
REVIEWS

James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Pp. xi, 270, illustrations, abbreviations, notes, bibliography, index. \$28.50.

The life of Maurice Leenhardt was, in many ways, a paradox. He was "a bundle of contradictions" moving between ethnology and evangelism, science and religion, Christian monotheism and archaic myth. He was an outsider who spent over half his adult life in Melanesia. He went to convert New Caledonians and, instead of imposing Western concepts on them, attempted to rediscover his own God in Melanesian religious experience. As Leenhardt once remarked, he himself was, perhaps, his only *real* convert.

Clifford's book is a well written and informative study of Leenhardt's life and thought. It should prove interesting and valuable, not only to Melanesianists, but to a wider audience, particularly students of the historical development of anthropological theory.

This biography is divided into two parts, each composed of seven chapters. The first, *Do Neva*, focusses on Leenhardt's training and experience as a missionary. The second, *Do Kamo*, concentrates on Leenhardt's intellectual life. It describes his life as a professor of ethnology in Paris, his relationships with Professors Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss, and the development of his theories of myth, person, and participation. The structure of the book reflects Clifford's insistence that Leenhardt was not a missionary turned ethnologist for it gives each of these aspects of his life and experience an equal importance, each having informed and molded the other. Both must be considered if we are to comprehend the man. The theme of Leenhardt as living paradox runs throughout this book. His career united two opposing roles, missionary and ethnologist, which, according to Clifford, Leenhardt never thought of separating. He was both a representative of the colonizing, Christianizing West and an ethnologist with a mission to understand the Melanesian structure of experience and to preserve the old ways of thought against alien, imposed concepts. When he returned to New Caledonia in 1947-1948, after years in Paris, he continued to speak on behalf of the ancient traditions. When he talked to surprised young Melanesians about the Kingdom of God he described it, not in terms of Heaven, but as the *maciri*

or “peaceful abode” of their grandfathers. One listener confessed, “Our Patriarch . . . turned us back on our tracks, back toward the religion of our *Canaque* ancestors. . . . I had some difficulty getting in tune with my very old and dear missionary” (p. 194).

Most of Leenhardt’s research was done in an evangelical context, and much of his later ethnological theorizing was a reflection on and a justification of his priorities as a missionary. Conversely, in his evangelical work he constantly strove to find his God in the concrete grounding of Melanesian religion. He insisted that an accurate translation of Christian concepts required the use of the vernacular in order that a Melanesian context might endow them with meaning. His painstaking translation of the New Testament was a constant search for dynamic equivalences and an attempt to provide an inventive interpenetration of the two cultures, French and Melanesian. His work anticipated by fifty years the modern ethnolinguistic approach to Bible translation. Clifford’s study clearly shows that in his translations, as in much of his thought and in his militant defense of the rights of indigenous peoples, Leenhardt was decades ahead of his time.

Another theme that unites Clifford’s book is that of Leenhardt the nonconformist. He was a “problem” student who did not adjust to the rigidity of the French educational system and who reportedly provoked one angry teacher to predict, “You’ll end up in New Caledonia!” then a penal colony. He was a trouble-making colonial, labelled pro-native by the other whites in New Caledonia, and with good reason. Convinced that Melanesians were being systematically cheated, he encouraged them to learn to read and cipher so they could protect their own interests when trading with white merchants. He also aligned himself with a general movement of native assertion. Consequently, he was viewed with suspicion by the colonial authorities and was accused of subversion during the rebellion in the New Caledonian highlands in 1917. He was an evangelical renegade who was distrusted by his own mission board. As a result, his recommendations for reform were ignored, and, when he left New Caledonia his mission was torn apart by factional disputes and soon deteriorated into just another auxiliary of colonial policy. Finally, he was a university misfit whose hermeneutical style was thought to be “strange” and whose phenomenological approach found little support in the existing ethnological theories of the day which were primarily derived from either Durkheim’s structuralism or Malinowski’s functionalism. Indeed, as Clifford observes, “his habit of looking at culture primarily from the point of view of the ‘person’ is still rare in ethnological literature” (p. 190).

It would have been easy for his many frustrations and disappointments to make Leenhardt a bitter man, the eternal outsider always standing in opposition to those in authority. But, Clifford insists, he was not. He was sometimes saddened, but never bitter. Instead he learned how to shock without becoming an enemy, how to prevail in a conflict without seeming to be involved. Furthermore, Clifford maintains, "he was composed of others": his mission family, his students, his friends, his intimates, his family, fellow ethnographers, missionary colleagues, colonial administrators, Melanesian converts. Clifford seems to suggest that Leenhardt embodied his own theory of the person, being himself an ensemble of participatory relationships without a central essential ego at his core. All of the persons and landscapes of which he was composed, says Clifford, "were resumed and reconciled not in a 'self' but in a 'person' " (p. 217).

Clifford's treatment of Leenhardt is sympathetic but balanced. We see in Leenhardt a man of immense vitality, warmth, informality, and sympathetic understanding, but we also see a missionary whose moral values sometimes led him to make judgements that a relativistic anthropologist would ordinarily not endorse. For example, as a young missionary Leenhardt broke his own later rule, that an evangelist should never forbid any indigenous custom that he does not thoroughly understand, when he outlawed the "purchasing of brides" without comprehending the Melanesian system of reciprocity. His relativism grew as he matured, but his tolerance was not always extended to his colleagues. His evaluation of the work of his peers was, apparently, colored by a certain amount of sexual prudery, the classic hobgoblin of missionaries. For instance, Professor Leenhardt was scandalized by Malinowski's "concentration on carnal details" in *The Sexual Life of Savages*, and finally, as editor of *Propos missionnaires* managed "to associate Malinowski with a subversive movement devoted to moral relaxation and based, he appears to believe, in Moscow!" (p. 147).

Throughout the book, Clifford traces the evolution of Leenhardt's understanding of Melanesian thought, beginning with his attempt to translate the Bible by finding Houailou equivalents for Christian religious concepts and proceeding through Leenhardt's development of the concepts of mythic participation, cosmomorphism, and the structure of the person. In contrast to Levy-Bruhl and, later, Levy-Strauss, Leenhardt's perception of myth is similar to Gregory Bateson's notion of the relationship between art (dance, ritual, myth) and primary process thought. Both are, fundamentally, an ensemble of synchronic and concretely juxtaposed forms and experiences. Only secondarily are they formulated narrative. Myth, like the Houailou concept no, is at once the word, the act, and the thing. It

communicates, beyond discursive language, the single expression of a felt complex of immediate experiences. One has the impression that Leenhardt's Melanesians would agree with Isadora Duncan: "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing [or mythologizing] it" (Bateson 1972: 137).

Clifford concludes his biography with an anecdote that expresses, concretely, the paradox of Leenhardt's life. At Do Neva, the site of his mission, there is a monument to Leenhardt. The seven-foot tapering white column is decorated with his profile in bronze, military in bearing, and an engraved plaque. At the narrow summit there is a single, smooth stone placed there by the local committee. In New Caledonian thought, stones are forms of history, mythic "words," the solidified spirits of the ancestors. At the ceremonies celebrating the centennial of Leenhardt's birth, the press dwelt on the many speeches and visiting dignitaries. The stone was ignored. "Perhaps," Clifford comments, "by means of a smooth stone, Leenhardt's tradition has been appropriately, discretely, coopted (sic)" (p. 227). Perhaps! After having read Clifford's excellent book, I suspect that Leenhardt would have appreciated the irony.

REFERENCES CITED

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