

If you can keep your head

An analysis of Torajan headhunting

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Abstract (1989)

Anthropological approaches of symbolism tend to involve speculative, if not specious, interpretations masquerading as analyses. Dramatic social institutions like headhunting seem to encourage scholars to put their critical faculties on hold. A common move is to import and impose Euro-American academic or popular categories to explain practices which, short of a thorough and thoughtful demonstration to the contrary, may be articulated according to metaphysical presuppositions radically different from those of whose practices they are.

At the time of writing, Lévi-Straussian was much in vogue as a means of cracking—if not decapitating—tough symbolic nuts. So, I offer what I hope is a pretty coherent and extended structuralist interpretation of reported accounts of headhunting among the Toraja of Central Sulawesi. Then I debunk my own interpretation to show how far it depends on us admiring our own cultural categories and intellectual antics. Not only does this leave Torajan social practices of understanding and reflecting on headhunting largely untouched, but the elegance of anthropological interpretations also effectively inoculates scholars from asking about the presuppositions that inform these practices. I single out three questionable assumptions behind such anthropological styles of argumentation. They are that there is some transcendent structure behind or beneath social action; that an anthropologist, whose grasp of the language is probably rudimentary in the extreme, is in a better position than the people to understand this structure; and that invoking or often plain inventing such structure constitutes an explanation of the institution under analysis. Behind the smoke and mirrors, how much anthropological analysis is in the end just deft prestidigitation?

If you can keep your head when all about you
 Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...
 Rudyard Kipling, 'If'

Headhunting is one of those exotic practices which so excite the romantic imagination of anthropologists that stern men throw years of caution and equivocation to the winds. And they embrace unusually silly hypotheses even by the standards of a 'discipline' much given to publishing their extravagances instead of quietly burying their mistakes like medical men. In this paper I hope to be more sober. My concern is to work through the existing ethnographic material on the Bare'e-speaking Toraja of Central Sulawesi, who seem to have been enthusiastic, if not desperately effective, head hunters. The analysis is based on existing reports and if it is more detached in tone, it is also the poorer for lack of detailed ethnographic knowledge. However Torajan ritual and belief appear to suggest - and pretty explicitly at that - a clear and remarkable interpretation of their headhunting institutions. It raises the question of whether anthropologists should not at times refrain from arrogantly imposing their own interpretations on the material when the locals seem to be doing rather better than they. I leave the reader to judge for him or herself whether the exercise was worthwhile or not.

Headhunting is a practice widely found in South East Asia from the Philippines, through Eastern Indonesia (and occasionally in New Guinea), Sulawesi, Kalimantan to the borders of Burma and Assam. Among the explanations put forward to account for it include a 'mystical' belief in the efficacy of some mysterious soul substance in bringing about the fertility of fields and the fecundity of women (various authors); the notion that heads are penises full of valuable seed (Freeman 1979); the mediation of symbolic clan oppositions (Downs 1955); the slaking of an insatiable emotional urge (Rosaldo 1980) and even the existence of a radically different theory of causality (Needham 1976).

In his paper 'Skulls and causality' (1976), Needham points out that popular general explanations of the phenomenon of headhunting in terms of soul substance seem invariably to be imports on the part of ethnographers who are determined to ignore all the evidence and impute their own folk ideas of 'substance' and 'force' to people of whom they have never inquired whether they have such notions. Freeman, arguing about the Iban of Sarawak, postulates a universal association of the human head and the penis, so that the detachment of the former is a symbolic equivalent of the ejaculation of the latter. Davison has shown however, there is precious little evidence that the Iban make such an equation.¹ Nor, if the identification is universal, does Freeman explain why everyone does not practise headhunting! Postulating universals to explain specific instances is a theoretical crutch adopted by the weak of mind like Downs (who is one of a number of American scholars who have enthusiastically adopted Dutch structuralism hook, line and sinker). Indonesian societies are distinguished, according to Downs, by a rigid division of society and cosmos into two complementary, warring but mutually inter-dependent moieties. Headhunting is at the least an expression of the necessary, but productive, conflict of the two halves. It may be more. For Downs has suggested that

headhunting is effective in bringing fertility and health because it represents a repetition of the cosmic cycle of life and death and struggle between the two halves of the universe, the Upper and Underworlds (1983: 127).

¹ As he remarks

it is the implicit suggestion running through Freeman's argument that enemy heads are taken *because* they are phallic symbols. If this seems rather obtuse, the point I am making is this: Do the Iban take heads because of their phallic significance? Or do Iban trophy heads acquire a phallic significance because of the nature of Iban headhunting?' (Davison 1987: 228).

As Fischer has pointed out though, unfortunately in many instances one does not take heads from the other half, moiety or whatever (1955). Not all the societies with such formal dualism practise headhunting (a 'classic' case are the Minangkabau, described by P. E. de Josselin de Jong (1952) but there is no evidence they ever engaged in this); nor do all head hunters come from such dualistic societies (e.g. the Ilongot, see below). (The argument is made to work because 'dualism' is so wonderfully vague a notion that the analyst can, and often does, define it as proves convenient.) Despite devastating criticisms Downs's paper has been hailed as a masterpiece of structural argument and reprinted (P. E. de Josselin de Jong 1983), while Fischer, a beacon of solid sense in a world of obscurantism, has of course never been heard of since.

More recent attempts to 'explain' headhunting are far subtler. Michelle Rosaldo, for instance, has turned to the motivations behind headhunting among the Ilongot of Northern Luzon. She links the prevalence of violence and headhunting to the cultural elaboration of a kind of 'anger', *liget*, experienced especially by bachelors which may only be 'cast off' by taking a head. As humans grow older, they obtain more self-control and are able to control *liget* through knowledge, *beya*. While *liget* may be a concomitant of the practice of headhunting it does not constitute a general explanation of the institution. It may be a culturally posited necessary condition of Ilongot young men's behaviour and epitomize 'realization of *liget*' (1980: 30), but it is hardly the sufficient condition. Needham also develops the thesis of indigenous causal categories to account for headhunting. His critique of existing ethnographic accounts is not with the kind of explanation (i.e. causal) which they offer but with the importation of alien notions of causation. Instead of imputing the existence of some mechanism, force or substance to link severed heads and the welfare of crops, he argues that we may be encountering a radically different kind of causality by which action may be effective at a distance without intervening factors.

While the critique of importing Western metaphysical categories to explain indigenous categories is clearly sensible, he has not been able to give any evidence that any such people do operate a non-material causal model, nor show that it is general among headhunters. For the Toraja, I shall suggest, that an analysis is possible which does not need to postulate distinct theories of causation (although they may well have them) to understand the forms which headhunting takes. Rather than regard the taking of heads as causally linked to the fecundity of women and the fertility of fields, these may be related metaphorically, an association which is acted out in practice. After outlining how the analysis might go, I shall suggest that it too makes some awkward, if not unwarranted, assumptions.

Before turning to the Torajan ethnography, however, a note on explanation is useful. In what follows I do not propose to explain *why* the Bare'e speaking Toraja hunt heads: I shall merely outline, partly because it is a popular style of analysis, the implications of a common reading of the practices in which Toraja (or, at least Bare'e-speaking Toraja) engage. Like Needham I am sceptical of the use of Western philosophical categories to explain other peoples' behaviour. However I would go further. Even were we to have, say for the Toraja, widespread knowledge of emotional states or notions of causation in what sense would these 'explain' action? It is commonplace for anthropologists to lay out systems of symbols, beliefs or whatever to which actors are supposed to subscribe. This does not of itself account for why people do what they do unless one adds a theory of the relation of mind (or belief) and action such that in some way having a belief is the necessary or sufficient condition of that action being carried out. We would require a very determinist theory of ideas to justify such a position and one which I doubt anyone would seriously embrace. The point behind all this is that 'why' questions are part of a cultural tradition of inquiry, stemming in this instance from Aristotle's theory of causation, notably his idea of final causes. Although the original formulation has been superseded, later arguments also presuppose that the world is so arranged that things have essences and states or actions ultimately reasons or causes which are knowable in principle. Until someone produces a satisfactory theory of the determination of human action, it is wise to avoid introducing unproven, and indeed, unnecessary, metaphysical postulates.

From octopus to bamboo

As this interpretation of Torajan headhunting came to me from reading Downs's *The religion of the Bare'e-speaking Toradja of Central Celebes* (1956) which was a library thesis based upon Adriani and Kruyt's monumental study in four volumes, *De Bare'e sprekende Toradjas van Midden-Celebes*, let me present first the sequence of activities which are supposed to constitute a headhunting raid and its aftermath, more or less as they are outlined in Downs.

1. Food taboos

From the time a raid is planned, the leader and other members of the expedition are placed under strict food prohibitions. These include *inter alia* palm products and, significantly, bamboo.

2. Talismans

On raids men commonly wear necklaces of octopus shells, which must be imbued with efficacy by a woman or no heads will be taken. The shells must still be dripping with sea-water at the time of the rite. The Toraja explicitly equate the dripping sea-water with the ejaculation of semen.

3. Gifts

All warriors carry a present from a woman *but never from the mother of the warrior*, without which it is said they will obtain no heads or may even die. These are:

- a) a piece of cloth tied around the hilt of one's sword
- b) a penis-sized piece of wood sucked during the raid
- c) menstrual blood obtained by the man inserting his finger into the woman's vagina (as many warriors are bachelors, this is commonly not from a man's permanent partner)

Finally each warrior carries a tobacco quid taken from between a woman's breasts while she is sleeping. It is absolutely forbidden however for a man to look at or play with a woman sexually on such an occasion, let alone have sexual intercourse, which is prohibited during the entire period of the raid. Breach is liable to result in death.

4. Rice

Each man carries with him special provisions of rice prepared by a woman. To do so the women must get up in the middle of the night, alone to pound the padi. The rice must be pure white and none of the grains should be broken. Any breach of this procedure will make the raid abortive.

5. Departure

Departure on the raid must be at night.

6. Ritual to ensure heads

From an assault camp men creep into the enemy village and place ash in a mortar there. Ideally they try to get near enough to a member of the village and drop ash into the sleeping person's mouth. *Under no circumstances may the head be cut off at this stage.*

7. Prohibitions on women

Women are placed under various strict prohibitions to prevent any man dying while on the raid.

8. *The attack*

Although the assault takes the form of a general scrimmage and appears to be largely free of 'ritual', there is one interesting rule. ***It is absolutely forbidden to look at, let alone touch, the genitals of an enemy*** because this would bring misfortune after the raid.

9. *Kinds and numbers of heads*

As occurs in other societies which hunt heads, no relative value is placed on male, female or children's heads. However, among the Toraja, if a large number are taken the surplus is simply thrown away into the forest on the return journey.

10. *Ghostly vengeance*

If a man loses his head in the course of carrying out a raid, his body is simply abandoned. His soul becomes a dangerous wandering spirit who seeks to lure other head hunters to the same end.

11. *Domesticating the heads*

The remaining heads on the return trip are carried carefully in the warriors' arms, are caressed, sung to, addressed and fed pre-chewed banana and other such foods.

12. *The return*

The hunters are prevented from re-entering the village on their return by the women on the grounds that they are contaminated.

13. *Ginger*

At this stage the men are fed with ginger by a woman directly into their mouths and they are showered with dry rice.

14. *Possession of the heads*

When the men are permitted to come back into the village they are met by women who are described as being overwhelmed with jealousy and who try to steal the heads away from the men. Women are said often to become possessed and try to bite the heads.

15. *Antiphonal songs*

On the re-entry to the village, before they return to their homes, the men are required to sit down with the women seated opposite them and they sing various appropriate chants in antiphony.

16. *The Wurake*

During the festival which ensues the heads are referred to as 'gifts from the Wurake', which is a category of very high spirit.

17. *Ending mortuary periods*

A period of mourning may only be ended by a successful headhunt.

18. *Incorporating the head*

The skull of the dead is incorporated into the community and installed in a special building.

19. *The feast of bamboo knives*

In the feast which concludes the headhunting series, men and women attack and cut the remaining flesh off the head with bamboo knives - steel is strictly forbidden.

Now if we return to Adriani and Kruyt's original, sometimes juxtaposed to the ethnography on headhunting sometimes in quite different sections, the following observations are made which may help to put the data briefly presented into some perspective.

1. During, and after, pregnancy women are forbidden to eat either bamboo or anything connected with palm trees.
2. The Toraja regard pregnancy as stemming from semen transmitted during sexual intercourse. Octopus is strictly forbidden to pregnant women (on the grounds that the foetus will stick like an octopus to rock) and to young children.
4. Pestle and mortar are commonly associated with male and female genitals respectively.
5. Childbirth is induced at night if at all possible.
6. Ash is used for fertilizing fields and a woman in labour sits on a pile of ash, or over a mortar, to facilitate delivery of the child.
7. Fathers are under similar prohibitions during pregnancy to prevent the danger of women dying in childbirth.
10. The other category of particularly dangerous human spirit is the *pontianak*. These are the 'souls' of women who have died during childbirth and who wander the earth in search of pregnant women to make them companions in misfortune. They also lure men away from their homes and families with their beauty (never to be seen again) in revenge for the miserable end to which men subjected them by obliging them to bear children.
11. The list of food, songs, names and endearments is exactly the same as those used for young infants.
12. Women after childbirth are prevented from re-entering the community as they are said to be polluted by birth.
13. The child's umbilicus, on birth, is covered in ginger and dry rice by the father.
14. After birth the child's filiation to the father is considered much more important than any ties to the mother: so men are said to own the children.
16. The Wurake are held to be responsible otherwise only for ensuring the birth of children.
17. On the physical death of the old, social continuity is maintained by birth of new members of the community. (But just as physical death does not mark full social death, so social birth is distinct from physical birth.)
18. The same building is used for the incorporation of new-born children into society in a markedly similar ritual.
19. After birth the umbilical cord is severed with a bamboo knife, steel again being prohibited.

Prima facie there seems to be a close connexion between institutionalized forms of Torajan headhunting and some of their beliefs and practices concerning conception, pregnancy and childbirth. Quite what are we supposed to make of this however? Before turning to provide some kind of answer, it is useful to consider the two series in a little more detail.

Are vaginas ashtrays?

The ostensible parallel between the taking of heads and the birth of children is developed more thoroughly than has so far been shown. Let us consider the sequence in each case and the connexions. First the would-be head hunters are singled out from the rest of the community by being placed under food prohibitions. So are women from the time it becomes known they are pregnant. Both classes of person then are distinguished from the remainder of society. They are also identified as having something in common by being subject to the same kind of food prohibitions.

Once this class of men-who-are-about-to-take-heads and women-who-are-about-to-produce-babies has been identified, they are promptly distinguished from one another. Whereas headhunting men are required to come into close proximity with octopuses (wearing dripping shells), women are strictly forbidden close contact (eating). Now this class has been internally differentiated the question comes of how the two are related. This is established by the next two stages. The two sections of the class are shown to be inter-dependent. In the headhunting ritual warriors are made dependent for the success of their trip, and indeed their lives, upon women, just as in life women are held to be dependent on men for being able successfully to produce babies. The relation between these two processes is, however, carefully distinguished. While women become pregnant by men (properly

their regular partners) outside their menstrual periods, men become able to take heads through blood obtained from women (who are not their regular partners) during their menses. (One could produce similar antithetical relations of wooden penises, which do not themselves produce fluid and flesh penises which produce fluid by ejaculation.) The distinction between the two sequences is, however, rigorously repeated. The one thing one cannot do in the course of obtaining blood and tobacco is touch a woman for sexual purposes. Abortion of children is thought to come about because the semen was not good (i.e. white and whole); whereas the raid will be abortive if women do not produce white whole rice. (That this is not ordinary food preparation is made clear by it being done alone, as opposed to in groups, and at night instead of by day.)

Once the inter-dependence of the two sexes has been established, the next stages in the sequences stress the parallels between the two kinds of activity, although by the differing natures of the two processes it is difficult to establish the identical sequence. For example, dropping ash into an enemy mortar or into someone's mouth must of necessity take place after one has departed on the raid, while the identification of the taking of heads and the actual labour through both beginning at night must occur earlier. At key points also the distinction between the two series is reiterated. That is confusing sexual approaches with headhunting in the absolute ban on @i[any] sexual molestation of the enemy. Headhunting here does not permit general rape, pillage and fun. Also, whereas the number of children produced is a matter of great importance, the number of heads collected is largely immaterial. Finally the connexion is confirmed in the parallel fates of women who die in childbirth and men who die while headhunting.

In the next stage the products of the respective activities are identified closely. The hunters croon to the heads, nurse them, feed them banana and so on just as mothers do their children. They are even addressed by the same names and endearments. At the same time successful head hunters and women who have given birth are identified again by both being barred from immediately re-entering the community and the link between babies and their source (the umbilicus) and the heads and theirs' (the head hunters) is signalled with ginger (sharp, and so a 'symbolic' means of separation?) and dry rice (the first stage before transformation in cooking?).

The identification of pregnant women and headhunting men is, of course, completed in one sense with the achievement of the desired product (babies and heads). So, appropriately, the next stages stress the distinction between the two in the course of separation of products from producers, which is necessary for the final integration into their respective roles in society. In the course of separation, the women try to seize the skulls from the men, just as men in a sense take the children away from their mothers as part of the inclusion of the new-born into their fathers' families. At the same time the role of the producers is de-emphasized by attributing responsibility for production ultimately to a class of spirits, which is significantly the same in both instances. And the relation of the two sexes, detached from immediate production, is now rephrased in terms of both antithesis and complementarity in the antiphonal songs which they sing.

For, whereas through childbirth depletion of the community through the death of members is replenished by the birth of new insiders, through headhunting the threatened depletion of the community by the activity of enemies is diminished by the destruction of outsiders. So while physical death of members can only be annulled by the birth of insiders, social death (recognized in mortuary rites) can only be annulled by the death of outsiders who must, in turn, be incorporated - like children into society - into the collective, and visible, consciousness of the community. All processes must have an end, if they are to be distinguished at all, and the full integration of the skull which will remain in a special place in the village requires the removal of the flesh which identified it with the living just as the baby must be separated from its mother in order for it to live. And just as the creation of new life and its separation from its source must be part of the natural process of continuity, so is the inclusion of the skull. Hence bamboo is used to signal natural separation (one which would extend

logically not only to birth but to natural death) as opposed to steel, which is associated with the unnatural disjuncture brought about by the cultural requirements of killing.

Structuralist explanations

The connection which the Bare'e-speaking Torajan ethnography suggests between the taking of heads and the process of conception and birth is of kind which is often called 'structuralist'. Briefly then let us consider what the structure is supposed to be, how such an approach is claimed to 'explain' the data and what light it may shed on Torajan culture.

Now a case has been made out that another Austronesian-speaking people make play of similar analogies. In an elegant piece entitled 'Siamese twins, birds and the double helix', George Milner attempts to explain the Samoan custom of tattooing adult men, an operation which is remarkably extensive, extremely painful and not infrequently fatal because of death through septicaemia. He starts with a Samoan myth of how two well-known goddesses (who had previously been Siamese twins, joined back to back) swam to Fiji where they met two men who taught them how to tattoo. They were told to remember the following message: 'Tattoo the women, but don't tattoo the men.' The twins repeated the message as they swam back but near the coast of Samoa they spotted an edible shell on the seabed and dived to get it. When they re-surfaced they carried on repeating the message but this had now become: 'Tattoo the men, but don't tattoo the women.' (1969: 15-16) This is why men, not women, are tattooed.

Turning from folk exegesis to the analysis of the structure of Samoan belief and practice, Milner makes use of three sets of complementary oppositions (1969: 17):

Nature : Culture Male : Female Pain : Pleasure

Following Levi-Strauss (1966: 119), Milner considers whether tattooing may then not be an answer to an unspoken riddle which runs something like (1969: 20-21):

Why do women have children, with pain and at the risk of death?

Why do men have children, without pain and at no risk of death?

To which the solution is:

(When) men grow up, they are tattooed

(When) women grow up, they bear children.

In place of the Samoan solution, the Torajan one would run:

(When) men grow up, they hunt heads (in danger and risking death)

(When) women grow up, they bear children (in danger and risking death)

The natural risks encountered by women are complemented by the cultural risks faced by men. While childbirth is naturally painful to women, the children it yields are pleasurable to men. Tattooing is painful to men, but Milner notes that women confess to obtaining great pleasure and excitement from watching it being done. One might note the parallel with Torajan women excitement over the sight of heads. Finally, in the Torajan example, the two processes are further linked by a complementary relationship, a sort of exchange.

Women need the natural assistance of men to bear children

Men need the cultural assistance of women to obtain heads.

If one wished to express the logical relationship of headhunting and childbirth among the Toraja, one might perhaps sum it up as follows:

Women give life to insiders (so preserving the continuity of the group)

Men take life from outsiders (so averting threats to the group)

So the two activities are complementary ways of ensuring social welfare. As an exercise in what is rather grandiosely called ‘structural logic’, it all looks extremely neat. Milner, however, rounds off his own argument by wondering if he has not merely succeeded in turning ‘whether deliberately or not, what to them are exciting, sacred, deeply-felt, beautiful, precious things, into cold and colourless concepts’ (1969: 21). So let me conclude in a similar vein by returning to the question of what exactly are we to make of the ostensible cultural connexion between headhunting and childbirth.²

If, for the moment, one allows that the ethnography presented in Adriani and Kruyt’s accounts is not as clear-cut as I arrange it here, one still wonders how Downs, in ploughing through the ethnography, failed to perceive the connexion, apparently reiterated endlessly, between headhunting and childbirth. It is always difficult to say why someone did not do something. Nonetheless the suspicion arises that a factor may have been the requirement of demonstrating the extent to which Torajan headhunting is an exemplification of Dutch structural models,³ with their insistence upon the centrality of the two warring halves of the cosmos.

There may be other reasons why such an interpretation was not picked up. Simplifying somewhat, the style of Dutch structuralism, which is the tradition within which Downs was attempting to write, conceives of structure as something what is manifest in the organization of collective representations. At its fullest such a structure is total, in the sense that it pervades every aspect of social life from the organization of social space (be it the entire society, residential units, or the house) to the relations of exchange from women to goods between social groups,⁴ to the structure of the cosmos and the self. Deviations from the ideal are usually argued to be due to historical change or the interference of practicalities in the elaboration of complex ideals. This structure is generally represented in two ways.

In its first, and classical, expression, structure tends to be conceived of as a spatial arrangement, which, at its fullest, consists of a five-part model arranged in terms of a centre opposed to four peripheral units commonly oriented in terms of the cardinal directions. Within this arrangement are to be found further oppositions, between centre and periphery and between paired peripheral segments themselves. The structure is held to contain its own dynamic, which is a clockwise movement (sometimes starting from and ending in the centre). It will be apparent that such a structure may serve at once as a spatial template, a principle of classification, a numerological device and as a model of process. As such total manifestations are relatively rare in Indonesia, it has proved necessary to detach the notion of structure from its observable manifestations and to think of it as a basic cognitive process by which the natural and social worlds are structured in terms of dual, or complementary, opposition (like the warring halves of the cosmos, noted earlier), the full-blown systems sometimes recorded by ethnographers, merely being the culminating point of such a cognitive process. Neither rescension lends itself particularly to exploring the significance of extended parallels between analogous series.

Such a model is also easy to criticize. In its spatial guise the range of observed forms are so great that, unless one assumes the ideal first and reads all exceptions as ‘deviations’, there is no particular ground to infer it to be the ideal in the first place. And when spelled out, as does say Barnes in his

² I omit recourse to a pseudo-universalist argument such as Bruno Bettelheim’s to the effect that female envy of male genitals is part of a much broader mutual envy at the functions of the opposite sex, which could here be read as suggesting that headhunting is the male equivalent of childbirth.

³ On which see P.E. de Josselin de Jong (1983) developed in such sacred ancestral works as van Ossenbruggen (1916), van Wouden and J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong (both 1935) and Onvlee (1949).

⁴ They place particular stress on the importance of asymmetric prescriptive connubium, in other words what would happen if people systematically married into the class of Mother’s Brother’s Daughter (real or classificatory), which produces organized non-reciprocal exchange between groups. In the absence of very many convincing cases of this, there has been endless debate about whether such systems are ever really prescriptive and whether this would have to be at the level of some ‘ideal’ or whether it must actually be statistically significant.

monograph on Kédang (1974), as a clockwise motion around a square, it looks curiously trite. As an underlying cognitive process it is both unfalsifiable and over-determined. In other words, there is neither a satisfactory means of knowing whether the process is at work in any instance or not, and it is possible to read almost any data as structured according to dual principles if one so wishes. Finally a weakness of both versions is that they are so loosely defined at key points - for instance the notions of 'opposition' or 'inversion' (when the 'content' of dually derived categories unaccountably seems to reverse) - and rest upon epistemological premises so vague that the method can always be claimed to work.

We have seen that elucidation of the analogy between two processes does not fit easily with recourse to Dutch notions of structure. Are there others that might do better? Milner's approach, for instance, draws somewhat cautiously upon the style of structural analysis associated with the work of Levi-Strauss, where structure is firmly located at the level of fundamental cognitive proclivities of the human mind, if not identified with its actual structure. Is this then the solution to the problem? It would provide the necessary ground for arguing both the relevance of comparing Samoa and Toraja-land and the ability of Western analysts to develop what seem often partly formed indigenous logical systems. The beauty of the method is that it can make sense of cultural materials where local informants are unable or unwilling to articulate indigenous criteria of interpretation, if these indeed exist. As a result it is a boon to anthropologists confronting the intractability of culture or, as some might see it, the bloody-mindedness of its members.

Unfortunately this way out, rather like recourse to the whisky bottle, is as soothing as it is illusory. As I have discussed various reasons why this is so in some detail elsewhere,⁵ one illustration will suffice. Lévi-Straussian structuralism draws ultimately on mathematical set theory. Now the problem of set theory is that it is too powerful. It is capable of providing a formulation which will account for, and so in a sense 'explain', the occurrence of any set of numbers *even if these are generated at random*. In other words, to the extent that structuralism draws on set theory, it can interpret collective representations as systematic, even when any connexion would be entirely accidental or non-existent. In short, the order anthropologists have established in some of the ingenious structural analyses of recalcitrant cultures which have appeared over the last twenty years may well reflect transports of academic delirium rather than any serious confrontation with the material. Further, in assuming that people in the culture in question have the same absolute assumptions about the processes of specifying and naming phenomena and of the logic and rationality necessary to link the 'data', structuralism has to make an appeal to a universalism which is circular and begs the question. It must assume a comparability of cognitive processes, which it requires to show provide the answer to puzzles like the unasked question.

At a more mundane level there are serious weaknesses in much structural method. The reader might like to reflect on the intellectual jiggery-pokery which I (deliberately) introduced into the last paragraph of the section entitled *Are vaginas ashtrays?* First, nothing in my previous analysis, nor the ethnography offered a justification for importing the categories of nature and culture (which are in fact part of our own cultural heritage, deriving from the Greek distinction between *phusis* and *nomos*, and not yet shown to apply to the Toraja). The 'logic' is at best tendentious, at worst spurious. If the Toraja had used steel knives to attack the drying head, I would merely have to have said that it proved the opposition between natural processes of childbirth and the ultimately cultural nature of headhunting. It will be obvious also that I have had to take a pretty liberal reading of the evidence to connect the umbilicus with head hunters as linking product and source. By way of another example:

⁵ These include the failure to distinguish carefully between complementary and polar opposition (1978); the failure to consider possible differences in logics and metaphysics (1983); and a general epistemological critique (1987). See also Cohen 1975 and Hallpike 1979: 224-35 on problems of 'logic', 'contradictions' and the status of 'complementary opposition'.

why should I identify wearing an octopus shell with eating its flesh? Both may be regarded as cases of proximity, but equally they differ. If one is keeping the skeleton externally, the other is absorbing the flesh internally. One could continue *ad nauseam*.

There is, of course, a certain intellectual elegance in such analyses. The play on menstrual blood, the use of mortars and so on suggest that if one continued long enough one might even be able to find a rationale in the sequence which starts with octopus and ends with bamboo, or establish collateral evidence for the 'symbolic' association of mouths with vaginas and ash with semen, such that one might end with the vagina-as-ashtray. The drawback of this whole approach is that it assumes that a culture contains some vast Platonist realm of associations upon which myth and ritual draw for their structure and into which the analyst delves to recover the pattern. One might as easily argue that the structure exists only in the ways events like headhunting and childbirth are re-presented on particular occasions. The reader will note that, at various points, I referred to 'data', as if Adriani and Kruyt, let alone Downs, were somehow 'collecting' fixed facts rather than re-creating them and imbuing them with system in the manner of their exposition.

Structuralism is far more an interpretive approach, akin to hermeneutics, than its claims to a stance of detached impartiality suggest. For instance, rice mortars feature in several different cultural contexts (the most obvious is the link to agricultural produce). Without comment, I have implied the sexual connotation to be the essential one in both cases. Without this, of course, the connexion falls very flat.⁶ In other words structuralist analysis quietly imputes its own context of explanation.

Were I to have wished I could have supplied alternative contexts. For a start the analysis would have looked quite different had I started with conception and pregnancy, which might just as well have been linked to the cycle of plant growth and reproduction. Alternatively I could have focused on a spatial model of relatively safe domesticity at the centre of the lived world and the ambiguous nature of the wild beyond which is both a source of danger and a means of replenishing the centre. I might have focused on travelling which seems both a popular male activity and a common metaphor used in shamanistic healing. Davison (1987) has, in fact, done such an analysis to suggest both that the system is far more flexible than structural analysis can allow and that, without a detailed knowledge of indigenous practice, it is at best extremely primitive.

One might well ask in what sense therefore a structural analysis constitutes an explanation of cultural phenomena. We may well be dealing with particular local interpretations of social practice in particular circumstances - after all people rarely wander around explaining to anyone who is prepared to listen what it is all really about. In which case the ethnographer's scribbles are re-presentations and subsequent analysis at best decontextualized re-re-presentations. So the question of how much is due to effete Western academics imagining that what is presumably the fairly stern world of headhunting resembles their intellectual diversions, and how much is 'out there' may itself be false. There is no 'Ur-text' or original practice: there are merely past occasions and past readings all different from each other and gently gilded memories of these. Rather than view beliefs or ritual as a closed system, it might be wiser to consider these as an open field of past practice on which people draw in different ways on different occasions. In which case the question is not how or why such activities are structured as they are, but how people make use of them in different situations.

When all is said and done however, rather as Galileo did under his breath, there is a temptation to say: 'And yet it works!' It is difficult in parts of Indonesia not to be struck by peoples' proclivity for coming up with elegant patterns of the kind we have looked at. My strictures have not been aimed at denying that people may engage in structural interpretations. That is a matter for empirical investigation. What I object to is three closely linked ideas. These are that there is some transcendent

⁶ The structuralist retort that such a diversity of associations will be unravelled by a comprehensive linking of all collective representations still leaves the analyst to decide which is the relevant one in any instance and whether indeed such structures are the necessary, let alone sufficient, conditions for the existence of social practices.

structure behind or beneath social action; that an anthropologist, whose grasp of the language is probably rudimentary in the extreme, is in a better position than the people to understand this structure; and that unfolding, or appealing, to such a structure constitutes an explanation of the institution under analysis. There is after all no reason why peoples with historical and geographical links may not make use of similar techniques of arguing over, or reflecting on, their culture provided we do not make the mistake of thinking that this proves that there is such a thing as a 'culture area' or a 'field of study' (cf. J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong 1935; P.E. de Josselin de Jong 1984). It is such styles of argument which would constitute grounds for remarking on possible similarities.

Until anthropology has reached such heights of sophistication, perhaps we should restrict ourselves to more modest aims and focus a little more on the problems of representing more fully what people do and say about what they do. This said, is there not in point of fact a most remarkable conjunction between Torajan ideas of the link between successful headhunting and emergent manhood and the concluding lines of Kipling's poem? It ends:

Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man. my son!

It is as good an epitaph for a head hunter as any. Unfortunately there are many 'ifs' to be overcome before structuralism can receive a similar accolade.

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