implicit meanings

selected essays in anthropology

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MARY DOUGLAS

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Implicit Meanings

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Mary Douglas is a distinguished international anthropologist. She retired as Professor of Anthropology at University College London, and taught in the USA until 1988. Her books include *Purity and Danger* (1966), *Natural Symbols* (1970), *The World of Goods* (1979), *How Institutions Think* (1986), and *Risk and Blame* (1992).

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Second Edition

Mary Douglas

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Preface, 1999

Starting to do anthropology, no one knows in advance where it is going. These essays mark where the first twenty years of that voyage took me. Anyone interested in belief, religion, and symbols looks to anthropology for insight. These essays are all either saying the same message, or providing some necessary background. The message is that it is useless to look for the meaning of a symbol, useless to take meanings one at a time, item by item, expecting to find something that will translate into our language. Meaning is part of a constructed world, the problem of understanding symbols is how to take a grip on a whole world. What is actually said in words is only the tip of the iceberg. The unspoken understandings are essential. How do we reach the implicit? By studying the classifications by which people decide if an action has been done well or badly, whether it is right or wrong. This is what these essays are saying.

There are two main justifications for anthropology. First is the imperative to make a full record of human society. That has little to do with disappearing cultures and much to do with the huge variety of ways of being human. Those who take on that project usually adopt an area, say the South Pacific, or India, China, or Japan, or the arctic circle, or west, south, east or central Africa, America, or wherever. They become regional experts and with like-minded colleagues they study the varieties of languages, agriculture, religion, and so on within their region.

Second, anthropology feeds the ambition to understand ourselves better by making comparisons with the rest of human kind – call it the project to find meaning. The combination of the two projects gives anthropology its distinctive outlook. Accepting the peculiar stress entailed by that vocation, the major challenge is for the regional specialists to deal with their own prejudice and bias. Somehow they must avoid interpreting everything through local Western lenses. The vast compass of comparisons creates the strain. It is never good enough to say that these other people think differently from us because they are different. Instead of exempting ourselves from the scrutiny, anthropology puts ourselves under it and turns local questions into universal ones. By the comparisons we put ourselves on the line. The anthropologist has to be daring. There must be empathy.

This book follows the second project. Its object is to find meanings. Its method is to universalise foreign and strange beliefs until what seemed at first to be inexplicable is eventually absorbed into our own enlarged experience. To examine the implicit it is necessary to go below beliefs that can be made explicit and to watch how submerged ideas determine action. For example, the idea that dirt is dangerous is mostly implicit. Taboo, for example, has a place in a general idea about forbidden behaviour as the cause of illness. Sink it back into a wider set of ideas and you find a common theory that moral failure causes bodily afflictions. Anthropologists sometimes talk about 'the problem of belief', but beliefs only generate problems when there is disbelief. It is no easier to suspend the one or the other. Belief is a matter of how worlds are constructed, not a matter of personal idiosyncracy. Consider, for example, the conflict between African belief in the dangerousness of sorcerers, and English disbelief. How can people communicate at all when their worlds are built upon such grave discrepancies?

The book has three parts. The first approaches the idea of the implicit by examining ideas which underprop action. The essays in the first section are about the Lele of the Kasai, a people in the Congo among whom I did my fieldwork training. Outsiders to the profession are often witty at the expense of anthropologists' fieldwork, as if it were a ritual requirement, an entry fee. They speak of it as a traditional ceremony of initiation which has taken this form fortuitously; strictly speaking it is unnecessary, anyone who wants to do anthropology without fieldwork will be none the worse. But whoever has the patience to read this first part and go on further will recognise how strongly the Lele themselves have shaped my professional judgment. A writer or traveller who has not been through it, may find it hard to imagine fieldwork as the source of creative understanding. But I think that this effect of prolonged and intense experience is common to most anthropologists.

The second part lets the esoteric African case histories lead into discussing other anthropologists' interpretations. So this is where essays on the structuralist interpretation of myth and ritual belong. Familiar problems of interpretation get their universalising and systematising treatment. Laughter, for example: is it the same thing from one period or place to another? Everyone thinks they know why they laugh and most can recognise a joke. But it is more difficult to say what makes a joke funny. Why do people insult each other and then laugh? Do animals laugh, or is laughter a uniquely human gift? To all these miscellaneous questions I find myself preparing the same general answer. The questions should not be asked as if individuals are non-social beings who laugh and worry on their own: they are social beings who live together, and who collectively shape each others' fears and laughter in standard ways. They act on beliefs they have collectively made. A theory of bodily behaviour is implicit here. The body turns out to be responding sensitively to the society, even the amount of movement that it can use, and the amount of signalling it is supposed to do is regulated. Therefore, if we want to understand symbols, we have to work out some way of comparing collective behaviour.

The main preoccupation which shows in all the essays is communication. The practical problem of belief is how to be believed. Also how to give readable signals. If I do not believe in the power of sorcerers, why is it so difficult to convince the people who are desperately worried about them? Certain symbols calm the anxiety of the sick and even cure barrenness (but which ones?). The strictures of the second part make a jumping off point for the third. The thread that links them is the question of how to interpret claims that moral defects have spoilt the course of nature. The Lele thought that quarrelling spoilt the hunting, the Hadza thought that the presence of a man whose wife was menstruating would spoil the hunting. In both cases the hunting is being used to enforce claims against the neighbours. The collective production of the world has made an environment equipped with set punishments which it will invariably apply so long as everyone wants to believe in its responsiveness to moral failure. With this we are into the basic issue of belief, its relation to society. We have the choice of treating the politicising of nature as something that far-off exotic peoples do, something utterly remote from our own behaviour. Or we can use anthropology to universalise the insights and apply them to the study of risk and environmental protection.

When in 1966 I chose the title *Purity and Danger* with a subtitle referring to theories of pollution I did not imagine that both purity and danger would be linked in a world-wide anxiety about pollution of water and air, and the environment. But by 1970, the topic of 'Environments at risk' (Chapter 16 at the beginning of the third section) had become prominent, and has been ever since. This is why there has to be a special anthropological branch of the theory of knowledge. Thinking about reason and knowledge as they appear within any one society is not so exacting as thinking about knowledge in general with libraries of discordant examples to take into account.

Innatism is a theory of mind which sets the psychologists on the search for universal categories hardwired in the human psyche. Various forms of innatism can be espoused without serious challenge when they surface in Western culture because the counter-evidence can be brushed aside. But anthropologists cannot support supposed universal phobias against snakes, or universal disgust at blood or dirt. I wrote *Purity and Danger* with the express intention of replacing psychologistic ideas about such universal tendencies. Disgust and fear are taught, they are put into the mind by culture and have to be understood in a cultural (not a psychologistic) theory of classification and anomaly.[1]

One of the most important things that anthropology can do is to qualify contemporary theorising about mind and emotion. And from here it can bring sustained criticism to the reading of ancient texts. For example, it has been assumed for two millennia that the animals which the Bible forbids the people of Israel to eat are revolting, disgusting, abominable in one way or another. But over that long period no agreement has been reached about what it is about them that deserves such aversion. Over the last twelve years I have been studying the Book of Numbers[2] and the Book of Leviticus. I have come to the conclusion that the emphasis, as between forbidden and permitted animals, should be reversed. It is always assumed that the forbidden animals are more worthy of scholarly interest and much attention

has been devoted to trying to identify what was so abominable about them. The intriguing problem was the banning of a few creatures, the pig, the camel, the hare and the rockbadger, and certain water creatures, whereas it now seems clear that the interest should have been fastened on to the permitted animals, the few allowed to be eaten.[3]

The last sentence of the original Preface has been misunderstood and rereading it, I can see why, and need to explain. I was writing about how knowledge is founded, that is, about the confidence to believe and trust interpretation. I was reproaching Durkheim for attempting a sociology of knowledge that made a fundamental distinction between post- and pre-scientific knowledge, and for arrogantly supposing that the questions that undermine the bases of knowledge in foreign parts can never raise problems about the foundations of our own knowledge. In a grand rhetorical flourish I declared: 'Surely now it is an anachronism to believe that our world is more securely founded in knowledge than one that is driven by pangolin power.' Some readers thought I had gone off my rocker with a wild claim that something called 'pangolin power' was just as effective as a source of energy for heat and light and communications as modern industrial technology. No! Not at all, far from it – I only meant that knowledge of the world is always founded in trust and faith. The confidence that the Lele had in their cult-based knowledge was secured in the same ways as our confidence in scientific knowledge. The confidence depends on the fact that the system actually works.

There are several obvious weaknesses of essays written thirty or forty years ago. One is due to the change in vocabulary, itself due to changes in public attitudes which anthropologists helped to bring about. I now get a shock to read of 'primitive peoples', 'primitive religion', 'primitive society', 'tribal religions' and 'tribes', terms which have practically disappeared. In those days anthropologists were struggling against a general assumption that moderns were different from 'primitives' and for that argument they needed contrasting terms in order to deny any difference.

NOTES

1. Due no doubt to careless writing I seemed to be proposing a theory of universal fear of or dislike of anomaly, the exact opposite of my central thesis. Edmund Leach subsequently developed an innatist and psychologistic theory of pollution which locates the sacred in anomaly. This was naïve insofar as he allowed his own culture to provide principles for detecting anomaly. E.R. Leach, *Culture and Communication, the Logic by which Symbols are Connected,* Cambridge, 1976. Leach, Introduction to Herbert Hoffman, *Sexual and Asexual Pursuit, a structuralist approach to Greek vase painting,* Royal Anthropological Institute, Occasional Paper 34, 1977, p. 5.
2. Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness, the Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers,* Sheffield, 1993.
3. Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature,* Oxford University Press, forthcoming 1999.

Preface, 1975

By piecing together, context to context, the references the Lele made to animals in their daily life, I reached some understanding of their main fertility cult, centred on the pangolin. If my fieldwork had been more thorough I would have been able to understand better the meaning this scaly ant-eater had for them. Their knowledge was not explicit; it was based on shared, unspoken assumptions. At the grass-roots level of daily behaviour the sense that emerged from their rituals and beliefs posed the problems about implicit forms of communication that I have been pondering ever since, as these essays show. Re-reading them, I see how confused and timid presentation has disguised the unity of theme. I also realise that with better fieldwork this theme would certainly have been shelved. For thanks to the work of others in Central Africa I am even more aware of rich layers of context I left unexplored. Above all, Luc de Heusch's study of the traditions of Luba royalty has made me see the gap between the daily-bread, common-sense world that I recorded and the high tradition of Central African cosmology in which the Lele beliefs fit so well. Disengaging certain recurring threads and identifying them as the warp of the different local cosmologies, he has greatly advanced the analysis of implicit forms of communication. If only the material and the theory had been available earlier.

The Lele cult of the pangolin was performed by a few initiates who alone could eat its flesh and were sworn not to reveal its secrets. It was one of many cults, each vested with its communal property of esoteric knowledge. I was never made privy to those secrets. Apart from the aristocratic clan, no women were admitted to knowledge of the cult. If I had stayed longer, and if I had known what theoretical uses the unveiling of their secrets would have served, I could have learnt much from a formidably clever and witty princess from the Eastern Lele. But structural analysis had not at that time redeemed myth and ritual from folklorism. Only now do I glimpse, in the pages of *Le Roi ivre* (de Heusch, 1973), the

possible sources of the pangolin's power. For, though I knew that this fish-like tree-dweller was the potent sign for a union of heaven and earth, I did not know that just such a union was celebrated in different ways by other tribes of the region. The pangolin was said to be a chief. The sacral kingship of the Lunda, Luba, and Bushong was also instituted in a marriage between celestial and earthly powers and in the rituals and myths about it are many echoes of Lele custom. De Heusch's book makes me see in very different light the brief, mysterious little tales of the origin of the Lele, which I dismissed as truncated and defective. Rather as the synoptic gospels need the structural analyses of John and the Pauline epistles for their exegesis, so the miracles of the pangolin need, for their full meaning to emerge, to be related to the cosmic themes of divine kingship and to the constitution of human nature and the planetary system. All that is too late for me now. Access to that implicit public language (Bernstein, 1972) from which the sacred canopy was woven would have given me enough work for the rest of my days, simply to analyse it. Moreover, the question of why the pangolin had so much power over human destiny would have been satisfactorily answered within the terms of the culture itself. Because my material was poor, I was driven to consider the matter under its more general aspect. In a comparative perspective, the question of implicit knowledge confronts the question of cognitive relativity so that they come to form only one single problem, as I shall try to explain below.

Among the Lele I found that rules of hygiene and etiquette, rules of sex and edibility fed into or were derived from submerged assumptions about how the universe works. It was evident that a very satisfactory fit, between the structure of thought and the structure of nature as they thought it, was given in the way that their thought was rooted in community life. Further, the latter was furnished with an armoury of support by this intellectually impressive fit. If we can understand how the inarticulate, implicit areas of Lele consciousness are constituted, we should be able to apply the lesson to ourselves. If they use appeals to the a priori in nature as weapons of coercion or as fences around communal property, it is probable that we do likewise. The anthropologist is inclined to respect the intellectual capacities of the tribe he studies. There is a built-in professional bias to believe that our own implicit knowledge is likely to be of the same order as theirs. Consequently the anthropologist who realises that their idea of nature is the product of their relations with one another finds it of critical importance to know just where and why our own ideas about the world are exempt from sociological analysis.

Around the beginning of this century Durkheim demonstrated the social factors controlling thought. He demonstrated it for one portion of humanity only, those tribes whose members were united by mechanical solidarity. Somehow he managed to be satisfied that his critique did not apply to modern industrial man or to the findings of science. One may ask why his original insights were never fully exploited in philosophical circles. Nowadays they are being joyously rediscovered by phenomenologists on the one hand, and

ethnomethodologists on the other. Neither scarcely pauses to ask how their project differs from his, or why his remained so little used. If Durkheim did not push his thoughts on the social determination of knowledge to their full and radical conclusion, the barrier that inhibited him may well have been the same that has stopped others from carrying his programme through. It seems that he cherished two unquestioned assumptions that blocked him. One was that he really believed that primitives are utterly different from us. A week's fieldwork would have brought correction. For him, primitive groups are organised by similarities; their members are committed to a common symbolic life. We by contrast are diversified individuals, united by exchange of specialised services. The contrast is a very interesting one, full of value, but it does not distinguish between primitives and moderns. It cuts across both categories. However, believing in this sharp difference encouraged him to harbour the idea of another difference between us and primitives. Their knowledge of the world could readily be understood as unanchored to any fixed material points, and secured only by the stability of the social relations which generated it and which it legitimised. For them he evolved a brilliant epistemology which set no limits to the organising power of mind. He could not say the same for ourselves. His other assumption allowed him to reserve part of our knowledge from his own sociological theory. This was his belief in objective scientific truth, itself the product of our own kind of society, with its scope for individual diversity of thought. His concern to protect his own cognitive commitment from his own scrutiny prevented him from developing his sociology of knowledge. His biographer, Steven Lukes (1973: 495), says:

> Durkheim was really maintaining two different theses which he failed to separate from one another because he did not distinguish between the truth of a belief and the acceptance of a belief as true. The first was the important philosophical thesis that there is a non-context-dependent or non-culture-dependent sense of truth (as correspondence to reality) such that, for example, primitive magical beliefs could be called 'false', mythological ideas could be characterised as 'false in relation to things', scientific truths could be said to 'express the world as it is' and the Pragmatists' claim that the truth is essentially variable could be denied.

With one arm he was brandishing the sabre of sociological determinism, and with the other he was protecting from any such criticism the intellectual achievements of his own culture. He believed in things, in 'the world as it is', in an unvarying reality and truth. The social construction of reality applied fully to them, the primitives, and only partially to us. And so, for this contradiction, his central thesis deserved to remain obscure and his programme unrealised.

Anyone who takes on the biography of a famous thinker is in a dilemma if he finds he is obliged to toss overboard as useless and wrong his subject's most cherished theory. Normally the would-be historian would have to choose either to look for a worthier subject or to spend the next ten years of research explaining how the thinker acquired an undeserved reputation. Steven Lukes's massive biography of Durkheim makes him a great expert on the man. He must have felt this dilemma when he decided that the contrast of sacred–profane was an empirically inadequate dichotomy which vitiates Durkheim's analysis in important ways (1973: 24–8). This judgment attaints also the distinguished group of Durkheim's colleagues who made central use of the contrast in their work. Durkheim himself thought the dichotomy was central to his theoretical position. Even if he was mistaken here as well, it is cavalier to dismiss an idea which closely parallels Marx's important remarks on fetishism. I shall argue below that the latter become a more powerful instrument of social criticism if added to Durkheim's analysis, once that is purged of the reserves he made on behalf of modern science.

Durkheim's work was all focused upon the relation of the individual to the group. The excitement he aroused among his close associates came from his claim to have discovered how the individual internalises the prescriptions of the group. The discovery is about the process of categorisation. He claimed to reveal the social factors which bound the categories and relate them to one another. When the process has worked through, the so-called individual is shown using a set of conceptual tools generated from outside himself and exerting over him the authority of an external, objective power. For Durkheim, sacred and profane are the two poles of the religious life on which the relation between individual and society is worked out. The sacred is that which the individual recognises as having ultimate authority, as being other than himself and greater than himself. The dichotomy profane and sacred is not isomorphic with that between individual and society. It is not correct to interpret the individual as profane and society as sacred, for each individual recognises in himself something of the sacred. Sacredness inheres in the moral law erected by consensus to which each individual himself subscribes. The sacred is constructed by the efforts of individuals to live together in society and to bind themselves to their agreed rules. It is characterised by the dangers alleged to follow upon breach of the rules. Belief in these dangers acts as a deterrent. It defends society in its work of self-creation and self-maintenance. Because of the dangers attributed to breach of the rules, the sacred is treated as if it were contagious and can be recognised by the insulating behaviour of its devotees. This is roughly fair to what Durkheim says of the sacred in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and how it is used by Hertz and Mauss.

To reject the concept of sacred contagion is to reject everything Durkheim contributed to comparative religion. From a present-day perspective, after fifty years of social

anthropology (Kuper, 1973), it is hard to see how such a fruitful approach to religion should cause so much difficulty. One might reject it indeed if one were unable to separate the insight itself from the moral and political conclusions Durkheim and others drew. But this is the elementary exercise of scholarly judgment. Let us address the matter afresh, since so many streams of thought are now ready to converge just here.

Durkheim's theory of the sacred is a theory about how knowledge of the universe is socially constructed. The known universe is the product of human conventions and so is the idea of God, as its ultimate point of appeal. Durkheim saw that all religious beliefs are pulled this way and that in men's haggling and justifying of ways to live together. He could see that in all small, isolated tribal societies men create their entire knowledge of their universe in this manner. They covenant implicitly to breed a host of imaginary powers, all dangerous, to watch over their agreed morality and to punish defectors. But having tacitly colluded to set up their awesome cosmos, the initial convention is buried. Delusion is necessary. For unless the sacred beings are credited with autonomous existence, their coercive power is weakened and with it the fragile social agreement which gave them being. A good part of the human predicament is always to be unaware of the mind's own generative powers and to be limited by concepts of the mind's own fashioning.

For any fundamentalist who would not wish to allow that men's ideas of God have to be refracted through a social dimension, the theory of sacred contagion is straight impiety. One can fully sympathise with the sense of threat and blasphemy. The religious believer normally uses a theory of cognitive precariousness within the framework of his doctrine; his theology provides areas of illusion and scepticism which are clearly bounded so that his own faith is secure while everything else is vanity and flux. But here is an attack on all religious cognition and therefore one to be resisted. One can well understand the initial religious hostility to Durkheim's rationalism. But hostility breeds the wrong atmosphere for philosophising. A little more calm and open reflection on this theme could have shown the devout that what Durkheim claimed for the social construction of reality in primitive society was no more destructive of fundamentalist Christianity than it was of secular theories of knowledge. It is no more easy to defend non-context-dependent, non-culture-dependent beliefs in things or objective scientific truth than beliefs in gods and demons. Clearly Durkheim intended to challenge existing theories of knowledge, for he meant to offer his account of social determinants to qualify or supplement Kant's subjective determinants of perception. Surely Steven Lukes is right to insist that the 1914 war broke the developing thread of that idea. The challenge remained incomplete and few have taken it seriously.

When an important thinker presents two intellectual positions which contradict one another, a sensible procedure is to choose the most original and push it to its logical conclusion. If it is a good theory it will end by transforming the more established one. Durkheim used the sacred–profane dichotomy to develop a completely sociological theory of knowledge. The theory comes to a halt in his thinking when it reaches objective scientific

truth. It peters out when it seems about to conflict with the most widely held beliefs of his own day. Therefore we should take the sacred–profane dichotomy and see if in its most extreme application it does not engulf fundamentalist theories of knowledge as well as fundamentalist religious doctrines.

The first essential character by which the sacred is recognisable is its dangerousness. Because of the contagion it emanates the sacred is hedged by protective rules. The universe is so constituted that all its energies are transformed into dangers and powers which are diverted from or tapped by humans in their dealings with the sacred. The sacred is the universe in its dynamic aspect. The second essential character of the sacred is that its boundaries are inexplicable, since the reasons for any particular way of defining the sacred are embedded in the social consensus which it protects. The ultimate explanation of the sacred is that this is how the universe is constituted; it is dangerous because that is what reality is like. The only person who holds nothing sacred is the one who has not internalised the norms of any community. With this definition in hand one should divest oneself of any preconceived ideas of what is going to be discovered to be sacred in any given cognitive scheme. If there are sprites and goblins which do not protect their sanctuaries with sanctions unleashing mysterious dangers, then they have nothing to do with the sacredness we are investigating. The definition quickly identifies the sacred which in Durkheim's universe is not to be profaned: it is scientific truth. In Steven Lukes's universe it would seem to be commitment to a non-context-dependent sense of truth (as correspondence to reality). Each of them risks a big sacrifice to his deity: both risk professional success and the acclaim of posterity by protecting their sacred thing from profanation. Both demonstrate in their work itself the validity of the sacred–profane dichotomy. It is entirely understandable that Durkheim should have internalised unquestioningly the categories of nineteenth-century scientific debate since he strove to have an honourable place in that very community from which the standards of conduct emanated. His blind spot, for all the theoretical weakness it brought him, at least vindicates once and for all the value of his central theory of the sacred. At that time science itself was unselfconscious about how its edicts were formulated and followed. But science has now diversified. It has moved from the primitive mythological state of a small isolated community to an international body of highly specialised individuals among whom consensus is hard to achieve. According to his theory, such a new kind of scientific community would be hard put to identify anything we could have recognised as sacred fifty years ago. So he is vindicated again by the passage of time which has made 'correspondence-to-reality' a fuzzier concept than it used to be.

In his Inaugural Lecture to the Collège de France, Michel Foucault focuses on the procedural rules which control discourse, including those which separate true from false (1971). He observes that humanity's long drive to establish truth in discourse has gone through many historical transformations. First, starting with the Greek poets of the sixth century, true discourse was the prophecy which announced what would happen, helped to bring it about and commanded men's assent to its justice. True discourse then was ritual

action in which destiny was seen and justified. A century later, by a shift from action to speech, the truth of discourse was to be found in the correspondence between the form of the statement and the object to which it referred. Since then, while correspondence between word and reality has remained important, a new concern for a new kind of truth developed from the sixteenth century, with the scientific revolution. Its peculiar characteristic is its vast investment in specialised techniques of measurement and testing and in authoritative institutions for proclaiming its truths. Each of these phases he treats as systems of exclusion which impose on discourse their prohibitions and privileges. Foucault speaks of discourse as a continuing social process setting up controls and boundaries and shrines of worship in a way that recalls Durkheim. But whereas Durkheim venerates the system of controls, Foucault savagely denounces it. His work celebrates a current phase in the evolution of the ways in which discourse requires a division between truth and falsehood. The present concern is focused on subjective truth; this is the day of consciousness. A sophisticated doubt dogs other forms of truth when they are presented as god-given objective facts with the right to exclude from and to control the discourse. This is a generation deeply interested in the liberation of consciousness from control. It is normal radical criticism to enjoy unveiling the fetishes of past generations. But a philosophy intending to be radical could well sift Durkheim more thoroughly and make use of his theory of sacredness as a tool for relativising the sacred shibboleths of others who would limit and transform the current discourse.

This is why it is timely to inquire again about the philosopher's bogy of relativism. Bracket aside Durkheim's wish to protect from defilement the values of his own community as a distracting illustration of the value of his theory – then follow his thought through to the bitter end: we seem to have a thoroughly relativised theory of knowledge. The boundaries which philosophers rally instinctively to protect themselves from the threat of relativism would seem to hedge something very sacred. The volumes which are written to defend that thing testify to its obscurity and difficulty of access. Relativity would seem to sum up all the threats to our cognitive security. Were truth and reality to be made context-dependent and culture-dependent by relativising philosophy, then the truth status of that philosophy is itself automatically destroyed. Therefore, anyone who would follow Durkheim must give up the comfort of stable anchorage for his cognitive efforts. His only security lies in the evolution of the cognitive scheme, unashamedly and openly culture-bound, and accepting all the challenges of that culture. It is part of our culture to recognise at last our cognitive precariousness. It is part of our culture to be sophisticated about fundamentalist claims to secure knowledge. It is part of our culture to be forced to take aboard the idea that other cultures are rational in the same way as ours. Their organisation of experience is different, their objectives different, their successes and weak points different too. The refusal to privilege one bit of reality as more absolutely real, one kind of truth more true, one intellectual process more valid, allows the original comparative project dear to Durkheim to go forward

at last. In the last essay in this collection I try to show how, when relativism is less feared, new questions can be asked about cognition. This project has waited very long to be launched. I venture a Durkheimian speculation on its tardiness.

Relativism is the common enemy of philosophers who are otherwise very much at odds with one another. To avoid its threat of cognitive precariousness, they shore up their theory of knowledge by investing some part of it with certain authority. For some there is fundamental reality in the propositions of logic or in mathematics. For others, the physical world is real and thought is a process of coming to know that real external reality – as if there could be any way of talking about it without preconceiving its constitutive boundaries. Whatever position is taken, the philosopher can be charged by his opponents with committing his theory to an arbitrarily selected and impossible-to-defend fundamental reality. The disestablishing anthropologist finds in W.V.O. Quine a sympathetic philosopher. Quine's whole 'ontic commitment' is to the evolving cognitive scheme itself (1960). This implies a theory of knowledge in which the mind is admitted to be actively creating its universe. An active theory of knowledge fits the needs of a radicalised Durkheimian theory. But active theories of knowledge seem to be especially vulnerable to seduction. Either the thinker in his old age endows a bit of his scheme with priviledged concreteness or his followers do. Instead of being seen as a process of active organisation, knowledge is then taken to be a matter of stubbing a toe on or being bombarded by solid reality or being passively processed by the power of real ideas, a matter of discovering what is there rather than of inventing it.

An active theory of knowledge allows full weight to historical and sociological factors. Herein, I suggest, lies the reason for its fragility. It eschews a solid anchorage; it is committed to movement and revision. By definition it runs counter to all the common-sense theories of knowledge which support separate intellectual disciplines using lower orders of abstraction. In these, the bit of the cosmos under specialised scrutiny is being busily furnished with indisputable hardware. Each discipline turns its fundamental knowledge into a piece of professional property. The click between its concepts and the real nature they discover validates the practitioner's status. There are some examples below of how contemporary anthropology tends to endow bits of its data arbitrarily with extra reality. Consequently at every lower level of theorising, fundamentalists theories of knowledge are continually winning the day, until a new theoretical revolution grades their discovered realities as so much junk. No wonder, on such a contrary base, an unanchored, unpropertied theory of knowledge is vulnerable. But it suffers a worse disability. It has no hard core to use as weapon in arguments of a political or moral kind. It can only patiently expound the whole of its coherent scheme. Bludgeonless, such a theory of mind seems doomed to be remote and trivial in relation to human affairs. For, as Durkheim saw for the world of the primitive, and as Wittgenstein for all worlds, the known cosmos is constructed for helping arguments of a practical kind.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau has described an evening he spent with David Hume (Guébenno, 1966: 169). At first he had been suspicious of the latter's good will. Hume's contribution to

their conversation seems to have consisted mostly of long silences, interspersed with 'Tut, tut!' or 'My dear Sir!' But such was the reassurance conveyed along these restricted verbal channels, that Rousseau's heart overflowed with affection and Hume recalled a 'tender scene'. If Durkheim and Wittgenstein could have spent such an inspired evening, how few words would they have needed to reach agreement. With a few tut, tuts Wittgenstein could soon have shattered Durkheim's faith in objective scientific truth. He would have put it to him that even the truths of mathematics are established by social process and protected by convention (Bloor, 1973, Wittgenstein, 1956). He would have shown him how much more elegant and forceful his theory of the sacred would be, stripped of exceptions made in honour of science. Thus encouraged, for his part Durkheim would have guaranteed to cognitive relativism the vigorous, questioning framework that would redeem it from triviality. A new epistemology would have been launched, anchored to ongoing social reality, and dedicated to developing a unified theory of consciousness.

Marx and Freud were not sanguine when they unveiled the secret places of the mind. Marx, when he showed ideology for a flimsy justification of control, shook the great chancelleries. The scene of anguished hate and fear which Freud exposed to view was just as alarming at a more intimate level. The first looked to a long-span historical determination of political forms and the second to a short-span determination of the emotions in family life. Between these two, another intermediate span is necessary that Durkheim's insights were ready to supply: the social determination of culture. It should have become the central critical task of philosophy in this century to integrate these three approaches. If Durkheim's contribution was accepted only in a narrow circle, his friends have to admit frankly that it was his own fault. When he entered that great debate, he muffed his cue. He could have thrown upon the screen X-ray pictures just as disturbing as either of the others. He could have been telling us that our colonisation of each other's minds is the price we pay for thought. He could have been warning us that our home is bugged; that though we try to build our Jerusalem, others must tear up our bridges and run roads through our temple, the paths we use will lead in directions we have not chosen. Woe! he should have cried, to those who never read the small print, who listen only to the spoken word and naïvely believe its promises. Bane to those who claim that their sacred mysteries are true and that other people's sacred is false; bane to those who claim that it is within the nature of humans to be free of each other. Begging us to turn round and listen urgently to ourselves, his speech would have disturbed the complacency of Europe as deeply as the other two. But instead of showing us the social structuring of our minds, he showed us the minds of feathered Indians and painted aborigines. With unforgivable optimism he declared that his discoveries applied to them only. He taught that we have a more genial destiny. For this mistake our knowledge of ourselves has been delayed by half a century. Time has passed. Marx and Freud have been heard. Wittgenstein has had his say. Surely now it is an anachronism to believe that our world is more securely founded in knowledge than one that is driven by pangolin power.

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Part I

Essays on the implicit

Introduction
1975

It seems hardly worth noting that some matters are deemed more worthy of scholarship than others. If there is any one idea on which the present currents of thought are agreed it is that at any given moment of time the state of received knowledge is backgrounded by a clutter of suppressed information. It is also agreed that the information is not suppressed by reason of its inherent worthlessness, nor by any passive process of forgetting: it is actively thrust out of the way because of difficulties in making it fit whatever happens to be in hand. The process of 'foregrounding' or 'relevating' now receives attention from many different quarters. But for obvious reasons the process of 'backgrounding' is less accessible. The chapters in this section focus on 'backgrounding'. They identify a number of different situations in which information is pushed out of sight. At one extreme it is automatically destroyed by reason of its conflict with other information. For example, the continuity of human with animal life is a piece of information which is consistently relegated to oblivion by all the social criteria which allow humans to use a discontinuity between nature and culture for judging good behaviour. The history of the behavioural sciences has been to reclaim bit by bit and make significant to us our common animal nature.

By a less extreme process of relegation, some information is treated as self-evident. The logical steps by which other knowledge has to be justified are not required. This kind of information, never being made explicit, furnishes the stable background on which more coherent meanings are based. It is referred to obliquely as a set of known truths about the earth, the weight and powers of objects, the physiology of humans, and so on. This is a completely different pigeonhole of oblivion from the first. Whereas the former knowledge is destroyed by being labelled untrue, the latter is regarded as too true to warrant discussion. It provides the necessary unexamined assumptions upon which ordinary discourse takes place. Its stability is an illusion, for a large part of discourse is dedicated to creating, revising, and obliquely affirming this implicit background, without ever directing explicit attention upon it. When the background of assumptions upholds what is verbally explicit, meanings

come across loud and clear. Through these implicit channels of meaning, human society itself is achieved, clarity, and speed of clue-reading ensured. In the elusive exchange between explicit and implicit meanings a perceived-to-be-regular universe establishes itself precariously, shifts, topples, and sets itself up again.

A third kind of backgrounding stems from the first two. This is the creation of dirt, rubbish, and defilement. Humble rules of hygiene turn out to be rationally connected with the way that the Lele cosmos is constructed. Rejection of body dirt and rejection of inedible animals is an indivisible part of the foregrounding processes by which the universe is classified and known. For example, there cannot be any possibility of truth, in a cognitive system such as that of the Lele, for the notion that menstrual blood is harmless or that its contagion is not conveyed through food cooked on a fire tended by a menstruating woman. The whole cosmos would topple if such a piece of tendentious and obviously false information were accepted.

The essay on 'Pollution' (Chapter 7) opens the topic in a strictly anthropological vein. Defilement and magic were not thought to be worthy of a nineteenth-century scholar's attention and to poke into the processes of thought which attached the label of impurity was suspect in the same way as the investigation of sex or death in our day. In consequence, a lot of unexplained assumptions have lumbered the study of primitive religion. This paper was being editorially processed before *Purity and Danger* was drafted, though it was published two years later – producing an encyclopaedia is necessarily a stately business. The central theme of *Purity and Danger* is stated here: each tribe actively construes its particular universe in the course of an internal dialogue about law and order. The currently accepted tribal wisdom invests the physical world it knows with a powerful backlash on moral disorder. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann say much that is valuable about the social construction of reality (1961). But, like other followers of Alfred Schutz, they make an unnecessary and misleading distinction between two kinds of reality, one social and one not social. This prevents them from being able to appreciate the social uses of the environment as a weapon of mutual coercion. If they could be more radical in their thought, if they could admit that the environment is for enlisting support, and therefore that all reality is social reality, then they could embark on the comparative project. How many kinds of appeals to the objective environment can be used to drum up support? What sort of typology of morality-sustaining universes could be made that would embrace ours and those of primitive societies? It is easier to see that tribesmen project the moral order upon their universe than to recognise the same process working among ourselves. Therefore the two essays, one on 'Environments at risk' (Chapter 16) and one on 'Couvade and menstruation' (Chapter 12), take the argument of *Purity and Danger* out of its secluded anthropological context. They challenge us to discover how we ourselves have constructed in collusion the constraints which we find in our universe. Our fears about the perils of global over-population or destruction of resources or the evil effects of thoughtless procreation, pornography, and a failure of parental love, match those of a tribal society worrying about epidemics unleashed

by incest or game animals disappearing from the forest because of human quarrelling. Our consciousness has so internalised these fears that we are fascinated by the symptoms and unable to look dispassionately at the social relations that generate them.

But the alternative, true consciousness, scarcely bears contemplation. The implicit is the necessary foundation of social intercourse. For men to speak with one another with perfect explicitness, uttering no threats of a backlash from nature – science fiction would be hard put to make such a society convincing. Ethnomethodologists, who disparage the assumed environment for its political inertia, cannot tell us what society would be like with all communication fully verbalised and none oblique. But if that is unimaginable, there are many problems about the implicit that can be discussed. Once we agree that the idea of nature is put to social uses, the challenge is to examine the social relations it masks.

The next two essays consider how and why some information has to be discounted. Information that forms an intelligible pattern in that very process destroys competing information. How the notion of primitive man is presented at any one time is a case in point. 'Heathen Darkness' shows the idea of primitive man being chopped to this or that shape to fit the dialectical needs of parties to a political debate. It was modern man they were talking about when they hotly argued that primitives were deeply religious or deeply superstitious. Realising that primitive man includes the whole gamut of human possibility, and realising that how he worships is part of how he lives and has little comfort one way or another for theology, we can remove the filters that showed him in any preordained light. Suddenly masses of suppressed information surface about thoroughly secular, pragmatic primitives. The screening out process is switched off, but not before we have caught it at work.

'Do Dogs Laugh?' (Chapter 11) considers the screening of information from another angle. It asks the reader to take a standpoint from within any verbal debate and note how much information is given and received through non-verbal channels. It is an attempt to reverse the usual organic analogy by which society is seen as a body. Instead the body is seen as an information coding and transmitting machine, a communication system which can be wired to carry a number of different loads. The heavier the load of messages, the more economical the use of available space and time. The total load and the total pressure of control are determined by the expected density of significant interactions, by something, that is to say, in the social system as it affects the communicating individuals. In a heavily loaded system each signal has to register its effect with less use of the resources of the bodily system as a whole. Vice versa, with light loading, each signal can use more of the communication resources. The underlying assumption reverses a common one in the social sciences, that loss of control is the exception needing to be explained. Here it is assumed that more control is more improbable and needs more explaining than less control. The narrower upshot is to suggest that the screening out of irrelevant bodily information is one of the distinctively human capacities. Animals are presumed to take account of involuntary smells and eructations: we select according to a screening and assessing principle which submits free bodily expression to the demand to be informed about the social situation. By means of

such a systemic approach, problems can be solved which cannot even be formulated by a piecemeal interpretation of discrete signals and responses.

It is all very well to repeat that foregrounding and backgrounding are necessary for creating form. When the whole social process is taken integrally as the production of meaning, the next sets of questions to be tackled have to do with the relation between different channels of expression.

In 'Jokes' (Chapter 10) we suppose that in communication the conveyor of information seeks to achieve some harmony between all possible sources of information. It is not exactly a daring assumption. We have seen that the cognitive drive to demand coherence and regularity in experience requires the destruction of some information for the sake of a more regular processing of the rest. At the same time, for the same reasons, it musters agreement from the different channels of communication. Senders of information seek to convince their would-be receivers. Under the threat of refusing to ratify the credibility of information given in contradictory styles, the very situation of communication forces the different channels to strive to match their separate performances. This article uses joke-perception as an example of concordances between different channels. In its structure the verbal joke replicates the situation in which it is uttered and so it can be perceived to be a joke. The laugh is a bodily response which mimes both the verbal and social structures. Freud's analysis of wit suggests further miming at a psychological level. By such mimesis, when one area of experience figured upon another is rendered intelligible, all domains, the social, the physical, the emotional, snap into alignment. This set of correspondences, which results from the subject's organising effort, is the subjective recognition of truth. Intelligibility organises the subject as well as the object of knowledge. If this description holds good for jokes, it ought to be demonstrable from other formally patterned experience.

Where does the energy for foregrounding some information and destroying or backgrounding some other information derive? in case the point is missed, I emphasise again that this vast energy is not an undirected, random intellectual force. It can only be generated directly in and as part of social interaction. Most forms of social life call somewhere for coherence and clear definition. The same energy that constrains disruptive passions and creates a certain pattern of society also organises knowledge in a compatible, workable, usable form.

Since the whole social process is too large and unwieldy for dissection, there are great problems of method in trying to study how related channels of communication agree so well that they tend to deliver the same message each in its different way. One solution is to study units of behaviour whose limits are formally recognised within the flow of communications. Like an illness, a rite or a meal, a joke's beginning and end are established. This is because the social roles which sickness, ritual, meals, and jokes permit are also bounded. As a delimited enactment the joke lends itself to our study. By noting the multi-layered repetition of formal patterns that deliver the joke we can see that it is anchored in a social situation. Particular meanings are parts of larger ones and these refer ultimately to a whole in which all the

available knowledge is related. But the largest whole into which all minor meanings fit can only be a metaphysical scheme. This itself has to be traced to the particular way of life which is realised within it and which generates the meanings. In the end, all meanings are social meanings.

Though all the essays in this section deal with rituals and symbolic systems, they all transcend the distinction between sacred and secular, mystical and real, expressive and instrumental. They approach the so-called expressive order full of wariness against the misleading implications of the verb 'to express'. That word establishes a distinction between the expression and that which is expressed. The object of our study discloses no such cleavage. Knowledge is a continuous process of realisation involving both the implicit and the explicit.

Chapter 1

The Lele of the Kasai

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The Lele[1] are the western neighbours of the Bushongo[2] in the southwest of the Belgian Congo. The population of 20,000 has a density of about four to the square mile, but the total density of the district they inhabit is doubled by recent immigrants of the Luba and Cokwe tribes. The region is bounded on the north and east by the Kasai river, whose tributary, the Lumbundji, divides it into eastern and western sub-regions, each a separate chiefdom. It is with the western sub-region, lying between the Loange and the Lumbundji, that I am familiar and from which my observations are drawn. However, what I have learnt in the west is probably true also of the easterly chiefdom, which shares similar ecological conditions. There is a third group of Lele living to the south, whose country is predominantly savannah, instead of mixed savannah and forest. It is unlikely that my observations about the western Lele apply also to these southerners.

Lele country is at the extreme edge of the equatorial forest belt,[3] hence the great change of scene in the 150 miles from north to south. The Nkutu, their northern neighbours on the other bank of the Kasai, inhabit dense forest. Their southern neighbours, the Njembe, live in rolling grassland. Lele country has thickly forested valleys separated by barren grass-topped hills.

It is useless to discuss any aspect of Lele religion without first summarising the material conditions of their life. This is not because these seem to have determined the bias of their religious thinking. On the contrary, the manner in which they have chosen to exploit their environment may well be due to the ritual categories through which they apprehend it.

MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY

A straightforward account of Lele material culture would not give the impression that hunting is their most important activity. By comparison with the Cokwe hunters, who have immigrated from the Kwango district into Lele country, they even seem inefficient in this pursuit. On the contrary, the culture of the raffia palm would seem to be their most vital

economic activity, and if their ritual values were derived from their social and economic values, then we would expect the Lele religion to be centred round the cultivation of the raffia palm. Yet this is not so. Again, assuming that a people long settled[4] in their environment normally exploit it to the full, it is difficult to see why the Lele refuse to breed goats and pigs (which thrive locally), and why the cultivation of groundnuts is left entirely to the women. These problems find some solution, however, when they are seen in the context of their metaphysical assumptions and religious practice.

The Lele village, a compact square of 20 to 100 huts, is always set in the grassland. From each corner of the village, paths run down to the nearest part of the forest. They wind first through groves of palms which ring the village round, and then through the grass and scrub. The palm groves give shade to the men working at their weaving-looms. Each corner of the village belongs to one of the four men's age-sets, which has its own groves adjacent to its row of huts. Alternating with the men's groves are other groves used by their women-folk for pounding grain. Farther away still is another ring of groves where the women prepare palm-oil. The layout of the village shows a deliberate separation of sexes. In all their work, feeding, and leisure, the women are set apart from the men. This separation of the sexes is a formality which they observe, a rule of social etiquette, not a natural principle derived from the nature of the work they perform, for in many of their economic activities there is a close collaboration between men and women. The separation and interdependence of the sexes is a basic theme of their social organisation and ritual, and one which is reiterated in almost every possible context.

Their staple food is maize, cultivated in the forest by slash and burn methods. With such a scattered population no land shortage is recognised and no crop rotation is practised. Maize is only planted once in a forest clearing, and fresh clearings are made each year for the new crop.[5] The original clearing is kept open for several years, until the other crops planted in it have matured. The most important of these is raffia palm, and in recent years manioc has become nearly as important as maize. Small quantities of pineapples, red peppers, and hill rice are also cultivated.

The palm takes four or five years to mature, and is very carefully cultivated. All its products are used; its main ribs for hut wall and roof supports, its fibres as string in hut building and basketry, its smaller ribs as arrow shafts, its outside leaves as thatching for the walls and roofs of huts. The inner cuticle of the young leaf is the material from which they weave their raffia cloths. Finally, one of the most valued products of the palm is the fermented wine, which forms the second staple article of diet. When the wine is all drawn off and the palm dead, its rotting stem harbours grubs which are a highly prized delicacy. When they have grown fat, and can be heard moving inside the stem, it is chopped open, and made to yield its last product.

This list of the uses of the raffia palm does not yet give an idea of its full importance in Lele culture. The Lele pride themselves on their skill in weaving, and despise their neighbouring

Cokwe, Nkutu, and Dinga who are ignorant of the art, and who exchange their products for woven squares. The Dinga give fish, the Nkutu give lengths of red camwood, the Cokwe give meat in exchange. Although every Lele man can weave, they also use the woven squares among themselves as a kind of currency. There is no object which has not its fixed price in raffia squares – two for an arrow-head, two for a basket, one for a standard lump of salt. Moreover, they are required as marriage gifts, fifty to the father and forty to the mother of the bride. They are expected as mourning gifts, demanded in initiation fees, apprenticeship dues, fines, and payment for medical services. For diet, clothes, huts, and ceremonial gifts this is a culture heavily dependent on the raffia palm.

The palm and the banana are the only crops which, although they grow best in the forest's rich soil, are also planted around the village. Apart from these, and the groundnut, all good things come out of the forest: water, firewood, salt, maize, manioc, oil,[6] fish, and animal flesh.

The division of labour is based mainly on two principles. The first is that work which relates to cookery and the preparation of food is performed by women. They draw water, gather firewood, cultivate fish-ponds in the marshy streams, cultivate salt-yielding plants, and prepare salt from the ashes. They are excluded from certain other tasks for which they are held to lack the necessary skill, strength, or courage. On these grounds hunting and everything to do with the weapons and medicines of the hunt are men's work, although women cook the meat. Women cannot climb trees, so cutting oil-palm fruits and drawing palm wine, and preparing all the products of the raffia palm are men's tasks. All the complicated process of preparing raffia and setting up the looms, weaving, and sewing is performed by men, although there is no prejudice against a man's wife or sister helping if she is able. The men cut down the trees for the maize clearings, and are aided by their women-folk who clear away the undergrowth, and later take on most of the work of keeping the crops clear of weeds. Women help with the planting and undertake all the harvesting of crops.

From this it is clear that the division of labour is based on practical considerations, men and women taking their appropriate share of the burden. Both are required to spend the major part of their time in the forest. Apart from the clearing and planting of crops there, which men and women share together, the time the men spend hunting and seeing to the raffia palms is paralleled by the time the women spend tending their salt and fish-ponds, chopping firewood, fetching water, and washing their manioc. If the women did not work in the forest the economic life of the village would collapse. Yet the Lele regard the forest as almost exclusively a male sphere, and women are frequently prohibited from entering it. On every third day they are excluded from the forest and must lay in their supplies of food, firewood, and water the day before. On all important religious occasions, such as mourning, birth of twins, appearance of the new moon, departure of a chief, in menstruation and

childbirth, they are similarly excluded from the forest until proper rites have been performed by the men. This exclusion of women from the forest is one of the principal recurring themes of their religious practice.

THE FOREST

The prestige of the forest is immense. The Lele speak of it with almost poetic enthusiasm. God gave it to them as the source of all good things. They often contrast the forest with the village. In the heat of the day, when the dusty village is unpleasantly hot, they like to escape to the cool and dark of the forest. Work there is full of interest and pleasure, work elsewhere is drudgery. They say, 'Time goes slowly in the village, quickly in the forest.' Men boast that in the forest they can work all day without feeling hunger, but in the village they are always thinking about food. For going into the forest they use the verb *nyingena,* to enter, as one might speak of entering a hut, or plunging into water, giving the impression that they regard the forest as a separate element.

But as well as being the source of all good things the forest is a place of danger, not only for women at the specified times but often for men. No mourner may enter the forest, nor one who has had a nightmare. A bad dream is interpreted as a warning not to enter the forest on the next day. All kinds of natural dangers may hurt the man who disregards it. A tree may fall on his head, he may twist his ankle, cut himself with a knife, fall off a palm-tree, or otherwise suffer a fatal accident. These hazards exist at all times, but the risk on certain occasions is that inimical powers may direct them against him. The danger for a man is one of personal mishap, but a woman who breaks the injunction against entering the forest may endanger the whole village.

These risks, personal or general, can be warded off, or afterwards remedied, by means of sacred medicines, which give men power to dominate their environment, heal sickness, make barren women conceive, and make hunting successful. There seem therefore to be three distinct reasons for the great prestige of the forest: it is the source of all good and necessary things, food, drink, huts, clothes; it is the source of the sacred medicines; and, thirdly, it is the scene of the hunt, which in Lele eyes is the supremely important activity. At this stage of description it would seem that two of these reasons are economic, not religious, but further examination shows that in reality the immense importance of the forest is derived from its role in Lele religion.

The attitude to hunting cannot be entirely ascribed to the importance of meat in Lele diet, although it is true that they have a craving for meat. Cooked maize, or manioc dough, would be unpalatable unless served with the appetising sauces prepared daily by the women from vegetables, red pepper, salt, and oil. A purely vegetable diet is so much disliked

that unless meat or fish can be served as well, people often prefer to drink palm wine and sleep unfed. Mushrooms, caterpillars, grubs, and so on are poor substitutes for fish, and even fish is second in their esteem to meat. In their ideal life the men would set traps and hunt regularly to provide their families with a daily supply of meat. To offer a vegetable meal to a guest is regarded as a grave insult. Much of their conversation about social events dwells on the amount and kind of meat provided.

The craving for meat has never led the Lele to breed goats and pigs, as do their southern neighbours, the Njembe. They profess to be revolted at the notion of eating animals reared in the village. Good food, they say, should come out of the forest, clean and wholesome, like antelope and wild pig. They consider rats and dogs to be unclean food, to which they apply the word *hama,* used also for the uncleanness of bodily dirt, suppurating wounds, and excreta. The same uncleanness attaches to the flesh of goats and pigs, just because they are bred in the village. Even plants which are used in sauces when gathered in the forest are left untouched if they grow near the village. This attitude does not seem to apply to poultry. Between men various social conventions cluster around the giving and receiving of chickens, but women are forbidden to eat their flesh or eggs. This prohibition, like most food taboos, is unexplained, but there may be greater danger to women from eating unclean food than for men, as in many contexts women are treated as if they were more vulnerable to pollution than men are.

Knowing of their craving for meat, and knowing that recent hunts had been unsuccessful, I was puzzled early in my visit to see a large pig carcass being carved up and carried some miles for sale to Luba and Dinga tribesmen. The Lele would not eat it. A few go-ahead men keep goats or pigs, but not for food. They rear them for sale to the rich Luba lorry drivers and mechanics of the oil company at Brabanta. The Lele owners make no attempt to feed or control their livestock, which does much damage to the palms and bananas near the village. This carelessness does not result from total ignorance of rearing animals, for the Lele keep poultry and dogs successfully. In particular, the dogs are objects of an elaborate veterinary theory and practice. It seems that if they wished to make a success of goat herding they could do so.

Livestock is not the only source of meat which the Lele overlook when they declare that the forest is the source of all good things, for the grassland around the village harbours quantities of game. These duikers are eaten with relish when they are killed, but the Lele hunt them only at one season of the year – the short dry season when the grass is burnt, and the animals are slaughtered as they rush out of the fire. Their normal hunting techniques are not adapted to the pursuit of grassland game.

The way in which the Lele, in speaking of the forest, disregard other important sources of meat and food can be explained only in terms of the coherence of their religious concepts. To admit an alternative supply of meat, independent of the forest game, would be inconsistent

with their attitude to the forest as the source of all the best things of life. Their view of the village as totally dependent on the forest is fundamental to their perception of the relation between human life and the natural and spiritual powers on which they depend. Ultimately, it appears that the prestige of the forest is entirely due to its place in Lele religion. It is the source of sacred medicines, but it need not be the only source of the material things of life. It is the scene of the hunt, but Lele hunting has primary religious functions which outweigh its economic importance.

The distinction of the village from the forest is one of the principal themes of their ritual, which is constantly emphasised and elaborated. There is also a subtle interplay between this theme and that of the separation of the sexes mentioned above. The separation of women from men, of forest from village, the dependence of village on forest, and the exclusion of women from the forest are the principal recurring elements of their ritual, on which minor variations are embroidered.

THE GRASSLAND

The appropriation of the forest by the men is balanced by treatment of the grassland as the exclusive sphere of women. The grassland has no prestige like the forest. It is dry and barren. The only crop which thrives there, the groundnut, is exclusively cultivated by the women. Ritual sanctions forbid a woman who has lifted the first sod of grass on her groundnut plot to have sexual intercourse until a month or six weeks later, when the seedlings are well established. No man must even set eyes on the work in progress, to say nothing of helping in the heavy work of cutting down the bushy trees on the plot. This is the only crop which women tend from start to finish, and the only crop which does not grow in the forest.

Most activities which custom allocates entirely to one or the other sex are similarly protected by sexual taboos, some lasting even longer than this example. No hunting expedition is undertaken without one night of continence being imposed first on the whole village. A man making pit traps may have to abstain from sexual relations for several months until certain specified animals have been caught. Most situations of ritual danger affecting the village as a whole are treated in the same way. The refrain ‘Tonight each woman her mat alone, each man his mat alone’ is a regular announcement preceding important rites.

The groundnut crop is the most striking example of the appropriation of the grassland by the women as their sphere. They often manage to find in the grassland some substitutes for what they cannot get on days when they are excluded from the forest. When they may not go fishing, other delicacies may be gathered in the grassland: grasshoppers in the dry season, caterpillars in the wet, or grubs from decaying palms planted near the village. A woman who has run short of firewood may collect in the grassland enough brushwood for the day’s cooking. There are no ritual prohibitions connected with the grassland. As a

neutral sphere between the two it is used again and again in the prohibitions which separate the village from the forest.

At first view I was tempted to find a natural explanation of the allocation of male and female spheres, the forest to the men, the grassland to the women. It is obvious that women, in spite of their economic tasks there, are at a disadvantage in the forest. Unarmed, and loaded with baskets, they are defenceless against strange men or wild animals. They are afraid of the dark. They do not understand the medicines which men find there and administer to the village. Hunting is a man's task. On the face of it there is something appropriate in regarding the forest as primarily the sphere of men, particularly if we associate the prestige and danger of the forest with male domination. But these considerations in themselves do not adequately explain the strict ritual exclusion of women on so many occasions.

A more satisfactory explanation can be given in terms of their religious concepts, according to which women hold a very complex status. Child-bearing, their most vital function, is regarded as highly vulnerable. On the other hand, sexual intercourse and menstruation are dangerous to all male activities. These contrasted themes are handled with elaborate subtlety in the treatment of marital and extra-marital relations, which do not concern us here. It is enough to remember the complex ritual status of women when trying to understand the separation of the sexes and the exclusion of women from the forest. As women are both highly vulnerable and highly polluting some separation of male and female spheres is indicated, and the very neutrality of the grassland makes its allocation to the women more appropriate.

MEDICINE

In Lele religion nearly all important rites are associated with the practice of medicine. The idiom of medical healing has so dominated their religious forms that it is often hard to distinguish two separate spheres of action. This is consistent with Lele speculations about life and death, which they consider to be controlled exclusively by God, *Njambi.* Such power of healing and curing barrenness as may be exercised by humans is derived only from God. Hence, the diviners must be at the same time healers and religious experts. Whether they are trying to cure a fever, or to set right the relation of a village to spiritual powers, the same vocabulary is used to describe the treatment, and the same personnel and resources are employed. To find the cause of the disorder they first use divination; then they prescribe and apply some herbal remedy with the proper formula, and impose a number of restrictions on the patient.

Although up to this point the vocabulary is the same, beneath the general similarity two categories are distinguished. The words used by the sick man to describe his symptoms are not used to describe the state of the village needing medical treatment. The man says he is