

André Itéanu. *La ronde des échanges. De la circulation aux valeurs chez les Orokaiva*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1983. Pp. 355. Fr 49.50.

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This study attempts to give a coherent picture of the culture of the Orokaiva (Papua New Guinea) by showing that it is based on a complex relationship between the world of spirits (situated in the wild) and the world of human society. Furthermore, the study claims that different stages of the relationship between the two worlds correlate with different stages in the process of differentiation of society and of the process that constitutes the human subject. Because of the latter correlation, the author first presents the principles of Orokaiva culture (or "ideology" as he calls it) through an analysis of the rituals of birth, initiation, and death. All these rituals are ultimately made possible by the complex symbolic relationship established between men and pigs.

Appropriately, then, the book begins by discussing the rituals connected with the birth of a child and the first year of life, together with the practices, some of them ritual, by which the pig is domesticated. In both cases, a being believed to come from the unstable world of spirits situated in the wild is differentiated from it and given a fixed place in human society.

The symbolic association of pigs and men is further displayed by their equivalence in the exchange between men and spirits. The spirits give pigs to humans, and by a strict application of the rule of reciprocity humans should give their children in return. But this direct reciprocity, which would make human life impossible, is delayed in the initiation ritual by offering the spirits a simulacrum of the children's death. Inasmuch as it makes a child's life secure, initiation is his definitive implanting in society. But it is also an occasion for the reconstitution of society in its fundamental articulations. Indeed, this ritual involves first the collapse of all social differences, then their progressive reconstitution.

Each stage of this reconstitution is characterized by a different modality of exchange involving different symbolic objects and different

social units and relations. The social relations involved are, in order of appearance: the father/son relation, the brother/sister relation, and finally relations established by locality. The crucial relation is the second because it connects the other two. Indeed, brother and sister are kin, but after marriage they usually reside in different locations. Furthermore, their relationship mediates the direct reciprocity between humans and spirits in the first stage of the ritual with the delayed reciprocity among humans in its last stage. The author concludes that "initiation is like a catalogue of the different exchange relationships possible" (p. 116). These relations are reconstituted after an initial state of social undifferentiation has been ritually produced, because society has "to prove to itself the founding role of exchange" (p. 112, my translations).

When spirits cause human death, the exchange of pigs for human life, delayed by the initiation ritual, is accomplished. Therefore, the death ritual begins, like the initiation, by symbolically representing the collapse of the boundary between human world and spirit world: the spirits have reasserted their rights over human life. The blending of the two worlds is emphasized by the fact that the participants blend human and porcine behaviors (the pigs represent the wild in which the spirits live). The two worlds are separated again by dividing the corpse, one part being left to the spirits and the other returning to the humans in the form of a new child. This process of separation is centered on the widow, who is identified with the dead man and can therefore bring about his transformation by being herself transformed.

Like the initiation ritual, the death ritual correlates the transformation of the subject with a process in which social distinctions are first dissolved, then reconstituted through exchanges. Furthermore, the sequence of social units and relations in this ritual is similar to that which occurs in initiation. The brother/sister relation, in particular, has a pivotal role in both.

In sum, the analysis of ritual makes it possible to discover crucial Orokaiva social relations. Accordingly, the author attempts to revise F. E. Williams' (1928, 1930) and E. Schwimmer's (1973) accounts of Orokaiva society on the basis of the insights provided by ritual. He shows that the so-called patrilineal clans are in fact local groups of people who bear the name of their leader in feasting. These feasts are events in which various rituals (including death and initiation rituals) take place simultaneously. The fact of performing them as a body is the true constitutive principle of the so-called clans. While a local group is differentiated from other groups of the same kind by the possession of the "name of the man" (i.e., of its leader in feasting), it is internally dif-

ferentiated by the “plant emblems.” The differentiation provided by these is purely contextual: therefore the author claims that Schwimmer is wrong in viewing plant-emblem groups as corporate groups.

The land-tenure system is also interpreted as a function of the feasting (and therefore ritual) system. Claims to land are not motivated by the desire to establish rights of use (which can be acquired independently of property rights) but by the desire of establishing the identity of one village relative to the others, particularly in the feasting system. Indeed, the food for feasts must be grown on the land owned by the organizing group, while the food for everyday use may be planted on anyone’s land. There are thus two systems of cultivation: a ritualized one and a non-ritualized one.

The author attempts to apply the same argument – that the feasting system is the main organizing principle of Orokaiva society – to kinship terms. The main point of his rather laborious analysis is that the brother/sister relationship is the fundamental one in the terminology, a fact that confirms the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the ritual system.

The discussion of social organization concludes with a chapter on marriage. The main argument is that any marriage is possible provided it is compatible with the global ritual cycle. This is because marriage is both part and condition of this cycle. In particular, the author sees a correspondence between the articulation of direct exchange and delayed exchange with the spirits in initiation on the one hand, and the articulation of direct exchange (i.e., sister exchange) and delayed exchange of women, on the other hand. Furthermore, the debts incurred by shifting from direct exchange to delayed exchange in initiation and marriage are both paid during the death ritual. The debt to the spirits is paid by transforming the dead into spirits and wild animals; the debt to the wife-givers is paid by funerary gifts to them. Between the two direct reciprocities characterizing the beginning and the end of man’s adult life, then, lies the realm of delayed reciprocity, with its accompanying balances and tensions.

The death ritual, therefore, dissolves the social relations accumulated during a man’s life, but since it concludes by returning the widow to her brother, and therefore by reconstituting the fundamental social articulation – the brother/sister relation – it starts the whole social cycle anew.

This is in outline the content of a book remarkable not only for its insights but also for the often obscure ways in which they are exposed. It presents us with a familiar Durkheimian theme: the hierarchical rela-

tionship between social undifferentiation and differentiation. Its main originality consists not in its argument that this relationship is constitutive nor that it is articulated temporally in the ritual process (others, from Victor to Terence Turner have argued the same), but in its grounding of the argument in the Melanesian context by correlating each stage with a modality of exchange. In this way the Maussian theme of exchange is brought back to the Durkheimian fold.

However, in his eagerness to show that exchange depends on its “cosmological” grammar, the author creates some unacceptable theoretical confusions. The most remarkable of these is the confusion of the level of the code with the level of the acting subject. More specifically, the internal motivations of the cultural code are equated to the motivations of the subject who acts according to its prescriptions. The subject is viewed as a place in which the social logic empirically manifests itself and which is devoid of any motivation other than the desire to reproduce the immutable and “eternal” social whole (p. 240). It is as if it were argued that the speakers of a language follow its grammatical rules not in order to communicate messages for their own purposes, but only in order to perpetuate the grammar. No doubt in certain contexts fidelity to the grammar is more in evidence in the speech act than its propositional content (cf. P. Bourdieu, *Ce que parler veut dire* [Paris, 1982]); and this tends to be even truer in ritual acts of communication. Nevertheless, reducing the subject to a simple means for the cosmological (or “ideological”) system to reproduce itself is adopting a position no less mistaken than its opposite, the “transactional” analysis of exchange, which views the system presupposed by the acts of exchange as a crystallization of individual choices and interests. Thus the author reverses rather than transcends the view of exchange that he criticizes (see his introduction). Indeed it simply displaces this view to what he calls an “inferior” level: the one which allegedly the system leaves open to the free play of individual interests and choices (cf. p. 241). It even seems that for the author anything is possible in Orokaiva society, provided it does not affect the “superior” level of ritual. This approach is reminiscent of the Dumontian treatment of political power, whose utilitarian definition is not so much dissolved into a properly culture-specific definition as displaced, its false universality left intact, to a hierarchically “inferior” level relative to religion or “ultimate values.”

In sum, the author’s approach displays once again the irreducible contrast between a “dialectical” and a “hierarchical” analysis of the relationship between “culture” (or “ideology” in the Dumontian sense) and “interest” and, more generally, of the relationship between “sys-

tern" and "subject." This contrast has been acknowledged by Dumont himself in the second edition of *Homo hierarchicus* (Paris, 1979) and was earlier noted in a paper of mine (Valeri, "Casta," in *Enciclopedia*, vol. 2 [Turin, 1977]). If the author of the present volume were right in reducing the subject to a simple hypostasis of the system, and at the same time to an entity allowed some degree of free choice and self-interest only insofar as it does not affect the system, the latter would reproduce itself in identical form through time: there would be no history, or only a history of collapses. Paradoxically, the Orokaiva ritual system has undergone profound changes that cannot be viewed as simple mechanical results of the prohibition of murder enforced by the colonial administration (as the author claims to some extent), but involve the creative reactions of Orokaiva subjects. It is precisely this process that cannot be accounted for in the author's theoretical framework. In this respect, it is regrettable that he has not rewritten his library study in the light of his fieldwork in modern Orokaiva society. Surely, in an essay that gives such a prominent place to initiation, it is imperative to discuss at length the reasons for the recent revival of this ritual after its abandonment early in this century. A historical perspective could throw light on the system and make its analysis more convincing.

A fundamental claim of this study is that the relationship of the different levels and forms of exchange in Orokaiva society is hierarchical. Yet the chapter in which these hierarchical relations are said to be summarized leaves an impression of ambiguity, if not of confusion: one could easily show that the author's criteria for hierarchizing are quite heterogeneous and are not reducible to simple part/whole relations, as would be required by the Dumontian definition of hierarchy. Depending, then, on the criteria used, one could change the hierarchical order of the forms of exchange. At any rate, it is not completely clear what this order is according to the author. The only hierarchical opposition that he formulates clearly is that between the symmetric exchange linking the undifferentiated society of humans and the undifferentiated society of spirits, on the one hand, and the asymmetric exchanges among humans, on the other. This superordination of the symmetric exchange with the spirits reflects – the author argues – both the fact that reciprocity is the supreme value of Orokaiva ideology and the fact that the society of humans depends on the society of spirits.

Yet I am not sure that by representing this relationship simply as one of hierarchy the author does not simplify a reality more complex and ambiguous than he is prepared to acknowledge. It is true that the world of humans is ultimately dependent on that of spirits, insofar as these are

the ultimate sources of life and death. This, however, does not allow the author to claim, as he does, that the spirits are the supreme “encompassing” value of Orokaiva culture. Indeed, it could be argued to the contrary that the human world is implicitly viewed as the supreme value, both because it is affirmed by tricking the spirits and dominating them for a while by means of ritual actions, and because the spirits themselves are seen from the point of view of human life and are as such expressions of its value. It is one thing to acknowledge the necessity of death and dependence on a world larger than the one that humans are able to carve out for themselves, and another thing to see this larger world as a supreme cultural value. The author has not demonstrated to my satisfaction that the Orokaiva are Nietzschean heroes. At any rate, what are we to make of the assertion that the world of spirits is the supreme and encompassing value of Orokaiva culture, when we are told so surprisingly little about the spirits as they are explicitly described and conceived by the Orokaiva in their own words?

The desire to apply the notion of hierarchy at all costs involves the author in some rather questionable procedures in his analysis of the kinship terms. This is too complicated to be discussed here, even in part. But I cannot refrain from mentioning a postulate on which it is based: that what the author calls “periphrastic terms” (such as *tata iou*, “husband of *tata*”) are hierarchically “subordinated” to what he calls “terms proper” (such as *tata*). This is a surprisingly formalistic criterion as it is based on the form of the terms (signifier) considered independently of its signifieds. To give an example, the author argues that the two meanings of the term *tata* (FZ and MBW) are hierarchically related as “inferior” to “superior” because the first is coupled with a periphrastic (hence “inferior”) term (*tata iou*: FZH) while the second is coupled with a “term proper” (*nobo*: MB). Quite apart from the fact that it is not clear what “inferior” and “superior” mean in this context, this analysis, by ignoring the obvious (that the terminology reflects the coexistence of the exchange of sisters with the delayed exchange of women), fails to raise the most interesting question: why are the males (MB and FZH) differentiated in order to reflect the possibility of delayed exchange while the females (MBW and FZ) are not differentiated in order to reflect the possibility of the exchange of sisters?

Although much more could be said about this interesting and stimulating book, I think that I have said enough to make clear that the author uses the notion of hierarchy too loosely to persuade us all of its usefulness for the interpretation of societies dominated by the tension between symmetry and asymmetry, spirits and humans, rather than by

the neat hierarchical ordering of these opposites. And, indeed, it is this tension that is at the heart of Mauss's reflection on exchange, still the starting point for any understanding of "gift societies."

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