

Olaf Blixen, *'I te matamu'a: Fundamentos de la cosmovisión Polinesia* [Basis of the Polynesian cosmovision]. Moana, Estudios de Antropología Oceánica, vol. 3. Montevideo, 1987. Pp. 399. US\$20.00.

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The title of this book, *'I te matamu'a*, which in the language of Easter Island means "in other times," sums up Olaf Blixen's two main objectives: to understand the spiritual life of the Polynesians by means of the mythical narrative corpus and to erect a framework to interpret the basis of the "cosmovision" (worldview, *Weltanschauung*) of these skillful sailors. As regards the former, undoubtedly *'I te matamu'a* refers to the early days when the ancestors of the deities took part in the events that laid the foundations of the future cultural facts. The latter has a methodological purpose that goes beyond application to the Polynesian religion, albeit this subject provides a convenient groundwork.

The author starts by making clear that the term "Polynesian" is an abstraction comprising a group of singular peoples including the Tahitians, Hawaiians, Samoans, Easter Islanders, and many others scattered over the vast surface of the Pacific Ocean. This concrete viewpoint is accounted for by an existential conception of the cultural phenomenon centered on W. Dilthey's *Erlebnis* (a personal experience,

something revealed “in the psyche through internal experience”; see his *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* [1907]). Hence the great significance Blixen gives to the mythical narratives in which the characters are presented as archetypes of social and individual action as they determine the life, the general ways, and the very feeling of the ethnographic group, which in contemporary ethnology has come to be known as the “structures” of the mythical conscience.

Due to the special nature of the bibliographical sources, the author has been compelled to resort to an heuristic approach to contend with the following difficulties: inaccuracy in the gathering of data, removal of repeated words and paragraphs, concision for the sake of aesthetics, fictitious reconstructions, periphrastic translations. To these problems affecting the hermeneutic level, we may add the profound changes suffered by the Oceanic cosmovisions as a result of the acculturation process.

Blixen is clear in this epistemological formulation of the purpose of ethnology, seen as the study of barbaric cultures in the classical Greek sense or, better, “strange” as they differ from the Western axiological and logical assumptions. As such, this “strangeness” circumscribes a particular ontological region that defines the foundations of ethnology as a science. These assumptions are based on E. Husserl’s phenomenology and on the theoretical and methodological formulations of the Argentine ethnologist M. Bórmida (*Etnología y fenomenología. Ideas acerca de una hermenéutica del extrañamiento* [Buenos Aires, 1976]), who is constantly quoted in *I te matamu’a*, resulting in a fruitful scientific dialogue. a

The mythical conscience, understood as an anthropological structure, has certain principles--or forms or structures--of a very general nature, states Blixen, which are probably shared in the emotional thinking of all barbaric peoples. Further on he adds that, because of its philosophical character, the discussion of the ontological nature of these principles goes beyond the objective of his work.

The ideas of participation and mystical experience, structure, category, and essence, among others, have been analyzed on the basis of Lévy-Bruhl’s memorable formulations about the meaning of the “pre-logical” (an unfortunately misleading word), and have been further complemented through consideration of the works of a number of different authors who have critically developed these concepts. Finally, Blixen notes that the structures examined in the various chapters of his book are but a portion of the molds that condition the spiritual life of

the Polynesians. Also, the exposition of "molds" is not exhaustive, and the purpose of his work is to better understand the cosmovision of the members of this Oceanic ethnic group.

The principles considered and through which the mythical conscience is manifested are: causality, the social conception of nature and the reciprocity principle, qualified space and time, the soul conception, divination, *mana*, taboo, magic, name, *te Po* and *te Ao* (day and night), participation, and culture as a gift. Other possible structures are also mentioned. In this review I shall comment on the concept of retribution and on *mana*, which, to me, constitutes the most remarkable principle of the archaic mind.

The Polynesian religious horizon, like those in most societies studied by ethnographers, consists of retributive codes that present criminal offenses and legal procedures to punish them. Moreover, these types of formulations include ethical axiological formulations. This legality is the result of a basic conception that views nature as a series of social relations; retribution works by means of actions that pretend to be a merited requital for an evil done or a deserved punishment for an injury. This is aimed at restoring the previous situation and to make return for the offense or the wrong inflicted. In Polynesia, points out Blixen, there are ceremonies where the first fruits are offered to the gods before using the produce of fishing or gathering, or before catching or using the beings under the protection of, or belonging to, a god. Other examples are the rites of bestowing the first fruits and gifts, such as the *inasi* in Tonga, with the corresponding distribution among those present, and the exchange of gifts at weddings. These practices were real ceremonial barter. In short, the myth, insists Blixen, is a conveniently significant field for putting forward the principle of retribution, which is found in the exemplary action and determines fate and the existence of things.

In Polynesia, *mana*, asserts Blixen, is the structure of power, a formulation he analyzes in detail as taken from the second half of the nineteenth century, when Max Müller published the famous letter written by the missionary R. H. Codrington. That description of *mana* enlarged ethnological knowledge. It not only gave a new word to the ethnographic repertoire but also introduced a conceptual element that permitted identification of its existence in other ethnic groups in the inhabited world. The scientific formulation of *mana* made it possible to go beyond its Melanesian specificity to the universality of the essence, to power as the general structure of meaning--from the cultural concept or idea to the ideal unit of meaning. For this reason, I have considered

power the outstanding principle of the mythical conscience, because it surpasses the perception of objective relations and reality becomes imbued with a qualitative dynamism.

In what we may regard as the second part of his book, Blixen transcribes and analyzes forty-seven mythical narratives from Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Futuna, Uvea, Tokelau, Rennell, Kapingamarangi, the Marquesas Islands, the Society Islands, the Tuamotus, Rarotonga, New Zealand, Chatham, and Easter Island. The technique used upon the application of a correct hermeneutics consists of three steps: first, transcribing the text translated into Spanish, except for the narratives from Easter Island, which were collected by Blixen himself; second, clarifying it with a large number of notes that provide an accurate interpretation, especially regarding the meaning of words in the native language; and finally, making an ethnographic comment with ample bibliography where the religious content is particularly analyzed.

A comprehensive bibliography and two indexes, one of names and another of topics, complete this contribution.

With *'I te matamu'a*, Olaf Blixen not only has more than reached his objectives but has also provided theoretical and methodological resources proper to the canons of a phenomenological ethnology, a contribution that takes shape through the fascinating Polynesian spiritual world. This knowledge shall undoubtedly be of great scientific interest to the Spanish-speaking reader as the author has chosen to write his book in this language.