerfully to dissolve the older ethnographic fixation on tribes as bounded entities and wholes, and to unveil for our viewing a landscape of highland Burma as an open system of many lineages linked in circles of wife givers (*mayu*) and wife takers (*dama*),

<sup>42</sup> The London School of Economics and Political Science. London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1954. Reprinted with Introductory Note by the Author in 1964.

<sup>43</sup> Leach, *Social Anthropology*, p. 44.

communicating with one another diacritically through variations of dialect, dress, and other local differences, and capable of dynamically generating and as well as contesting tendencies towards extra-local hierarchical political formations. It was a model of an open-ended system, constrained but not determined by certain 'objective' conditions, and capable of an expanding multiplication as well as incorporation of new lineage segments. In this way he changed extant notions of tribes, ethnic identity, and repetitive equilibrium as timeless static ontological entities of anthropology. The book also proposed a stimulating view of the patterning of myth and ritual and their role in political action, and grappled in an exploratory way with the integrated use of historical materials in anthropological analysis.

In a separate essay, 'The Structural Implications of Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage', published in 1951 some three years before *Political Systems*, Leach had already produced the first English language commentary on Lévi-Strauss's *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* especially as it bore on his Kachin materials.

In the above mentioned 1951 essay, Leach set out to demonstrate that the Kachin *Gumsa* type social order was not inherently unstable and threatened with break up by virtue of *internal intra-kinship* processes generated by the marriage rules towards greater and greater inequality and imbalances as Lévi-Strauss maintained; what has to be considered in a fuller analysis is how arrangements by which women travel 'down' and marriage goods move 'up' in compensation are interlocked with territorial sovereignty, land tenure, and patron client relations, so as to maintain in dynamic tension a stratified political system of the *Gumsa* type. Lévi-Strauss had been mistaken in thinking that women moved upwards hypergamously thus creating the demographic bottlenecks at the top.<sup>44</sup> Leach provides an elegant analysis of how the prescriptive marriage exchange among the Kachin is integrally linked up with and sustained by the wider political and economic circumstances, and here we see his version of structuralism and functionalism displayed at its best. It should be noted, however, that Leach appears to be asserting that the *Gumsa* system can be presented as stable and in equilibrium in terms of a 'model', but that in fact it was an 'unstable' form owing to various dynamic processes which are described in the book.

Vis-à-vis Lévi-Strauss's 'mechanistic' model deriving from kinship categories and marriage rules themselves taken as structuring the system, Leach was arguing that kinship structures per se should not be essentialised and reified as formal systems containing an exhaustive internal logic, but should be explicated in terms of how actors use and manipulate them within

<sup>44</sup> See "'Kachin and Haka Chin": A Rejoinder to Lévi-Strauss', *Man*, ns. 4 (2) (1969), 277-85.

the larger political economy, which, while providing directives and incentives to action, is also in turn constituted and changed by the dynamic strategising acts and normative ideological constructs of the actors.<sup>45</sup>

Leach's assertion in *Political Systems* was that events and behaviour on the ground are 'only seen as structured when they are ordered by means of verbal categories'.<sup>46</sup> The three categories of ideal political order that the Kachin themselves used in their political dialogues ('discourses' in modern jargon) were *gumlao* and *gumsa* which were respectively 'democratic egalitarian', and 'ranked-aristocratic' in their connotations and which gave conceptual gloss and a mental ordering to their own activities; the third, *shan*, pertained to the monarchical/feudal conceptual ordering of the neighbouring valley centred people.

In Leach's language *gumlao* and *gumsa* categories are 'transformations' of each other in the mathematical/structuralist sense. The Shan model is predicated on entirely different principles—for example, the Shan chief who is polygamous receives wives and concubines as 'tributes' from his petty chiefs and political subordinates and as wife-taker is superior to the givers thus reversing the Kachin *mayu-dama* (wife-giver–wife-taker) evaluation; and the building blocks of Shan monarchical polity are not segmentary descent lineages. A fundamental misunderstanding is generated when a Kachin chief gives a wife to a Shan prince: the former in his own terms as *mayu* is the ritual superior; the latter in accepting a tributary gift from a political subordinate is in his terms the superior overlord. Therefore the Shan model is not a transformation of the *gumlao-gumsa* dyad; individual *gumsa* Kachin chiefs may try to 'become' Shan by adopting Shan pretensions and claims, but such developments are subverted by the Kachin themselves whose basic valuations and practices resisted this kind of political subjection. As Parry and Fuller put it:

<sup>45</sup> This in my view is an instance and an occasion in which Leach's structural and functional perspectives meet and combine to illuminate, and come close to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical ambition stated years later in formal terms in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977. The original French text, entitled *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*, was published in 1972 by Librairie Droz S.A., Switzerland) to combine 'rules' with 'practices', to steer clear of 'mechanistic sociologism' and 'spontaneous voluntarism' and to track the relation between objective structures, the cognitive and motivating dispositions they shape (*habitus*), the strategies of action to realise practical aims, in social situations, and the final outcome as 'practices' ('regulated improvisations'), which recursively have a feedback effect on objective structures. (Whether in fact Bourdieu has actually realised this ambition is a debatable matter that need not concern us here.) Unlike Bourdieu who has attempted to produce a systematised theory of practice with an attendant set of concepts, Leach as I have remarked before was uninterested in such ambitious theorising, and implicitly illustrated the relation between semantics and pragmatics, structuralism and functionalism, cultural rules and individuals' manipulating to maximise their power and status by means of empirically oriented analyses.

<sup>46</sup> Introductory note to the 1964 reprint of *Political Systems*, p. x. Leach refers to Pareto's *Traité de Sociologie*, and to its English translation: Arthur Livingston (ed.), *The Mind and Society*, (New York, Dover Publications, 1963).

'Partly because a gumsa polity had a more precarious productive base, partly because a gumsa chief was liable to alienate his kinsmen by treating them like a Shan prince's subjects—which he could hardly afford to do since his wealth . . . was in people rather than land—the nearer such a polity got to the Shan model, the more likely it was overthrown by a “democratic” rebellion'.<sup>47</sup>

Leach's famous thesis of 'oscillating equilibrium' asserted that over a period of 150 years, which is the historical time span he has dealt with, the Kachin communities may be seen as oscillating between the gumlao-gumsa poles. He was later to explain that this oscillating model was influenced and adapted from 'Pareto's discussion of the alternating dominance of the “lions” and the “foxes” and his conception of a “moving equilibrium”'.<sup>48</sup> His concern with historical process over a large span of time had led him to transform and formalise the indigenous Kachin categories into his own construction of an 'as if' model, between whose poles could be situated particular Kachin communities in time and space. He repudiated those readings of his text that inferred that he was saying that Kachin communities mechanically and inevitably moved through an everlasting cyclical process, with the additional connotations of a historical determinism that such a view carried. There were two kinds of processes that he adduced to counter this reading. Over a span of time particular communities may stay put or move in different paces and directions, and there is no way in which all these circumstances could be aggregated or summed up as constituting one integral total moving equilibrium system, or a system moving unidirectionally.

Leach's explication of the gap between 'ideal categories' and 'actual behaviour', 'rule and practice' focused on how individual Kachin actors driven by self-interested power motives instrumentally manipulated the ambiguous meanings and contested the application of those categories to their on the ground situation. In this respect Leach had anticipated the current interest in 'agency'. And when wearing this hat, Leach would argue that 'to the individual himself [different social systems] present themselves as alternatives or inconsistencies in the scheme of values by which he orders his life. The overall process of structural change comes about through the manipulation of these alternatives as a means of social advancement. Every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavours to exploit the situation as he perceives it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of the society itself'.<sup>49</sup>

In an important review, published in 1958, Ernest Gellner charged Leach with holding a position that was an 'idealist error'<sup>50</sup> in so far as Leach

<sup>47</sup> Fuller and Parry, 'Petulant inconsistency?', p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Introductory note to the 1964 reprint of *Political Systems*, lx.

<sup>49</sup> *Political Systems*, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ernest Gellner, 'Time and Theory in Social Anthropology', *Mind*, 67, NS, no. 266 (April 1958).

emphasised verbalised thought categories as providing the phenomenological map for viewing and interpreting the world out there, but that the dynamic behaviour of actors and the untidy 'facts on the ground' did not bear a direct correspondence to the ideal categories which were manipulated for personal advancement in the power game. The persisting element in social relationships was a pattern structure of verbal concepts, open to diverse interpretations, rather than empirically observable and existing kin groups.

It may come as a surprise to many readers, including some of his disciples, that in fact while rejecting Gellner's attribution of 'error' Leach did accept and did again and again explicate in the later decades of his career his 'idealist' position, which he conjoined with his 'humanist' and 'empiricist' orientations. This idealist-humanist-empiricist position radically separated him from what he saw as Radcliffe-Brownian empiricism and quasi-rationalism which saw societies as 'concrete' systems held together by principles of kinship and descent, and theoretically capable of being represented on 'the method of science involving observation, classification and generalization', in short a natural science of society. According to Radcliffe-Brown, 'The fundamental problems' of a theoretical science must 'depend on the systematic comparison of a number of societies of sufficiently diverse types'.<sup>51</sup> Leach's objections are that aside from the myopia of structural-functionalists regarding the issue of 'the lack of fit between ideal categories and empirical discontinuities', their static classificatory types failed to see their societies 'as continuously adaptive sub-systems within an unbounded matrix'.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Leach came to underscore as part of his credo, what he already had perceived in *Political Systems*, that 'historical process' is open-ended and cannot be represented in causal determinative evolutionary terms.

## 6. Pul Eliya: The Challenge to Descent Group Theory

Leach introduces the monograph on Pul Eliya<sup>53</sup> as having two aspects, firstly as an addition to the already substantial literature relating to Ceylonese land tenure, and secondly, 'as an academic exercise designed to provide a critical test of certain features of the theory and method of British social anthropology, especially as it related to the general field of kinship theory'.

<sup>51</sup> See Edmund Leach, 'Social Anthropology: A Natural Science of Society?' Radcliffe-Brown Lecture, 1976. From the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXII (Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 157–80. In this lecture Leach assembled in one place all the objections he had to the Radcliffe-Brown brand of structural functionalism.

<sup>52</sup> *Political Systems*, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> E. R. Leach, *Pul Eliya, a Village in Ceylon: A Study in Land Tenure and Kinship* (Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 1.

Whatever professional anthropologists may say in regard to its theoretical implications for kinship theory, there is no doubt at all that the monograph is a masterly, detailed, and unmatched account of the land tenure system prevailing in a village in the 'dry zone' North Central Province in the year 1954.

It is possible that those anthropologists who have studied people who practice shifting agriculture with hoe technology or pastoralism have for the most part little sense—although these systems have land tenure concepts and inheritance rules—of the almost obsessive concern for people of South Asia, who practice sedentary plough agriculture in fields of fixed size and position, with values oriented towards possession of land and its transmission, and all the well-being, status, and symbolic capital that goes with it.

Although there have been previous partial accounts by colonial public servants and recent Sri Lankan scholars of traditional irrigation technology and land tenure arrangements, Leach's study is the first full scale empirical study of the actual 'workings' of a particular agrarian and social system in all the details of its singular particularity. *Pul Eliya* is a case study that illuminates the previous academic treatises in unexpected ways.

This work did in fact stimulate a number of other field studies in Sri Lanka in which the relation between social structure and land tenure was a critical axis both for the people studied and for the anthropologists.<sup>54</sup>

Keeping in mind those many omnibus wide-ranging monographs, common to the field of anthropology which aim to touch on almost every aspect of the social and cultural life of single communities, Leach modestly and accurately says that his formal subject matter 'covers an extremely narrow field' namely 'the local land tenure system' and its relation to kinship. This narrow field in fact becomes an inexhaustible vista filled with ethnographic particulars that in my view constitutes one of the richest and analytically illuminating documentations of virtually all aspects of a 'peasant economy', both synchronically as it operated in 1954, and diachronically from 1890 or so to 1954. Land tenure is a canopy that covers much in the areas of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange.

Some wags have joked that because Leach lost all his Kachin field

<sup>54</sup> For example, Gananath Obeyesekere, *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon* (Cambridge University Press, 1967); Marguerite S. Robinson, *Political Structure in a Changing Sinhalese Village* (Cambridge University Press, 1975); Stanley J. Tambiah, 'The structure of kinship and its relationship to land possession in Pata Dumbara, Central Ceylon', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 88, Part I (1958), 21–44; Stanley J. Tambiah, 'Kinship fact and fiction in relation to the Kandyian Sinhalese', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 95, Part II (1965), 131–79; Stanley J. Tambiah, 'Polyandry in Ceylon—with special reference to the Laggala Region', in *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India, and Ceylon*, ed. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 264–358; Nur Yalman's *Under the Bo Tree* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1967) is contemporaneous with Leach's work, but of course both were in contact as teacher and student at Cambridge.

notes during the Second World War, he compensated by publishing all the information he collected in *Pul Eliya*. Leach genially admitted that there is something to this charge, but that there was a serious purpose behind his detailed documentation.

The resort to and handling of archival and contemporary first-hand information is truly amazing: cadastral surveys first done in 1890, and surveys later repeated; tax records from 1860–93; land title registrations, plot ownership and transmissions from 1890–1954; administration reports; court cases and litigation—all these backed by Leach’s own complete mapping of the Old Field and the residential compounds (*gamgoda*), and all categories of other land owned and used, and a thorough compilation of genealogies and much else.

All this exhaustive and meticulously checked information is marshalled to cover the central aspects of economic life: landownership and its transmission through time; the maintenance of the irrigation system; cultivation operations and landlord–tenant–labourer arrangements; credit and debt relations; labour organisation and labour exchange, and sharing of rewards in different phases of a single cultivation season culminating in harvesting, threshing, and share distribution; forms of cultivation in compound gardens, and the fascinating system of shifting cultivation (*chena*) on dry land, according to the ‘wheel pattern’. All these details are there not only to provide an understanding of the multiple dimensions of the economic life of the *Pul Eliya* people but also as ammunition for waging a theoretical campaign, ambitious and risky. The facts are marshalled and presented, as Leach warned, to the point of ‘unreadability’, because the validation of his theoretical assertions depended on the empirical *method* he had chosen to substantiate the assertions. Thus, *Pul Eliya* is for Leach an experiment in method which would generate the empirical data needed to confirm his assertions. This experiment in method he compared to the usual anthropological field work of his time in this way. From Malinowski onward, the so-called field study and case history took the form of the anthropologist’s propounding a general hypothesis and then presenting his or her cases and examples *to illustrate the argument*. ‘The technique of argument is still that of Frazer. Insight comes from the anthropologists’ private intuition; the evidence is only put in by way of illustration.’<sup>55</sup>

Covering quantitatively and qualitatively everything of significance in a small universe in relation to a chosen topic cannot of course be done in a literal sense, but it is important for any serious reader of *Pul Eliya* to realise that Leach harnesses his uncompromising empiricism to a theoretical end, namely that the quantitative patterns formed by the data would in themselves constitute a ‘social order’ or ‘social structure’, akin to the quantitative rates of the ‘normal’ as opposed to the ‘normative’ invoked by Durkheim in *Suicide*. This

<sup>55</sup> Leach, *Pul Eliya*, p. 12.

would be a different representation of 'social structure' from that propounded and allegedly confirmed by resort to jural norms and 'mystical' concepts of solidarity by the leading British exponents of 'structural-functionalism'.

What is Leach's quarrel with this school of thought that 'emanated from Oxford'? During the period 1934–54 'the most important developments in anthropological work were concerned with the enlargement of our understanding of the nature and significance of unilineal descent groups'.<sup>56</sup> The chief contributors to this effort were Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, especially in his study of the Nuer (1940) and Fortes, notably in his summing up (1953).<sup>57</sup> By virtue of its success and also its biases, this body of descent group theory invited its antithesis.

Radcliffe-Brown 'consistently exaggerated the importance of unilineal as opposed to bilateral (cognatic) systems of succession and inheritance'. Though uncommon in Africa, the main site for theorising about unilineal descent groups (UDGs), cognatic systems are widely distributed throughout the world and far exceed in frequency other types, yet Radcliffe-Brown gave them little notice. A question that arises then is how his generalisations apply to societies in which unilineal descent is not a factor.

A main assertion of Radcliffe-Brown, further accented by Fortes (and ultimately deriving from their reading of Henry Maine's *Ancient Law*), was 'that in societies with a lineage structure the continuity of the society as a whole rests in the continuity of the system of lineages, each of which is a "corporation", the life-span of which is independent of the individual lives of its individual members'.<sup>58</sup> Although, as Weber made clear, there could be other bases or means of incorporation such as locality and ritual initiation, or other special interests, these theorists saw descent per se as the most effective basis of incorporation, especially because 'descent is fundamentally "a jural concept" (as Radcliffe-Brown argued)', and its significance was that it served 'as the connecting link between the external, that is the political and legal aspect of what we have called unilineal descent groups, and the internal or domestic aspect'.<sup>59</sup> Readers of *Pul Eliya* who come across Leach's barrage against theorists who consider kinship per se as 'a thing in itself' will find their clues to what he meant by this expression in the view that kinship, especially descent, is the very generative basis of jural status, succession and inheritance rights, placement and incorporation in descent groups, which by a further extrapolation from the internal domestic domain to the external domestic domain, also provides the grid for political and legal relations. In a society

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard. *The Nuer* (Oxford University Press, 1940), M. Fortes 'The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups', *American Anthropologist*, 55 (1953), 17–41.

<sup>58</sup> Leach, *Pul Eliya*, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Fortes, 'Unilineal Descent Groups', p. 30.

like that found in Pul Eliya, where no unilineal descent principle prevails, 'it is locality rather than descent which forms the basis of corporate grouping'.<sup>60</sup> It is only after one has worked through the ethnography that this statement can be tested and understood.

There are other entailments to the UDG approach which Leach criticises as constructing a 'static' and 'equilibrium' view of society insulated from dynamics and change. 'If anthropologists come to look upon kinship as a parameter which can be studied in isolation they will always be led, by a series of logical steps, to think of human society as composed of equilibrium systems, structured according to ideal legal rules'.<sup>61</sup> In Leach's mind, and in terms of what would be a central concern and demonstration in Pul Eliya, the intrinsic equilibrium kinship model is particularly guilty of considering economic factors and activities to be of 'minor significance', and thus the study of social adaptation to changing circumstances is made impossible.

The insensitivity to economic activities and relations of production in general stemming from the emphasis on the lineage principle was also reflected by Radcliffe-Brown who constantly stressed the jural and 'legal aspects of kinship relations as manifested in *the rights of inheritance in contrast to the economic aspects manifested in work cooperation*' [emphasis added].<sup>62</sup> This last criticism, simply mentioned in one line in the introduction, would in fact become a central issue of exposition in the text: that while inheritance and transmission and possession of property over time is of vital concern to the Sinhalese peasantry, so is the organisation and cooperative relations of labour in the operations of cultivation and harvesting of rice, of tank fishing, and shifting agriculture (*chena*), and the rewarding of them through distribution of the product. The jural ties of kinship and inheritance stemming from 'descent' are quite different from labour cooperation directed by ties of affinity. Furthermore, the stress on patrilineal descent and organisation leads to 'explaining away' the importance attached to *matrilateral and affinal kinship connections*.<sup>63</sup> Leach's thesis seems to be that if economic activities are a primary concern and basic to social life, and if changes in economic circumstances do engender changes in the kinship system, the latter cannot be regarded as 'intrinsic and autonomous', and the possibility is raised that economic relations might in this sense be 'prior' to kinship relations.

Leach is not bent on simply offering, in contrast to 'unilineal systems', the

<sup>60</sup> Leach, *Pul Eliya*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7–8.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Fortes is famous for his thesis of 'complementary filiation': in patrilineal systems with polygynous marriages each mother serves to internally distinguish the male siblings born of the same father; also marriage is an individual matter, and siblings will have different networks of affines through marriage.

Pul Eliya case as a 'bilateral system'. The distinction between non-unilineal and unilineal systems is not useful either: Pul Eliya does not belong to either type, and moreover, for some aspects of life in that village there is at work a notion of 'descent', and in others a contrasting notion of affinity. Similarly, Leach is not keen on distinguishing between 'jural' and 'economic' relationships where they are interactive and copresent. He would much rather be seen as offering the subversive agenda of persuading the unilineal descent group theorists to see in the Pul Eliya exposition reasons for loosening the primacy they accord in their accounts of unilineal societies to the structuring role of kinship per se, and permit other existential activities and contextual circumstances a creative and structuring role. 'Kinship as we meet in this book [*Pul Eliya*] is not "a thing in itself". The concepts of descent and affinity are expressions of property relations which endure through time. Marriage unifies; inheritance separates; property endures. A particular descent system simply reflects the total process of property succession as affected by the total pattern of inheritance and marriage. The classification of whole societies in terms of such a parameter can only be meaningful in an extremely crude sense.'<sup>64</sup> This is the polemical challenge posed in trenchant terms, and aimed directly at the kinship theory of Radcliffe-Brown and his followers.

What is the relation between 'custom' and the 'behaviour of individuals'? Repudiating 'the currently fashionable structuralist concept of social solidarity', which he dubs as a 'mysticism' invoked as an ultimate explanatory device and absolute virtue towards which all social activity is of necessity directed, Leach proposes a different way of thinking about the distinction between and relation between custom and individual behaviour, ideal model and statistical order, normative and normal. In a way the answer he searches for is an extension and elaboration of a perspective first broached in *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, in which he tried to probe the correspondence between 'ideal type thought categories' (such as gumsa and gumlao) and the 'empirical facts on the ground'. The thought categories he warned should not be equated with actual behavioural relations. But *Political Systems in Highland Burma*, though an advance, had, as Leach recognised, 'idealist' connotations, even 'idealist pitfalls'. *Pul Eliya* seeks to go further by incorporating a 'materialist' dimension, so to say, and the answers Leach proposes to the grand question can only be sensibly reviewed and judged after doing our homework of closely attending to the ethnography he presents.

That the people of Pul Eliya had 'ideal concepts' and normative formulations, which anthropologists have labelled as belonging to the domain of 'kinship' is readily admitted and documented by Leach. He agrees that kinship terminology classifies kin; that certain kinds of kin terms, specifying parent

<sup>64</sup> Leach, *Pul Eliya*, p. 11.

and child, siblings—especially older and younger brother—and cross-cousin and brother-in-law, may also be accompanied by formulaic norms of ‘ideal’ conduct, such as the famous ‘right’ of a man to claim a mother’s brother’s daughter; and that incest taboos may serve as constraints on most actors. All these and other kinship particulars, however, do not determine or predict actual conduct, because there is much cultural and social space ‘outside their scope’ which provides the context, circumstances, and interests which actors pursue to reach their goals.

It would be absurd to think that the perspective of individual actors making strategic choices to maximise their interests and goals makes these motivated acts somehow amoral or non-social because they have ‘personal’ or ‘private’ relevance. The rules that define a game are different from the strategies and moves the players can adopt in playing the game, and that again is different from the actual performance of the players, for players manipulate and play with different skills, and opportunities, and cope with unexpected contingencies and accidents. An entailment of the individual strategising perspective is that while actors may know what they individually are trying to attain, and may know what the results are for them, all the actors in a situation are not for the most part aware of the aggregate distributional patterns and outcomes of all their acts. This pattern of outcomes is what Leach called the ‘statistical order’ (and the ‘curves’, ‘averages’ and other measures that are used to calculate the ‘normal’).<sup>65</sup>

Leach’s discussion of ideal models and actual behaviour, as especially displayed in his treatment of marriage patterns and their situational logic, anticipates and reminds one of Bourdieu’s schema in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*<sup>66</sup> for linking ‘objective structure’ and ‘subjective action’. Leach’s grappling with the issue of the relation between ‘ideal’ *pavula* (kindred) and ‘effective’ *pavula*, of how both these structures interrelate, but in which it is the axis of affinity and *massina* (cross-cousin) alliance that supersedes in social life the role of formal male sibling ties, is another variant example of the same general issue. Moreover, the unpacking of the alleged solidarity of male siblings by filiation and as primary heirs to parental property, by revealing how their being competitors to that patrimony creates a social distance among them, further accentuated by distinctions of age, is an acute diagnosis of contradictory trends built into that building block of ‘kinship principles’ central to Africanist descent group theory, namely ‘solidarity of the sibling group’.

But there are other revelations which surprise us in another way. The ideal formulation held that inherited *paraveni* field plots in the Old Field are so

<sup>65</sup> The neoclassical model of market under conditions of perfect competition is an extreme ideal formulation of this logic.

<sup>66</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

precious for validating status that they ought not to be sold, especially to 'outsider' traders of the wrong *variga*, and even worse of alien 'race' (Muslims and Tamils). This formulation was utterly contravened by many of the titled and wealthiest farmers of the village. But there were circumstances and manipulations and strategies (including the unwillingness of locals to cultivate the plots as tenants or labourers to these 'outsiders') by which the plots returned to the ownership of the Pul Eliya *minissu*; and there were similar processes of conversion into citizenship of new owners or their children by means of marriage with Pul Eliya women, and transforming that property into 'heirlooms'. These processes demonstrate the routes by which actual gaps between ideal model and actual events are over time closed and retrospectively made to look as if the ideal norms have not been violated and have always been observed. In the case of the cooperating labour teams (*kayiya*) involved in the tasks of harvesting and threshing, whose membership is not obligatory on the basis of kinship, but open to choice, Leach finds that the total pattern of the teams (the statistical order) shows that the teams were bodies of kinsmen linked by affinal ties and *pavula* links. The outcomes thus affirm the Pul Eliya social structure as revealed by other outcomes in other formal situations.

There are other examples of how a master ethnographer meticulously engaged with micro-details, assembles his data according to a combined 'idealist cum empiricist' perspective (a self-ascription). But the most important documentation concerns the dialectical relation between ideal formulations and actual behaviour. Leach laboured to convince his readers that despite various events over time (especially from 1890–1954) among the people of Pul Eliya and their closest neighbours who consider themselves of the same *variga* (sub-caste/territorial corporation), events that had to do with changes in the ownership over plots and associated water rights (especially in the Old Field and old residential area), despite drastic changes in the economic status of individual families and their heirs (changes in regard to economic differentiation), and despite changes that made available new categories of land by virtue of governmental policy and legislation, etc., the people of Pul Eliya managed to maintain virtually unchanged the topographical layout of the 'tank-village' in terms of two fields and three *baga*, and of the notion of 'shares' subdivided into strips and their associated agrarian duties of tank and irrigation maintenance. This topographical system (a cultural agrarian model that was influenced by certain given 'natural' economic ecological factors) was existentially more salient and relatively rigid and frozen. But the social system of the locals, exemplified by their 'kinship system', though framed in terms of cultural ideal principles, was in fact much more flexible in its workings, and this 'adaptability' was primarily a response to changes in the ownership of prime land and water rights produced by inheritance, marriage, sales, and gifts.

But when the anthropologist tracks these flexible dynamic social relations (large areas of which are given shape as a dialectic between ideal kin and subcaste rules and actual behaviour), Leach discovers that these actual relations (aggregated as ‘statistical orders’) are themselves significantly related to the manner in which the actors are spatially situated as contemporaneous contiguous owners and neighbours, or as potential neighbours or combiners of plots through marriage. The agrarian system as such that requires that owners of neighbouring strips must cooperate to maintain irrigation, must get along to work the system of water sharing, and also the system of strip location and that tells people which physical combination of contiguous plots are worth possessing or acquiring—ultimately has a steering role to play in the social relations of people, and the actual patterns that ‘debts of social obligation’ and ties of amity assume on the ground. It is in this sense that ‘locality rather than descent forms the basis of corporate grouping’ in Pul Eliya.<sup>67</sup>

## 7. The Engagement with Structuralism

The year 1961 also saw the first attempts by Leach at structuralist analysis of myths influenced by certain Lévi-Straussian precedents. In 1955 Lévi-Strauss had published the essay ‘The Structural Study of Myth’<sup>68</sup> containing his famous decoding of the Oedipus myth, and in 1958 he had published the even more important tour de force ‘La Geste d’Asdiwal’,<sup>69</sup> that—in due time, but not immediately—came to have a special recognition as an exemplar in British academic circles.

Leach responded to the stimulus of Lévi-Straussian structuralist myth analysis with two 1961 essays: ‘Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?’,<sup>70</sup> and ‘Lévi-Strauss in the Garden of Eden: An Examination of some recent Developments in the Analysis of Myth’.<sup>71</sup> And in the following year, he published the remarkable essay, ‘Genesis as Myth’.<sup>72</sup>

‘Genesis as Myth’, brief though it is, dealt with three stories from the first four chapters of Genesis—the story of the seven-day creation, the story of the

<sup>67</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 68 (270) (1955). A modified version was printed in his *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris, 1958), the English version of which is *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963).

<sup>69</sup> Lévi-Strauss, ‘La Geste d’Asdiwal’, *Annuaire de l’E.P.H.E.* (Sciences Religieuses) (1958–59, Paris).

<sup>70</sup> *Daedalus*, 90 (2) (Spring 1961), 371–87.

<sup>71</sup> *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, (series 2) 23 (4) (1961), 386–96.

<sup>72</sup> *Discovery*, 23 (5) (May 1962), 30–5. Reprinted in Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969).

Garden of Eden, and the story of Cain and Abel. Leach generously states that 'this approach to myth analysis derives originally from the techniques of structural linguistics associated with the name of Roman Jakobson, but is more immediately due to Claude Lévi-Strauss . . .'.<sup>73</sup>

Although some of his writings were known to individual anthropologists, it might be said that Lévi-Strauss made his official entry into British anthropological circles when the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) held a seminar in June 1964 in Cambridge to examine his writings on myth analysis and totemism. This seminar actually originated in the Spring of 1963 when members of ASA meeting in Oxford decided to devote a future session to this genre of his writings, and consequently invited certain persons, notably Mary Douglas, K. O. L. Burrell, Michael Mendelson, Peter Worsley, and Robin Fox, to prepare papers. Subsequently, Edmund Leach was invited to serve as the seminar convener in Cambridge, and, seeing his role as 'strictly catalytic', he circulated to participants copies of an English translation of 'La Geste d'Asdiwal' produced by Nicholas Mann. In *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism* edited by Leach,<sup>74</sup> this translation of the Asdiwal essay appeared as the head piece followed by the contributions of the above mentioned invited authors, plus a new piece containing Nur Yalman's observations on Lévi-Strauss's first major volume on Amerindian myths, *Le Cru et le Cuit*, which was published in Paris in the autumn of 1964, and had therefore not been available at the time of the Cambridge discussions.<sup>75</sup>

Leach himself recognised retrospectively in print in 1982 that there had been some kind of watershed and change of direction in his subject matter and theoretical concerns. This second phase of his writings roughly stretched from the early sixties to the eighties.

Although Leach expressed critical attitudes towards Lévi-Strauss's writings on kinship, there are many Lévi-Straussian contributions by which he was fascinated, and which he deeply admired, such as Lévi-Strauss's formulations about 'savage' thought,<sup>76</sup> his techniques of decoding myth, and his demonstration of 'transformational' analysis.

In fact, Leach's little Fontana volume entitled *Lévi-Strauss* in 1970, written at a time when some differences had already crystallised between them, is a challenging and fascinating piece of writing to deconstruct. It was translated

<sup>73</sup> Leach, *Genesis as Myth*, p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> *The Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, ed. Edmund Leach, (London: Tavistock Publications, 1967).

<sup>75</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques I: Le Cru et le Cuit* (Paris, 1964).

<sup>76</sup> 'The *Savage Mind* taken as a whole is an entrancing book. The exploration of the way we (the Primitives and the Civilized alike) use different kinds of languages for purposes of classification, and of the way that the categories which relate to social (cultural) space are interwoven with the categories which relate to natural space is packed with immensely stimulating ideas.' Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 9.

into six languages and ran to three editions. Although critical of Lévi-Strauss's shallow fieldwork, and his reliance on dubious documents, it would seem that Leach on the whole did appreciate Lévi-Strauss's complicated explorations of the thought logic of South American mythology, and was much impressed with his demonstration of homologous and transformational relations on many registers and dimensions. Lévi-Strauss's ingenious decoding attempts stimulated Leach, who already had semiotic leanings, to experiment with similar analyses. Thus it is transparent in chapter 4 ('the Structure of Myth') of *Lévi-Strauss*, where Leach sets out to instruct the reader about Lévi-Strauss's approach to myth, that he cannot resist the temptation to make an authorial substitution and to play at 'Leach imitating Lévi-Strauss'.<sup>77</sup> He gives his own analysis in the Lévi-Straussian mode of interconnected Greek myths (e.g. 'Kadmos, Europe, and the Dragon', 'Minos and the Minotaur', 'Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur', and others such as the Oedipus cycle), and suggests the plausibility of Lévi-Strauss's central thesis that the function of mythology is to exhibit publicly, though in disguise, unconscious, existential paradoxes; and that myths deal with irresolvable contradictions that we hide from consciousness because their implications run directly counter to the fundamentals of human morality. Leach's own illustrations reveal that a matrix is formed by the oppositions between the relative positions of human beings and deities and animals, that 'the polarity Nature: Culture, Gods: Men . . . affirms that the relationship between gods and men is one of ambiguous and unstable alliance—exemplified by marriage, followed by feud, followed by marriage accompanied by poisoned marriage gifts'.<sup>78</sup> Such myth messages were congenial to Leach's own independently generated ideas on ambiguous and ambivalent liminal entities and on the nearness of sinning and creativeness. Leach draws a major message from the whole set of Greek stories he analyses: 'If society is to go on, daughters must be disloyal to their parents and sons must destroy (replace) their fathers.'<sup>79</sup> No doubt this message was in accord with his own personal declaration that at some stage a pupil will have to repudiate his own teacher if he is to be creative himself.

One can point to many other affinities between Leach's sense of metaphorical and metonymical logic and many Lévi-Straussian analogies, but Leach was much more cautious than Lévi-Strauss, and modestly agnostic, when it came to the issue of universal trends in the structural patterning of thought categories and other cultural phenomena. He certainly avoided grand pronouncements about the fundamental properties of the human mind, the collective unconscious of the human mind, and underlying relations of an algebraic kind objectively embedded in human thought.

<sup>77</sup> Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, p. 80.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Nevertheless, a great deal of his own actual analysis of verbal categories, of myths, of representations in art form and so on did depend on his reliance on binary categories, their contrasts and intersections, and the affective load carried by the overlaps as well as interstices between them. He made liberal use of the Euler diagram to discuss taboo. In certain of his essays he also relied on the tripartite schema of Van Gennep (separation, liminal phase, aggregation) as a general structural pattern applicable to the phenomena at hand (although he would simultaneously insist on understanding the context in which the schema was employed).

It is in certain elaborations and applications of this theoretical bent that we witness the distinctive ways in which Leach's perspective on the work of social anthropology differed from that of Lévi-Strauss. It was in his notable and remarkable essays focused on Biblical materials, early Christian doctrines, and art that Leach demonstrates his own brand of virtuosity. These essays contain transformational analyses of thought structures and symbolic complexes together with their dialectical linkage within the larger social contexts and existential concerns of the people who generated and deployed them.

## 8. The Comparativist Stance: Us and Them

Leach was trenchantly committed to the view that modern anthropology is as much about 'us' as it is about 'them'. He was also vociferous that 'there is no class of "primitive societies" which can be contrasted with "modern societies" as "static" is to "dynamic"'.<sup>80</sup> This is one of the issues on which he registered his dissent from Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the premodern 'cold societies', resistant to change, and the modern 'hot societies', continuously volatile and changing.

Human beings are generative beings and they have always been in tension with their environment. Other peoples, whether of the past or in the present, are like us in certain features, a principle common feature being similarities in linguistic structure. 'Neanderthal man, despite his strange appearance, was a human being like ourselves, a rational creature operating with language in the two crucial domains of metonymy and metaphor.' To an audience of archaeologists, Leach enunciated his 'universalist' position thus: 'Human beings on the Australian continent some 40,000 years ago were rational men like ourselves, for their ancestors had needed to design sea-borne rafts and to exercise forethought.'<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Leach, 'Masquerade . . . '.

<sup>81</sup> Leach, 'View from the Bridge', p. 167.

If the people an anthropologist studies in the field are people like us in the senses mentioned above, then their culture can be viewed as a transformation of ours and ours of theirs. We thus arrive at a point where we have to introduce a conception favoured by Leach in the second phase of his theorising, namely 'transformational transcription'. In the context of viewing culture as a 'text', he associates transformational relations in the ways linguists like Jakobson and Chomsky used the term. (Leach ultimately associated transformation with 'mathematical' manipulations, and in his later writings resorted to that label to encompass quite a number of his structuralist demonstrations.)

Thus Leach's firm repudiation of evolutionism in its crude nineteenth-century form, and of the quest for 'the ultimate primitive who is "quite different" from civilized man', was linked to his commitment to a comparative method which looked for 'cross-cultural schema' and transcriptions that spanned both the alleged 'primitive societies' and the modern 'civilized societies.' 'My own prejudices go all the other way. The data of ethnography are interesting to me because they so often seem directly relevant to my own allegedly civilized experiences. It is not only the differences between Europeans and Trobrianders which interests me, it is their similarities.'<sup>82</sup> He demonstrated the fruit of this comparativist view when he juxtaposed high Christian theology with 'primitive' materials allegedly documenting ignorance of the facts of physiological paternity in his famous essay on 'Virgin Birth', which he delivered as the Henry Myers Lecture in 1966.<sup>83</sup> Each schema compared entailed fitting pieces of ethnographic evidence that came from a single context to form a pattern; this contextual stipulation separates the structuralist comparative method from the snippets-of-evidence prodigality of Frazer.

Leach's essay was in large part directed at Melford Spiro who had in a 1966 essay criticised an interpretation Leach had made in 1961,<sup>84</sup> in discussing the beliefs and attitudes of the Tully River Blacks concerning sex as reported by Roth in 1903.<sup>85</sup> Roth had concluded that his informants were ignorant of any causal connection between copulation and pregnancy.<sup>86</sup> Spiro had declared himself to be personally persuaded that Roth's statements must mean that the aborigines in question were ignorant of physiological paternity, and had asked 'by what evidence or from what inference can it be concluded that . . . the statements mean what Leach claims they mean?'<sup>87</sup> And Leach

<sup>82</sup> Edmund Leach, 'Virgin Birth'. The Henry Myers Lecture 1966. Reprinted in Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 97.

<sup>83</sup> *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*, pp. 85–112.

<sup>84</sup> E. R. Leach, 'Golden Bough or Golden Twig?' *Daedalus*, 90, no. 2 (Spring 1961), 371–87.

<sup>85</sup> W. E. Roth, *Superstition, Magic and Medicine*, N. Queensland Ethnographic Bulletin. 5 (Brisbane: Vaughan, 1903).

<sup>86</sup> Leach quotes from his 1961 essay, see 'Virgin Birth', p. 87.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

accordingly replies, 'What is really at issue is the technique of anthropological comparison which depends in turn upon the kind of "meaning" which we are prepared to attribute to ethnographical evidence.'<sup>88</sup> The merit of his essay, he declares, 'lies in its method'.<sup>89</sup> Leach sets out his method of inference and comparison which he later in the essay identified as 'structuralist' à la Lévi-Strauss, and contrasts it with the neo-Tylolean perspective, which Frazer further distorted and which Spiro himself now espouses.

Of Spiro's method Leach said: 'He believes that explanation consists of postulating causes and ultimate origins for the facts under observation.'<sup>90</sup> And his neo-Tylolean naivete consists in not simply taking an ethnographer's report that 'members of X tribe believe that . . .' as an orthodoxy, a dogma; Spiro and all neo-Tyloleans 'desperately want to believe that dogma and ritual must correspond to the inner psychological attitudes of the actors concerned'.<sup>91</sup> By way of illustration he gave a witty account of a Church of England marriage service.

Leach charged that a long line of distinguished anthropologists, which includes Frazer and Malinowski as well as Professor Spiro, were 'positively eager to believe that the aborigines were ignorant' while at the same time displaying 'an extreme reluctance to believe that the products of aboriginal thought can be structured in a logical way'.<sup>92</sup> Leach's explanation either anticipates or aligns itself with the early formulations of the critiques of colonialism,<sup>93</sup> and is in advance of some of the later neo-Marxist and 'post-modern' commentary.

The Frazer–Hartland generation of anthropologists were guilty of adopting two mutually inconsistent attitudes to these stories. Where they come from present-day 'primitive' people they are obviously survivals from their earlier primitive stage of ignorance. But the theology of the 'higher religions' manifesting similar patterns was not amenable to anthropological investigation at all: the five volumes of Hartland devoted to the discussions of Virgin birth contain scarcely a single reference to Christianity, and the corresponding volumes of *The Golden Bough* by Frazer 'make no attempt to fit the details of Christian theology into a cross-cultural schema which includes "primitive" materials'.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., pp. 91–2.

<sup>93</sup> I have in mind here such texts as those written by Hymes, and Talal Assad.

<sup>94</sup> 'Virgin Birth', p. 95.

## 9. The Structural Analysis of Biblical Narratives

Leach found in the Bible a treasure house of narratives, which he construed to be of a mythical nature, and which he found eminently suitable for his kind of structuralist analysis. Fully realising that he was taking a risk in dealing with Old Testament and New Testament texts which had been subject to a long tradition of commentary by Jewish and Christian scholars, he made a serious effort not only to familiarise himself in detail with the Bible translated into English, but also to study commentarial works of scholars dealing with issues pertinent to his own analysis and interpretation. He was also sensibly aware that his approach to the Bible as a unitary mythological text amenable to his kind of structuralist analysis was at variance with that of the Biblical scholars who sought to distinguish different textual genres and to identify in the texts what portions were 'historical' and what portions were not. He took care to say that he was by no means rejecting these scholarly pursuits or trying to prove them right or wrong. He was doing his own thing, and consequently set out his method of procedure and making inferences and establishing patterns. He was offering a new way of reading the Bible.<sup>95</sup>

Leach recognises that historians of the Bible and theologians of Christianity and Judaism may present a formidable obstacle on the basis of their specialist knowledge of interpolations and the 'historical' intentionalities of those whose compositions constituted the Bible. He makes a spirited defence of his approach: 'I take it for granted that none of the stories recorded in the Bible, either in the Old Testament or in the New, are all [*sic*] likely to be true as history. In its present form the Bible is a much edited compendium of a great variety of ancient documents derived from many sources, but the end product is a body of mythology, a sacred tale, not a history book.'<sup>96</sup> Leach is aware that 'all scholarly opinion recognizes that the present recension of the books of the Old Testament is an assemblage of very varied writings which was finally edited and made fully canonical only around 100 BC. Likewise all agree that the purportedly "early" works in the collection contain numerous interpolations which have been inserted from time to time by later editors in the interests of consistency or with a view to providing traditional support for a disputed point of political or religious doctrine.'<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Leach himself has mentioned that the distinguished Judaic scholar J. Neusner had commented favourably on his writings in *The Talmud as Anthropology*, Annual Samuel Friedland Lecture (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979).

<sup>96</sup> Leach, 'Why did Moses have a Sister?' in Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, eds. *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 35. This piece was first delivered as The Royal Anthropological Institute Huxley Lecture for 1980.

<sup>97</sup> Edmund Leach, 'The Legitimacy of Solomon: Some Structural Aspects of Old Testament History', *European Journal of Sociology*, VII (1966), 58–101. It was reprinted in Edmund Leach, *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 25–83. All references here are to this second publication, p. 34.

Since the time of the assemblage, however, the stories of the Old Testament have retained the same structures despite the changing fashions of theology, and Leach argues that he is not concerned with questions of truth in historiographical terms or of Jewish or Christian theology, but with ‘patterns or structures in the record as we now have it, and this record has been substantially unchanged over a very long period. To assess these structures we do not need to know how particular stories came to assume their present form nor the dates at which they were written.’<sup>98</sup> Thus he takes the structuralist stand that he is doing comparison not in terms of content but in terms of structures, and that materials and stories that may share little content may well share ‘similarities’ and ‘differences’ of structure of a more abstract kind. These structural identities and differences include inversions, transformations, and contradictions. So, in sum, Leach bases his analysis ‘on a presumption that the whole of the text as we now have it *regardless of the varying historical origins of its component parts* may properly be treated as a unity’.<sup>99</sup>

‘The Legitimacy of Solomon’ was first published in 1966 and is, in my view, the best essay on Biblical narratives in the structuralist mode composed by Leach. It illustrates well the way in which Leach extracted structural patterns and existential dilemmas from Old Testament materials.

Leach makes a fundamental point of method and interpretation in this essay, which he would try to implement and demonstrate in this as well as subsequent treatments of the Bible and early Christianity: ‘we may compare one myth with another and note the varying positions and mutual relations of the various elements concerned *but we cannot go further without referring back to the total ethnographic context to which the myth refers*’ (emphasis added).<sup>100</sup> Leach expounds the ‘total ethnographic context’ in certain Biblical materials in terms of postulating the normative categories relating to tribal segmentation, then mapping these segments onto territory as spatial allocations, and then playing these against the references to alleged actual marriages and sex relations and to political manoeuvres, and other practical realities on the ground. The myths reflect in their own terms the tensions, contradictions, manipulations and fudging that this complex dynamic generates. The relations between these levels are not direct and one to one, but are dialectical interplays that are context-sensitive and open-ended, and exhibit themes and issues deeply embedded in Jewish culture.

Leach states that his ‘purpose is to demonstrate that the Biblical story of the succession of Solomon to the throne of Israel is a myth which “mediates” a

<sup>98</sup> ‘The Legitimacy of Solomon’, p. 33.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

major contradiction. The Old Testament as a whole asserts that the Jewish political title to the land of Palestine is a direct gift from God to the descendants of Israel (Jacob). This provides the fundamental basis for Jewish endogamy—the Jews should be a people of pure blood and pure religion, living in isolation in their Promised Land. But interwoven with this theological dogma there is a less idealized form of tradition which represents the population of ancient Palestine as a mixture of many peoples over whom the Jews have asserted political dominance by right of conquest. The Jews and their “foreign” neighbours intermarry freely. The synthesis achieved by the story of Solomon is such that by a kind of dramatic trick the reader is persuaded that the second of these descriptions, which is morally bad, exemplifies the first description, which is morally good.<sup>101</sup>

In a nutshell, the irresolvable problems engendered in Jewish Biblical history can also be seen as an agreement with the following elementary formulas of general significance. A taboo against incest coupled with a rule of exogamy provides a basis for forming marriage alliances between antagonistic groups within a single political community. Furthermore, it is the nature of real political communities that they consist of self-discriminated groups which are at any point in time either mutually antagonistic or in alliance. A rule of endogamy provides a basis for expressing the unitary solidarity of a religious community, the chosen people of God. In real life the religious communities and the political communities seldom coincide. There is a total incompatibility between a rule of endogamy and the recognition that society consists of politically antagonistic groups allied by marriage.

When one reflects upon all Leach’s essays on Biblical narratives one notes with interest his assertions that they embody and convey religious truths or ‘metaphysical truths’ and not other kinds of truth, ‘historical’ or ‘scientific’. Religious truths are presented in terms of a ‘mytho-logic’. Leach seems to have concluded in the latter part of his career that if most religions are concerned with the mediation between omnipotent deity in heaven and human beings on earth, or between the supernatural realm and this world, then all the interesting actions—the puzzles, the paradoxes and their attempted solutions, the transformational operations that result in a change of state—lie primarily at the level of this mediation. A virtually omnipresent human preoccupation is the transformational nexus between life-death-rebirth or resurrection, including the passage of the dead to ancestorhood and their regeneration in successor generations. The religious truths that in fact surface in the Biblical materials revolve around liminal states and interstitial spaces, and with special beings who are simultaneously kings and prophets, saints and sinners, mediators and

<sup>101</sup> ‘The Legitimacy of Solomon’, p. 40.

tricksters. The Bible affirms the role of the wilderness and the value of the reclusive life for having special experiences and acquiring special energies. It is from that space and regime that the prophet emerges to preach the message and perform heroic acts, even miracles. The religious truths also seem to focus on the dialectics of sexuality and procreation, incest taboos and marriage rules, and their observance and transgression, and on the tensions between endogamy and exogamy—all of which have implications for the maintenance of ancestry and group boundaries and personal identity. It also seems that religious narratives suggest in the face of official rules that the creative powers of foundational patriarchal leaders are linked to their breaking those rules (as seen from the unorthodox marriages of Moses and Joseph). Lastly, Leach's establishing the immense importance and necessity of female figures in the Biblical narratives, despite the male orientation of the edited canonical version, must be of interest and congenial to feminist writers on early and later Christianity, as well as on comparative religions.

## 10. Anthropology of Art and Architecture

Leach had always on the side been interested in the objects and artefacts of the so-called 'premodern'/'primitive' societies which had simultaneously aesthetic and religious/ritual and practical significances, and which in any case must be understood in the contexts of their use. The practice of removing objects from their contexts of production and use and placing them in museums for viewing as exhibits was an issue on which he had acerbic things to say. He was an advocate of informed ways of assembling museum objects that gave the alien viewer a sense of their multivalent attributes and the contexts in which they were originally deployed.<sup>102</sup> He was particularly interested in Melanesian objects, especially those from the Sepik River region, and from the Trobriands,<sup>103</sup> and in

<sup>102</sup> See E. R. Leach, 'Aesthetics' in *The Institutions of Primitive Society. A Series of Broadcast Talks* by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Raymond Firth, Edmund Leach, *et al.* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1954), pp. 25–38. Reprinted as 'Art in Cultural Context' in *Cultural and Social Anthropology. Selected Readings*, ed. Peter B. Hammond (New York, Macmillan, 1964), pp. 344–50.

<sup>103</sup> The fine collection of Sepik artefacts collected by Gregory Bateson was deposited in the Haddon Museum at Cambridge University, and was much appreciated. Anthony Forge, a pupil of Leach later studied Sepik artefacts and became an authority on them. Leach was very interested in the artistic, aesthetic, and textual researches of Giancarlo Scoditti, who did fieldwork in Kitava in the Trobriands. He was particularly taken with a wood carving of Monikiniki (snake figure) in Scoditti's collection. Malinowski had recognised Monikiniki as being in some sense the mythical founder of Kula, but had not recorded the relevant mythology. Leach had urged Scoditti to present the mythology he had recorded together with the iconographic decoding of the carving illustrated with photographs. I am grateful to Giancarlo for providing me with some correspondence written by Leach on this matter.

Hindu and Buddhist iconography.<sup>104</sup> He very much cherished his election as a Trustee of the British Museum.

It was, however, when he was engaged in his structuralist analysis of Biblical narratives and Christian art and movements that Leach, who had a discriminating visual faculty and had a phenomenal visual memory, began systematically to examine and reveal the relationships among doctrinal cosmologies, their institutional realisations, and their visual and tactile representations in Art and Architecture. As previously underscored, Leach was irresistibly drawn to experimenting with and testing new ideas on anthropological materials and to making interdisciplinary connections.

I recommend two essays by Leach which portray his structuralist interpretations and anthropological perspectives on art and architecture, namely 'Melchisedech and the emperor: icons of subversion and orthodoxy',<sup>105</sup> and 'Michelangelo's Genesis: A structuralist interpretation of the Sistine Chapel ceiling'.<sup>106</sup>

It is the latter essay, that I shall consider here. 'Michelangelo's Genesis' had a long run on the lecture circuit originating as an illustrated lecture given at the Slade School of Art in University College London, on 9 February 1977; a version without illustrations (a mishap due to a printers' strike) was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* on 18 March of that year. Much revised versions of the lecture were subsequently given to a variety of anthropological/history of art audiences in widely dispersed localities including Vancouver, Cambridge, London, and Sydney. The final version printed in *Semiotica* (1985), together with eighteen plates of the panels of the Sistine Chapel, was based on a lecture given to an Indiana University audience in Bloomington in October 1984 as one of the Patten Foundation lectures.

Leach's topic is the patterning of the iconography in the principal pictures on the ceiling of the Chapel. He is humbly aware that there is a vast bibliography of writings relating to Michelangelo and many treatises by art historians devoted to describing, commenting, and interpreting the panels. But

<sup>104</sup> In a quite early essay Leach included in his exposition the significance of iconographic features in Hindu-Buddhist sculpture: see Edmund Leach, 'Pulleyar and the Lord Buddha: an aspect of religious syncretism in Ceylon', *Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalytic Review* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1962), 81-102.

<sup>105</sup> Edmund Leach, 'Melchisedech and the emperor: icons of subversion and orthodoxy' Presidential Address of the Royal Anthropological Institute 1973, and published in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, ed. Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycok, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983), ch. 4, pp. 67-88.

<sup>106</sup> Edmund Leach: 'Michelangelo's Genesis: Structural Comments on the Paintings of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 March 1978. Revised version in *Semiotica* (December 1985). Two other notable essays which cannot be treated here are: Edmund Leach, 'The Gatekeepers of Heaven: Anthropological Aspects of Grandiose Architecture', *Albuquerque Journal of Anthropological Research*, 39, no. 3 (1983), 243-64; Edmund Leach and Revd John Drury, *The Great Windows of King's College Chapel*. (Published by King's College Chapel, 1988).

he is proposing that his structuralist mode of analysis has something to offer that has been missed out by most of the art historians.<sup>107</sup>

Obviously Michelangelo had to some extent intentionally evolved a design of the artistic project he was about to execute; and he was to some extent constrained by the materials he had to work with, by the existing structure of the Chapel, by the wishes and requirements of his patrons, the principal one being the Pope, by the Biblical Treatment of his artistic theme, by prior and current art styles, and so on. So what is it that Leach thinks his theory and method of structuralism can reveal that is special to it?

Michelangelo was working within a long established artistic convention which is manifested in a whole series of quite explicit cross-references from the Old Testament to the New through the ordering of the designs. However, when he molded that convention to fit in with the particular requirements of the total logic of his complicated overall design, it seems very likely that he did not fully understand, at a conscious level, just what he was doing. He did what he did partly because that was how the jigsaw puzzle worked out, but also because that was somehow how it had to be. My purpose is to show you, at least in part, just why it had to be like that.

It is this kind of part-conscious, part-unconscious, subliminal logic that the structuralist is looking for because *he* believes that the structure of such a logic will help us to understand something of significance about the nature of aesthetics and of the operation of human minds in general.<sup>108</sup>

Leach focuses in this essay on the nine main panels and the four corner panels of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. I can only convey briefly his interpretive method and some of the main points he makes and leave it to the interested reader to study closely the eighteen plates and one figure in the original essay.

Notice at once that the nine center panels are arranged in alternation small-large-small-large. This was dictated in part by the physical form of the roof. But, besides having to adjust his overall composition to the peculiarities of the shape of the vaulting Michelangelo also took account of the various uses of the floor space below.

As it is today the screen which separates the ante-chapel from the chapel proper comes under Panel 7 'Noah's Sacrifice' but the screen was originally closer to the altar and stood directly beneath the border between Panel 5 'The Creation of Eve' and Panel 6 'The Fall'.

This detail is important because it meant that the distinction between the Chapel proper (at the Altar end), which was reserved for the Pope and the

<sup>107</sup> Leach mentions that a paper by the art historian, S. Sinding-Larsen ('A Re-reading of the Sistine Ceiling' in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artum Historiam Pertinentia*, vol. iv, 143-57, Rome: Institutum romanum Novogiae, 1969) has conclusions 'that dovetail in very well with those of my own account which relies on a quite different technique of analysis'. He encountered this paper a good while after he had produced his first version, and therefore finds the coincidence of views reassuring.

<sup>108</sup> 'Michelangelo's Genesis', p. 4.

Cardinals, and the Ante-Chapel, which was sometimes open to aristocratic laity, is marked in the ceiling as the distinction between Sacred and Profane.

All the main panels to the West of the screen (as it then was) show God in his role as Creator; all the main panels to the East of the screen towards the door, show sinful man without God. Directly over and to the East of the screen is the crisis of the Fall, the boundary between this World of Suffering and the Other World of Paradise. It is relevant that in medieval churches the screen separating the nave from the choir was commonly fronted by a crucifix and known as the 'rood-screen' on that account.

The general structure of the iconography is as follows. Panels 1, 2, and 3 show God in the Cosmos without Man. Panels 4, 5, and 6 show the Garden of Eden Story in which God and Man are together in Paradise. Panels 7, 8, and 9 relate to the story of Noah where sinful Man is in this World separated from God. Thus the middle triad mediates the two extremes. This mediation pattern is repeated in various symmetries.

Throughout his explication of the panels Leach probes the logic of their arrangement as triads. Invoking his favourite Euler diagram, he focuses in particular on the intersecting boundary between two opposed categories as the mediating and creative and ambiguous betwixt and between component. Thus the middle panel in the triadic arrangement of panels, and again the middle part within a panel, are focused on as special zones of the sacred, the sites of ritual action, and the locus of intermediaries who combine opposite values, or who are generative in producing the paired polarities.

Leach identifies the manner in which different episodes and persons in the Genesis account are elided and fused in some of the panels. He next shows that the panels simultaneously cross-reference Old Testament episodes with New Testament ones, and that there is both a prefiguration of events to come from the Old to the New as well as an inversion in the meaning from negative fall of man to positive redemption of man through Christ.

It is only quite recently that the critics have noticed that for an ordinary lay observer the sequence is back to front, Creation in reverse. Entering by the door at the East end we start with Man alone in his corruption and are led back step by step to assimilation with God. The unstated text for the whole composition is the passage from St. Paul: 'As in Adam all die; so also in Christ shall all men be made alive'.

This Old Testament/New Testament inversion is reiterated all the way through. The key points for our understanding of this fact have already been mentioned. First, Eve, whose creation has pride of place at the Center, is also the Virgin Mary, the second Eve, the 'Church of my Salvation', just as Adam is also the second Adam, Christ the Redeemer. But furthermore, where one might expect a Crucifix above and in front of the rood screen, we in fact encounter a cruciform Tree of Life around which is coiled the Serpent of the Garden of Eden. Of that more in a moment.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> 'Michelangelo's Genesis', pp. 20–1.

It is in Panel 6 that

the key ambiguity comes, as it should, at the center in the form of the Serpent/Tempter coiled around the Tree of Life and in that of the Tree itself. There are really two serpents; one faces the still innocent Eve and *grasps* her by the hand; the other is the arm of God, the Biblical Cherubim who drives out the sinners from the Paradise Garden armed with a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of 'life'.

But the two serpents combined to provide yet another key symbol. There was a medieval tradition that the crucifix on which Christ died to redeem our sins was cut from the Tree of Life that grew in the Garden of Eden. Here, in the picture, the Serpent, the Cherubim and the Tree are combined in a cruciform image which stands, let us remember, above and just in front of the rood screen. This device of the double headed serpent forming a cross is repeated in the corner panel to the right of the altar.<sup>110</sup>

The text for this [latter] picture [of the double-headed serpent forming a cross] comes from Exodus. The Israelites wandering in the Wilderness complain to God who punishes them for their lack of faith by sending a plague of serpents. Moses appeals to God. God instructs Moses to set up a brazen serpent with the promise that those who gaze upon this seemingly idolatrous figure will be cured. Michelangelo depicts this scene using a long established convention. Moses does not appear. The saved and damned are separated, the saved being on the altar side, to the left of the picture. As before, the serpent is two headed though here it is an explicit symbol of salvation instead of an explicit symbol of damnation. In this case the crucifix-serpent is lit by the glory of God shining from the divine light of Panel 1 immediately above.

The association between the story of *The Brazen Serpent* and the Crucifixion has direct biblical sanction. It comes in St. John's Gospel: 'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life'. That much the orthodox critics have noticed, but they have not paid any attention to the consequential feedback for our understanding of the corresponding imagery in Panel 6 which, as we have seen, puts the Crucifix in the Garden of Eden. The implication is surely plain. As we proceed from the altar towards the door the Serpent in the Tree of Life stands for damnation through Adam; as we reverse our steps and move from the door to the altar the same image is symbolic of Christ on the Cross of Death and stands for salvation through Christ.<sup>111</sup>

Leach deals with a number of other inversions, but the summary implication of all of them is that 'at a grand scale level, the Old Testament message concerning the Creation and the Fall, that appears in the panels when read in sequence from altar to door, should be inverted and read as a New Testament

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., pp. 21–2.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

message of Redemption through the Crucifixion and the Eucharist when the same panels are read from door to altar'.<sup>112</sup>

The New Testament meaning, he claims, is ordinarily the direct converse of the manifest Old Testament meaning, and this argument rests on the 'mytho-logic' uncovered by his structuralist reading. Modern orthodox scholarship tends to be scornful of ambiguity, 'yet many practicing artists would themselves maintain that all artistic statement is ambiguous'.<sup>113</sup>

'Michelangelo's Genesis' is perhaps Leach's most ambitious attempt on the anthropology of art. He boldly ventures into a field that is considered the province of art historians, and while acknowledging their scholarship and contributions, he proffers his own 'structuralist' analysis of an artistic production as capable of bringing to light certain features unconsidered or unseen by most of them. The essay attempts to demonstrate the systematic nature of the structuralist method he espoused and developed, and the imaginative revelation of the powerful, creative, and transformative role of ambiguous in-between middle terms in triadic arrangements. It has to be admitted that some art historians have been critical of his venturing into their domain, and that by and large most of them, as well as most anthropologists, have not engaged with his efforts in this direction. I personally think that this is to be deplored.

## 11. The Work of Sustaining Institutions

### Provost of King's College

Edmund Leach was elected a Fellow of King's College in 1960; he was elected Provost of King's in 1966. 'Though still relatively new to the College, his election as Provost in 1966 came as no surprise. It fitted the mood of the times, a mood for change.'<sup>114</sup>

We may recall that Mao's Cultural Revolution had begun in 1966 (and raged for a decade) in China. By the late sixties student activism and radical politics including demonstrations against nuclear weapons were in ferment both in Europe and in the United States. May 1968 saw the militant student uprising in Paris; soon afterwards in the United States the repudiation of the Vietnam War and opposition to conscription came to a boil. It is possible that taking cognisance of the Cultural Revolution in China, and seeing signs of impending student militant politics, Leach may have used the Reith Lectures delivered in 1967 as a platform to talk of necessary change in Britain and the need for scientists and policy makers to act creatively and responsibly. In A

<sup>112</sup> 'Michelangelo's Genesis', p. 27.

<sup>113</sup> 'Michelangelo's Genesis', p. 28.

<sup>114</sup> Hugh-Jones, *Edmund Leach*, p. 31.

*Runaway World?*<sup>115</sup> Leach upbraided the older generation for having failed to create a viable world for young people to live in; he linked youthful disorder to a breakdown of family life, and urged a reform in the current educational system, the proper task of which is to impart genuinely creative and relevant knowledge to face the challenges of a world propelled by technological revolution. By the late sixties, many students in Cambridge wanted representation in college councils and were advocating withdrawal from financial involvements in South Africa.

How did Leach as head of a famous House deal with its affairs during the twelve years of his tenure? Let me quote parts of an account of Leach's performance by Stephen Hugh-Jones, who having been an undergraduate at King's, was thereafter a doctoral student under Leach's direction, and later a Fellow of King's, throughout Leach's years as Provost (1966–79):

The stage was set for a rethinking of the College and changes there were—the Hall was turned back to front, the servery became a self-servery, the high table was made low, and English not Latin became the Provost's language in Chapel. More significantly it was under his Provostship that King's, after years of discussion and contention, finally decided to admit women as undergraduates and Fellows. Edmund took personal pleasure in the fact that, despite the wrangles, the final vote was approved *nem con* at the congregation on 21 February 1970.<sup>116</sup>

The admission of women went hand in hand with another change in the social make up of the College, an increasing number of students from state schools, the result of an admissions policy inaugurated by Provost Annan and championed by Edmund and his ex-student and colleague [physical anthropologist] Alan Bilsborough. The students' relations with this Provost were respectful rather than close; they admired him but did not know him well. These were also years of student militancy and here, rather to the surprise of many, especially the students themselves, the same man who, in his Reith Lectures, had seemed to advocate greater permissiveness and the ceding of power from the old to the young, now seemed to play a cautious and often rather conservative role.

An enthusiastic supporter of another major change, student representation on the College council and other administrative bodies, he was rather less enthusiastic about the targets and manner of their other demands and protests. Though a rebel himself, when confronted by other rebels his conservatism came to the fore. For Edmund they simply did not go about it all in the right kind of way nor behave in the manner that he thought students ought. With students in mind he expressed his views as follows—'the whole system of things and people which surrounds us coerces us to be

<sup>115</sup> Leach, *A Runaway World?*

<sup>116</sup> Both Leach and Hugh-Jones are in error regarding this historic occasion. The Minutes of the King's College Council state that 'at an ordinary congregation held on 27 May 1969' the motion for the admission of women was carried with 'Ayes 48 and the Provost, Noes 5, Abstentions 6'.

conformist; even if you want to be a rebel you will still have to go about things in a conventional way if you are to gain recognition and not to be rated insane'.

An active and efficient administrator, he took pleasure in 'making things work'. He certainly liked power but it was not power over people that he wanted but the power to put his ideas and plans into effect and then watch them run. This mechanic's interest in systems fitted with his anthropologist's interest in people and their institutions. In the machinations of College affairs he was neither autocratic nor devious and he knew how to delegate.

The years of his Provostship coincided with his emergence as a man of public affairs, the holder of numerous appointments, and with a gradual transition from young Turk to an Establishment figure. As Chairman of its Needs Committee he played an important role during his period on the General Board. A tough, independent and determined administrator with a good strategic mind, he championed the need for long term planning within the University and helped to push through a number of structural reforms, most notably the grouping of the Arts faculties into Inter-faculty Committees in line with the Sciences.<sup>117</sup>

Edmund retired from the Anthropology Department in 1978 and from the Provostship the year after and became an elder statesman, full of wise council and ever ready to back and encourage new projects and initiatives. Apart from a truly splendid farewell feast in the Hall, marked by his memorable speech about himself as a 'dying god', he went out of his way to avoid all forms of memorial, festschrift and the like.<sup>118</sup>

Aside from his acts of generosity towards research students through the Esperanza Trust (of which more shortly), and from his own private funds, Leach made some gifts to King's. He transferred to the College his quite substantial house and garden at Storey's Way, and had willed half the proceeds of the sale of his valuable library for making long overdue improvements to the library of the College.

### **Fellow and president of the Royal Anthropological Institute**

#### **'The Institute is very close to my heart' (Leach)**

The following notice of Leach's passing away composed by Adrian C. Mayer appeared in *Anthropology Today*:

Professor Sir Edmund Leach, born in 1910, died in Cambridge on 6 January 1989. An Obituary will be published shortly in A.T.: but Fellows and Members of the Royal Anthropological Institute owe a special debt to Edmund which should be separately expressed.

From the time when he was first elected to the Council in 1946, Edmund

<sup>117</sup> Hugh-Jones, *Edmund Leach*, pp. 31–2.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

was one of the most active supporters of the Institute, seeing the help he gave it as being part of his more general advocacy of anthropology in the world at large. During the late 1950s and 1960s, he took a leading part in moves to enlarge the Fellowship and reorganize the Institute's publications. But his greatest challenge came in 1971, when his Presidency coincided with the Institute's loss of its premises in Bedford Square and with a low point in its finances. It was characteristic of his commitment that he agreed to serve an extended four-year term, by the end of which the Institute's affairs had started to turn, under the long-term objectives set out by the Development Committee he had formed in 1972. Thereafter, Edmund continued as an active Vice-President, attending most Council meetings—at which his contributions were, as might be expected, imaginative and controversial as well as helpful.

It will be a cause of great satisfaction to his colleagues to know that he lived to see the Institute attain most of its objectives for which he had worked, often through the generous support of the Esperanza Trust, of which he was the donor and principal trustee. Without its help, the purchase of the Institute's premises would have been jeopardized, the development of A.T. put at risk, and many of its academic initiatives weakened. That the Institute has been able to respond to a changing world has to an important degree been due to Edmund's initiative and practical support.<sup>119</sup>

The RAI published (as its *Occasional Paper* no. 42) 'a near-complete bibliography of his publications over the fifty years of his career, as a tribute to its former President and as a working tool for scholars . . . The first item in the bibliography is a letter to *The Times* published in 1935 about reforms in China; the last (apart from posthumous publications) is an anonymous leaflet on the Great Windows of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, co-authored with the Dean of King's'.<sup>120</sup> Among other things, the Preface to the Bibliography written by the then President of the RAI, Eric Sunderland, says: 'he established and generously endowed the Esperanza Trust for Anthropological Research, and he continued to be intimately involved in its affairs, which included assisting in the purchase of the Institute's current premises, its launching and sustaining of *Anthropology Today*, and myriad other matters of concern to anthropology generally, under the umbrella of the RAI'.<sup>121</sup>

The Esperanza Trust was named after the sugar factory, La Esperanza, on the estates of Hermanos Leach in the Argentinian province of Jujuy, and was funded from money Leach had inherited from its sale. A statement by the RAI says 'According to the Founder's wish, the Trust gives unobtrusive support to the Institute's work in many ways as well as funding the Leach/RAI Fellowships'.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>119</sup> *Anthropology Today*, 5, no. 1 (February 1989), 1. The obituary written by Chris Fuller and Jonathan Parry 'Petulant inconsistency? The intellectual achievement of Edmund Leach' was published in *Anthropology Today*, 5, no. 3 (June 1989), 11–14.

<sup>120</sup> Publication notice of the RAI Distribution Centre, Letchworth.

<sup>121</sup> *Edmund Leach: A Bibliography*, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Edmund Leach served as Chair of the Esperanza Fund until his death. Audrey Richards was one of the Trustees (among others), and after her retirement Jean la Fontaine replaced her, and after Leach's death, became Chair.

As Mayer and Sunderland have already intimated, Leach made other benefactions to the Institute: a small collection of antique Chinese pottery was given to it to auction; and he left half the proceeds of the sale of his valuable library to it. Leach effectively used his financial and administrative skills to help the Institute regain its vitality. He also no less importantly vigorously urged and led the launching, as a supplement to the *Journal*, of another publication, *Anthropology Today*, which would deal with contemporary issues and new intellectual and artistic pursuits that would appeal to a wider reading public than the professionals. He saw the relevance of giving more visibility to ongoing studies on race relations, refugee studies, studies of feminist issues, and ongoing efforts in visual anthropology, including the burst of ethnographic and other documentary films.

His own concern with the state of racial prejudice and race relations in Britain is reflected in 'Noah's Second Son. A Lady Day Sermon at King's College, Cambridge', published in *Anthropology Today*.<sup>123</sup> The second son is of course Ham, whose descendants were condemned to be 'servants of servants unto his brethren', also by extension 'black' skinned. Leach condemns the notion that people can be sorted into exclusive 'racial categories'. Although he does refer critically to 'apartheid' in South Africa, and other perhaps softer versions of it in India (the caste system) and in Israel where 'racist prejudice' prevails, his main message is 'let us worry about our own society' in Britain. Discussion of this issue is timely because 'If "race" is now a matter of public debate it is because things are changing rather than because they are standing still.' The important changes taking place in Britain are linked with greater opportunities in education: 'the many defects of our present system of attitudes are not immutable. If we fully understand that fact we must not be complacent but we need not despair.'<sup>124</sup>

## 12. Retirement, Retrospection, and Final Illness

After relinquishing his positions as Professor of Anthropology in 1978 and, a year later, as Provost of King's College, Leach continued to be active and productive for another eight or nine years until poor health drained away his energies and incapacitated him.

Celia and Edmund went to live outside Cambridge in the village of Barrington. 'The Birk' consisted of a simple cottage, and a functional study and compact library. Its marvellous feature was the large garden and orchard, and beyond it many acres of woods kept as a natural reserve.

In retirement, Leach remained quite busy until the end of 1988 not only attending seminars and meetings both in Cambridge and London, but also

<sup>123</sup> *Anthropology Today*, 4, no. 4 (August 1988).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

lecturing abroad especially in the United States. For example, in the Fall of 1979, accompanied by Celia, he spent a term at Cornell University as a Senior Fellow of the Andrew Dixon White Center for the Humanities, and visited some universities to give lectures (including Harvard). He contributed the position paper entitled 'Past/Present: Continuity or Discontinuity' to the Second Annual Symposium on Historical Linguistics and Philology held at the University of Michigan, April 1982;<sup>125</sup> he contributed to the Harvey Lecture Series at the University of New Mexico (1983),<sup>126</sup> and the Patten Foundation Lectures at Indiana University (1984–5).<sup>127</sup> Earlier in 1983 Leach served as the President of XV Pacific Science Congress held at Dunedin, New Zealand, and delivered the address 'Ocean of Opportunity'.<sup>128</sup> In the same year, he participated as the discussant for a symposium entitled 'Text, Play, Story', organised by The American Ethnological Society (11–14 February 1983) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The symposium was planned to coincide with the Mardi Gras in New Orleans.<sup>129</sup>

A conference entitled 'Symbolism Through Time' supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation Anthropological Research was held in the city of Fez, Morocco from January 13–20 1986. Edmund Leach contributed a paper entitled 'Aryan Invasions over Four Millenia', which was published in a volume edited by Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Culture Through Time. Anthropological Approaches*.<sup>130</sup> The volume was posthumously dedicated by the editor 'to Edmund Leach, a towering intellect and a modest man'.

Leach made his last visit to the United States to present 'Masquerade: The Presentation of the Self in Holi-day Life' at the Tenth Anniversary celebration of the Department of Anthropology at The Johns Hopkins University, and at Harvard University in April 1986.

A cursory look at the list of his publications after retirement between the

<sup>125</sup> This was published in the *Journal of Historical Linguistics and Philology*, 1, no. 1 (1983), 70–87.

<sup>126</sup> The lecture entitled 'The Gate Keepers of Heaven: Anthropological Aspects of Grandiose Architecture' was published in the *Albuquerque Journal of Anthropological Research*, 39, no. 3 (1983), 243–64.

<sup>127</sup> The titles of the two Patten lectures were 'Semiotics, Ethnology, and the Limits of Human Understanding'; and 'Michelangelo's Genesis: A Structuralist Interpretation of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling' which was later published in *Semiotica*, 56, nos. 1/2, pp. 1–30.

<sup>128</sup> A revised version of this address was published in *Pacific Viewpoint*, 24, no. 2 (1983), 99–111.

<sup>129</sup> The Proceedings were published as follows: *Text, Play, Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*; Stuart Plattner, Proceedings Editor, Edward B. Bruner, Editor and Symposium Organiser; Washington, DC: The American Ethnological Society, 1984. Edmund Leach's comments as discussant appear under the title 'Conclusion. Further Thoughts on the Realm of Folly', pp. 356–64.

<sup>130</sup> Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990. Leach's essay appears on pp. 227–45.

years of 1978–88 as given in the Royal Anthropological Institute *Bibliography*<sup>131</sup> shows the enormous number of pieces he wrote especially in the form of book reviews, an activity in which he assiduously engaged, and enjoyed, throughout his career.

In the last years of his life, Leach was engaged in an activity, even a pastime, which he obviously enjoyed. The man who cared not for a commemorative festschrift from his past students, colleagues, and friends, who was embarrassed by praise and preferred argument, attempted to set the record straight about his social and family background, his career, his experiences as well as his prejudices, in a mode of writing and speaking that combined humour and irreverence, frankness and a near-breaking of academic etiquette. Informative, and in places unconventional, the essay ‘Glimpses of the Unmentionable in the History of British Social Anthropology’ was written for the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1984).<sup>132</sup> He turned the ‘traditional’ invitation by the *Review* to eminent professors emeriti and emiritae magisterially to reminisce about their careers into a polemical and experimental exercise in the sociology of knowledge. The essay featured an innovative and controversial thesis concerning the link between the theorising of some eminent anthropologists and their social class and nationality.

Edmund Leach passed away on 6 January 1989. He had not wanted a memorial service for the same reason he had not wanted a festschrift to commemorate his retirement in 1978. But there was a funeral service at King’s College Chapel at which the College’s famed angelic choir sang for him.

The high points of the service, besides the singing of the choir, were ‘the Address’, given by Stephen Hugh-Jones; and ‘the Reading’ by Dadie (G. H. W.) Rylands of John Donne’s poem

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so . . .

At the end of the service, there was a solemn and moving procession from the Chapel, round the front court to the gateway, in this order (which Leach would have anticipated): coffin, family, Provost, Vice-Provost, participants in the service, and Fellows in significant order. An observer noted that above the buildings the setting sun and rising full moon coincided.

After the cremation, tea was served in the College Hall to all the guests.

STANLEY J. TAMBIAH  
*Harvard University*

*Note.* I thank Michael Herzfeld for valuable editorial assistance.

<sup>131</sup> *Edmund Leach: A Bibliography*, op. cit.

<sup>132</sup> *Annual Review*, 13 (1984), 1–23.