

WAZIR-JAHAN KARIM: Ma' Betisék concepts of living things (London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 54) xv, 270pp. London: Athlone Press.

In the manner of Samuel Wilberforce, the unfortunate Bishop of Oxford, anthropologists seem sometimes to deliver themselves into the hands of those critics who wonder at their capacity for theoretical gymnastics. The issue in this instance is the coherence of indigenous systems of thought. The culture in question is the Ma' Betisék, popularly known as the Mah Meri, an Austro-Asiatic speaking people on the west coast of Malaya. Dr Karim has written an admirably clear and thoughtful work exploring the models of order in the worlds of natural species and men. Her argument is that, rather than there being one all-embracing 'system', there are at least two contrary ways of understanding the relationships which the Ma' Betisék see as holding between themselves and features of their environment. Her discussion touches on more general issues. For instance, what kind of criteria should one use to assess the consistency of shared representations, and what status do such 'beliefs' have? Much anthropological theorizing stems from the obscurity of key ideas and, wisely, Dr. Karim argues her case on the quality of her ethnography, leaving polemics to others.

Among the Ma' Betisék, it would seem, ideas about plants and animals may be structured according to different frameworks. In the first, natural species are destined for human consumption. The asymmetry between eater and eaten is justified by human observance of moral law (fittingly this includes bans on incest and cannibalism). The failure of the eaten is described in myth. For plants and animals are potentially destructive and once tried to take on human form to kill men who retaliated with a curse, *tulah*, condemning their aggressors to become potential food. Breaches of the code of proper conduct between elders and young people, as well as between men and natural species, are described as *tulah*, a notion found widely among Indonesian (Austronesian-speaking) peoples. So too is *pemali* (*kemali* to the Ma' Betisék), what is forbidden or the danger of doing what is not allowed. Destroying animals or plants is also *kemali* and fundamentally wrong; and accounts for human illness and death. In myth, natural species are also the souls of ancestors; so when shamans need the help of these to cure disease, the hierarchy implicit in *tulah* is stood on its head. As the ideas are used in different contexts and only assume structure in action, any incompatibility is not obvious.

It is not the evidence which is at issue, but its interpretation. For, in his review of the book in TLS of the 19th. March 1982, Dr. R.H. Barnes, another distinguished Oxonian, takes the author to task over her conclusions. She is wrong, he suggests, to see the alternative views as contrary. In fact they demonstrate a "salient regularity", as what is involved is not contradiction (he does not intend this term, I think, in the traditional logical sense) but inversion, which is "commonplace in Southeast Asia". Instead, what emerges is a set of parallels between the Ma' Betisék and neighbouring cultures – in such features as the link of even numbers with misfortune, but odd numbers with good – so what Dr. Karim saw as inconsistent is actually internally coherent and at least partly isomorphic with other systems. Before the critic dismisses anthropologists as hopeless, he would do well to note that the issues are more important than he might think.

What is at stake is the relevance of the recently fashionable structuralist approach. In arguing with such force for a structural interpretation, Barnes points to some of its weaknesses. Even to the casual reader, it will be obvious that the claim to coherence rests on the notion of 'inversion' resolving all incongruities. Yet another illustrious Oxonian,

Professor Rodney Needham, has rightly been at pains to show that ‘reversal’, ‘inversion’ and other words are often used indiscriminately to cover different formal relationships. As the *tulah* complex deals with the differentiation of sense data, while *kemali*’ is about the evaluation of action, Dr. Karin has at least a *prima facie* case for a real epistemological difference. *Kemali*’ ideas indeed dwell quite subtly on the problem of potentiality in agents (one is reminded as well of Aristotle’s entelechy). To torture the nuances of a culture’s metaphysics on the ready rack of structuralist dogma looks like a giant step backwards.

The difficulty is that structuralism tends to treat a wide range of logically distinct operations as synonymous. Under the blanket term ‘opposition’ it is possible to transform all sorts of differences into a comfortable system. No matter what is fed into the hat, the prestidigitator always pulls out rabbits with elegantly opposed ears. Structuralist analyses, like psychoanalytic ones (to which they are epistemically related) are easily unfalsifiable. If all contradiction is inherently part of a higher order, how could we ever know, let alone show, if something did not fit? This is the nub which stung a structuralist retort. To the extent that it is axiomatic that all collective representations be structured, and, therefore coherent, Dr. Karim is wrong *ex hypothesi*.

The second part of Barnes’s critique is that among the regularities overlooked are “important constants” such as the relative auspiciousness of numbers, the moral qualities of black and white, and the significance of anti-clockwise rotation. This is one side of the hoary debate about how far one can compare particular features of different cultures, or how much depends on context (itself a tricky notion, but one which Dr. Karin stresses). In asserting the former position without qualification, Barnes comes perilously close to summoning up the banished spirit of Sir James Frazer (the ‘contradiction’ between Oxford and Cambridge is now presumably happily resolved). The ghosts and goblins afoot are not only Ma’ Betisék ancestral souls! But before the anthropologophobe rubs his hands in glee, he should perhaps reflect that this is just part of a not-unhealthy debate about what facts are, what they presuppose or entail and where does interpretation begin – issues which some subjects too often take for granted. So perhaps the good bishop had a point after all when he asked on whose side the apes were.

Mark Hobart