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MODES OF THOUGHT AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Theories of Knowledge in the Context of Social Action

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To my mother and father

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In studying man Rousseau was concerned with two complementary tasks.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, he was engaged in a journey to the centre of the species in order to understand the "natural" pre-civilized man as a human possibility. He situated that possibility in pre-history and viewed certain realities in modern civilization as a threat to its own perpetuation. On the other hand, he was engaged in a journey to the centre of his own civilized being. The first task was historical, the second personal.

In The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology Gouldner argues that future sociological studies should in part focus on field-workers-cum-theorists, in order to be more aware of themselves as a part of society instead of pretending to objectivity. The social world is to be known not only by looking outward, but also by opening oneself inwardly.<sup>2</sup> Anthropological activity is not just scientific: it is also expressive or symptomatic of a pre-supposed world view of which it is itself an integral part. The anthropologist in field work is involved in "double translation".<sup>3</sup> While his impulse to understand the largely unexperienced, but imagined, possibilities of himself as a civilized person proceeds, he is caught, so to speak, in the web of an alien understanding;

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<sup>1</sup>Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1963) 'Rousseau, Father of Anthropology'. A major contributor to the discipline. UNESCO Courier 16, No.3: 10-14.

<sup>2</sup>Gouldner, Alvin Ward (1970) The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology. Criticism of objectivism in social science. N.Y.: Basic Books.

<sup>3</sup>Kaplan, Abraham (1963) 'The Conduct of Inquiry'. Recommended methodologies for field work. Methodology for Behavioural Science, Chandler: California, p.386.

and their resulting attitude towards him shapes the object of his experience. In short, the anthropologist embodies an attitude that changes and conditions human beings, and this in turn generates a response modifying his own behaviour. Not only are they objects who become subjects to the field-worker's view but these subjects view him as an object, to which they either give positive assent, or avoid supporting his endeavour. Responses are recorded according to personal circumstances and are incorporated in the construction of models.<sup>4</sup> He can assume a logical and historical complementarity between himself, as a prototypical modern man, and the subjects with whom he is concerned.

We have all become engineers with concepts, working from plans and anxious to get the structure right. The primitive is not an engineer but a bricoleur. He puts together his structures from whatever comes in handy, without special concern for the congruity of their elements. Bricolage is the sort of thing made out of oddments. The bricoleur is the handyman, the tinkerer, who gets surprisingly practical and often aesthetic results from the most unlikely material. One of the fundamental theses of The Savage Mind<sup>5</sup> is that the structure is all-important rather than material content. According to structuralist theory, the same structure may recur in different manifestations, the contents being subsumed under a formalized design.<sup>6</sup> Structuralism is an attempt to avoid enclosing the

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<sup>4</sup>Cicourel, Aaron Victor (1964) Problems in research method. Method of Measurement in Sociology. N.Y.: Free Press.

<sup>5</sup>Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966) The Savage Mind. The structure of human thought. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, pp.352-363.

<sup>6</sup>Caws, Peter (1970) 'What is Structuralism?' Readings on structuralist orientation, Ch.15, cited in The Anthropologist As Hero, Hayes & Hayes (ed.). MIT Press, pp.213-214.

human mind in any particular reality (loc.cit.). This attempted synthesis, which embraces data, the construction of a model, introspection in the service of self-knowledge, which in turn clarifies further what one is observing, is the first lucid expression, and among the last, of what anthropologists do or should do.<sup>7</sup> Edmund Leach described Lévi-Strauss's Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté (1949) as a splendid failure.<sup>8</sup> But as he himself (Leach) admitted, the common principle Lévi-Strauss distilled from Mauss, Freud and Jakobson is important to our understanding of the mental categories Lévi-Strauss believed as generic to the human mind (ibid.). He states that social behaviour is always conducted with reference to a conceptual scheme, a model in the actor's mind of how things are or how they ought to be. The essential characteristic of this model is that it is logically ordered. Lévi-Strauss has been less concerned with the empirical and substantive materials concocted by the brain and rather more concerned with what lies behind the empirical facts. Importantly, principles regulate the legitimate limits to which materials conforming to rules, may be combined and transformed from one level to another. Lévi-Strauss believes in an underlying logic producing a specifiable and limited number of rules linking customs in marriage with kinship systems, totemism, puberty rites, the relation between

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<sup>7</sup>Diamond, Stanley (1969) 'Anthropology in Question' in Hymes Dell (ed.) Reinventing Anthropology. Argument for a new critical Anthropology. N.Y.: Pantheon, p.412.

<sup>8</sup>Leach, Edmund (1965) 'Claude Lévi-Strauss - Anthropologist and Philosopher' in Manners & Kaplan (eds.) (1968) Theory in Anthropology. An examination of major theoretical issues in Anthropology. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, pp.545-546.

myth and ritual exchange and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

By conscious and reflective practice on his world, man can know himself only by way of history.<sup>10</sup> Man's conception of himself is relative, and subject to change.<sup>11</sup> We can articulate the rational attributes only by addressing man's situation as an historical problematic. Through "being", being constituted and reconstituted in continual process it is accordingly meaningless to set limits to what man is capable of achieving. To man there exists at least in an imaginable sense infinite possibilities when referring to alternative styles of thought and action. The main constraining force shaping man's response to life itself is the past. Man becomes what he is by what has controlled and shaped that destiny, namely his own particular history. Nature is to things, as history is to man. We even find in the wisdom of St. Augustine, "Man, likewise, finds that he has no nature other than what he has himself done."<sup>12</sup>

The notion that the intellectual fulfils a very specific and distinctive function has been important to those particularly concerned with the history of ideas and the philosophy of science. It is emphasized in many studies dealing with the sociology of knowledge, notably in Karl Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Sontag, Susan (1970) 'The Anthropologist as Hero'. Readings in structuralist orientation, in Hayes & Hayes (eds.) Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Anthropologist as Hero. MIT Press, p.193.

<sup>10</sup>Lewis, I. M. (1968) History of Social Anthropology. Readings in the Relationship between history and anthropology (ed.). N.Y.: Tavistock. Introduction xxii.

<sup>11</sup>Tennekes, J. (1971) Anthropology Relativism. An inquiry into the methodological principles of a science of culture. The Netherlands: Assen Van Gorcum, pp.36-39.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Mannheim, Karl (1936) Ideology and Utopia. An introduction to the sociology of knowledge. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London. pp.61-103, 132.

One of the main concerns of Mannheim's book is to find the answer to the disturbing problem arising from inquiries into the relationship between mind and society. If our thoughts and even our modes of thinking are shaped by our specific social position, if each one of the segments of society - workers, industrialists, financiers, farmers, rural aristocracy and tenant farmers - looks at the same reality in different and often conflicting ways, how then can we still believe in a universal truth binding for all the strata of society? Mannheim sought to unify the partial and limited views held by the various classes. He believed such a synthesis could be achieved by persons who were not linked to particular groups and not drawn into their struggles (ibid.: 167). He had in mind the intelligentsia, the socially unattached intellectuals whose aloofness would enable them to meet the challenge of integrating the one-sided and often conflicting insights of the different components of society (ibid.: 135). He hoped that through the contribution of the intellectual, society would attain a more comprehensive grasp of reality, a more objective understanding of the truth.

We are well aware of the contribution which Mannheim has made to the work of sociology. However, we cannot overlook the illusion which his optimistic faith in the role of the intellectual reflects and which the events of the quarter century following the publication of Ideology and Utopia have so relentlessly destroyed. We have only to remember the role of scientists and researchers in schemes ranging from Nazi concentration camps, the status quo orientation of theorists capitulating before the dictates of commercialism, militarism, communism and fascism.

The same kinds of works engaged in by anthropologists were designed to assist the Americans in Thailand, Vietnam and Chile, and it was doubtless unethical. Therefore we realize the fancifulness of Mannheim's thesis that it is the intelligentsia as a class to whom our age owes its understanding of objective truth. How can we explain that a scholar of Mannheim's stature, who has done so much to dispel the illusions dominating the thinking of individuals and social groups, could maintain such an unrealistic view of the role of intellectuals? The answer in part lies in Marx's pronouncement that intellectualism, like most things in society, had become a commodity fetish. One way to circumvent this debasement is to accept a relativistic social science and thus avoid the generalized mediocrity we are perforced to fashion in all research wherever this uncritical dimension is applied. Anthropology needs emancipation from the absolute acceptance of a methodology.<sup>14</sup> Implicit in this performance is the unreflexive subscription to categories employed by the anthropologist's own culture. The value attached to such categories is a commitment and an interest and therefore signifies a value to both the cultural interests of the theorist and as such the perpetuation of dominant existing conceptions (op.cit.: 297). Mannheim critiques this approach thus:

It is only by means of this liberating - if at times painful and as yet uncritical - perspectivism that we can hope to come to the point where the false ideal of a detached, impersonal point of view [can] be replaced by the ideal of an essentially human point of view which is within the limits of human perspective, constantly striving to enlarge itself.

(Mannheim, 1936, p.297)

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<sup>14</sup>Wolf, E. R. (1964) Anthropology. Prentice Hall. A discussion about issues in post-war anthropology in U.S.A., pp.20-25.

Wittgenstein views such perspectivism in terms of activities with their appropriate languages,<sup>15</sup> and a modified verification principle is now used to ask what sort of things would count against it. If we know that we can say in which "language game" a concept belongs the assertion is "at home". It is now recognized that different kinds of language are appropriate in different situations. The language of love is not that of biology, nor is the language of politics that of physics. The word "cause", for example, has different functions in the disciplines of physics, economics and history. We should not try to mix the language of love with other language games.

Radcliffe-Brown first elaborated the notion of structure in social anthropology,<sup>16</sup> defining it as the complex network of actually existing social relations in any society. Other anthropologists, while accepting the concept of structure, have found this formulation too wide. Thus Evans-Pritchard<sup>17</sup> has preferred to restrict the term to those relatively enduring relationships which unite persisting social groups into a total social system.

These definitions have sometimes tended to suggest that there is in every society something which may be called "the structure", and thus rather obscure the fact that a society may reveal many

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<sup>15</sup>Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1945, 1949) Philosophical Investigations. An inquiry into the nature of understanding. G. E. M. Anscombe & R. Rhees (eds.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp.23, 7. On the variety of language games, cf. p.65 ff.

<sup>16</sup>Radcliffe-Brown (1952) Structure and Function in Primitive Society. A positivist thesis on social structure. London: Cohen & West. Also Radcliffe-Brown (1953) 'Letter to Lévi-Strauss' in Tax Sol (ed.) An Appraisal of Anthropology Today, p.109.

<sup>17</sup>Evans-Pritchard, E. (1962) 'Social anthropology: Past and present' in Manners & Kaplan (eds.) A Reader in Theory and Method. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp.46-57.

different social structures, depending on the interest of the observer. The view that structure is something that is "there" in the society, something that the social anthropologist may, if he uses the right techniques, hope to discover and put on record, has been criticized by Claude Lévi-Strauss.<sup>18</sup> He emphasizes that any kind of structure, in the sense in which anthropologists use the term, is a construct or model, based on but not composed of the empirical data. The validity of a scientific model, unlike that of an empirical fact, is to be judged not by its truth but by its usefulness or "strategic value" in facilitating comparison and leading to new knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

#### Cognitive configurations

There are, this writer points out, two distinct models.<sup>20</sup> These are what I would term relative constructs. A model by which members of a society represent to themselves their concept of their own society. This is an exigetical description. The anthropologist abstracts from the observational and empirical level the contents in order to order them logically in a formalized fashion to produce an arbitrary interpretation. The operational model, then, represents to the theorist an explanatory device whereby each level is explained by the level that immediately

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<sup>18</sup>Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1967) The Scope of Anthropology. A summary of the discipline. Cape Editions.

<sup>19</sup>Leeden, A. C. van der (1971) 'Empiricism and Logical Order in Anthropological Structuralism', Journal of Royal Netherlands Anthropological Society. Bijdragen 127 (1): 15-38.

<sup>20</sup>Rossi, I. (1974) 'Structuralism as Scientific Method'. Discussions on structuralism, in I. Rossi (ed.) The Unconscious in Culture. Dutton paperback, pp.60-107.

precedes it. In this way, believes Lévi-Strauss, what lies hidden below the level of consciousness is revealed to us through the various determinations articulated between the various levels. One famous example Lévi-Strauss used was in reference to the Bororo.<sup>21</sup> Here, the classic Bororo system of exogamous moieties divided into clans, lost its functional importance as a result of being underlain by a more fundamental tripartite endogamous structure. A screen type model presents a barrier to understanding. Wittgenstein poses a difficult problem when he asks, How can one claim one understands when understanding is itself the problem? Can something that is hidden to our understanding be understood when "comprehension" poses a problem in inferring the meaning behind social events? We rationalize others' cognition in constructing an overarching conceptual scheme, embodied in an operational model. The structure, for instance, of a system of kinship relationships as it is expounded by an anthropologist in a journal is very different from the "same" structure as it is understood by a participant in the system. Furthermore, understanding functions in relation to the specific contextual controls operating through rules expressed in an ideology, which expresses, describes or commends a particular way of seeing the world, other men, and oneself, and the way of life appropriate to such a perspective.<sup>22</sup> The logical structure ordering such a grammar is typified according to what characterizes

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<sup>21</sup>Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969) The Elementary Structures of Kinship. A formal analysis of kinship organizations, Ch.I, III, IV, XXIX. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.

<sup>22</sup>Helmer & Hirschberg (1958) 'On the Epistemology of the Inexact Sciences', Rand Corporation Reprint. Science and non-science contain elements of qualitation.

a way of life.<sup>23</sup>

The question of "hermeneutics" refers to the various stylizations of meaning. Linguistic analysts have also considered this question. In fact, it has been central to their method, for an answer to the question of meaning is implied in a modified form of the verification principle. According to linguistic analysts, if we wish to know the meaning of a word or statement, we must look at the way it functions in actual use.<sup>24</sup> Statements of sense-content cannot be verified by commonsense or empirical means. That is to say, they cannot be verified by a shared sense experience, since they do not say what "all of us" can see but only what "I saw". Nor can they be checked against empirical data open to any competent investigator who cares to examine them, for again, a sense content statement is about what "I saw", not about what is "there for everyone to see". Only "I" can record what was "on the mirror of my mind". But this is only to say that sense content statements are not commonsense or empirical assertions and more cannot be said against them.<sup>25</sup> The way to verify a statement of sense content is to see if the words and actions of the person who makes the statement conform to it. The test is one of consistency. If Hamlet claims to have seen his father's ghost "and" to have learned from the ghost that his father was murdered, his claim is verified by his setting out to avenge his father's death.

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<sup>23</sup>An issue appreciated by John E. Smith commenting on Wittgenstein in 'The Impact of Wittgenstein', An Analysis of Language. Penguin Books, 1960, p.239 ff.

<sup>24</sup>'The meaning of a word is its use in the language' Wittgenstein (1967) op.cit., p.43.

<sup>25</sup>For the logic of the following analysis of "sense content" statements, cf. Wisdom, John (1957) Philosophy and Psychoanalysis. Oxford: Blackwell, p.240 ff.

His actions tend to support his claim of what he had seen and heard.

In like manner, a person's statement of sense content, which identified the one he saw with a man who had lived a certain kind of life, is verified by the events of that person's subsequent life.

### The context of situation

To Wittgenstein each context signals its own way through which to communicate and initiate action. Each context must therefore be necessarily bounded and contain its own intrinsic usages. Cultural filters shape communication processes. Different contexts generate their own *raison d'être* emphases for action. Each context limits the nature of discourse in relation to specifically contextually inter-relatable concerns.

Wittgenstein's thesis that ideas are social productions fabricated relative to context is analogous to Mannheim's conjecture on the importance of how position<sup>26</sup> within a structure circumscribes a domain of experience. Therefore the situational placement an actor takes must strategically shape and colour perception and so on. What is perceived in these different situations is always different. This applies to all people.<sup>27</sup>

My point here is, that the nature of association and class necessarily promulgates a closure on the contents of consciousness, particularly

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<sup>26</sup>Mannheim acknowledges his indebtedness to Husserl's hypothesis that spatial objects can only be viewed from definite local positions from where their properties present themselves to the observer only in one-sided "profiles", in partial perspective. By analogy with Husserl's approach to everyday physical nature Mannheim argues that historical, cultural and psychic objects present partial mental-psychic profiles to the observer who is himself inevitably rooted to a limiting mental-psychic perspective.

<sup>27</sup>See Merleau Ponty (1963) The Structure of Behaviour . Boston: Beacon Press, p.118 ff. A phenomenological understanding explaining situational constraints on behaviour.

in the earlier infantile critical periods. In taking this approach it is inadmissible to assert that the way past this problem is to move through space and time, and socially across boundaries in order to divest oneself of the specifically domestic and indigenous concepts which clothe a person's outlook. In their studies on colour perception Berlin and Kay<sup>28</sup> are really pointing to the fact that overall there are different colour aggregates between bounded contexts. The fact that these theorists arrived at "the term 'focal colours' seemed to indicate a common appreciation involving eleven colours being offset by an array of colours all named for their distinctive referents". In short, a theorist, be he an analyst or experimentalist, cannot slough off the cultural edifice which selectively sifts expressive possibilities open to such an actor. Further, Piaget saw the crucial operations of "conservation", "constancy" and "reversal" as occurring throughout early childhood before closure sets in. This treatment derives from Piaget's theoretical framework, in which he views cognitive development as the construction of successively more complex systems of different types.<sup>29</sup> The skeletal structure provides the basis for "pulling together" certain specified ideas resulting in intrinsic complexes of relations with their own internal rules for consistency. Core values arise by the canalization of messages into a coherent whole where each element represented in a series contributes to the whole and defines its placement by its essential relationship to that whole. The tendency to stabilize and conserve intact the essential

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<sup>28</sup>Berlin, B. & Kay, P. (1969) Basic Colour Terms. Research on Cross Cultural Perception. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>29</sup>Piaget, Jean (1970) J. Piaget's theory in P. H. Mussen (ed.) Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology, Vol.2. N.Y.: Wiley, pp.703-732.

closure results in a degree of continuity through time and space. On the other hand, closure can become an inordinate hindrance to selecting innovative ideas and solutions. To be too fixed means that the unadaptive feature becomes uppermost. A small measure of flexibility in any carapace lets a little "air" in to replenish, and refurbish and, if necessary, change the existing formal arrangement, so that the acquisition of favourable characteristics and the ability to reproduce renewable materials abundantly ensures an adaptive advantage to the most successful (Lorenz, 1972, p.65). The human brain operates on the principles of openness and closure.<sup>30</sup> What is accessible to the brain at any time becomes effectively translated into psychic material, but the definitive closures localized in the solidification of brain mechanisms occur early in the life cycle.<sup>31</sup> The logical conclusion then, is that mobility does not preclude fixity in belief and attitude. In fact, mobility may do just the opposite in reassuring the intending aspirant that his prejudices, latently suffused into his way of life, are basically insuperable. All adaptive modification is essentially identical with induction. That is, certain sensitive periods facilitate imprintation through selective mechanisms establishing group identification.<sup>32</sup>

My intention is not so much to ask where cultural idioms develop in the individual or in society, but more - how do ideas come to be

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<sup>30</sup>Lorenz, Konrad (1972) 'The Enmity Between Generations and its probable ethological causes'. A study in intergenerational conflict, in Play and Development, W. M. Piers (ed.). N.Y.: Norton.

<sup>31</sup>Piaget, Jean (1972) 'Intellectual evolution from adolescence to adulthood', Human Development, 15: 1-12.

<sup>32</sup>Lorenz, Konrad (1969) 'Innate Bases of Learning'. An ethological inquiry setting out stages of growth and development, in On the Biology of Learning, K. Pribram (ed.). N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p.35.

used as if to circumscribe the possible limits to consciousness? Language structure exists and operates generally below the awareness of the speaker-hearer. The strong constraints operating in the choice of words regulate word usage. The appearance of Noam Chomsky's syntactic structures marked the beginning of a new trend in linguistics that has come to be called "transformational generative grammar".<sup>33</sup> The contribution linguistics made to anthropology here was to emphasize the need for the theorist to go beyond the "facts" of the given to search for an underlying highly organized and very restrictive schema that permitted the child to make a leap from scattered and disparate data to highly organized knowledge. Chomsky calls this an innate language that the child brings to language learning.<sup>34</sup>

Chomsky began by defining a language as a set of sentences and a grammar as a device capable of generating and specifying the only acceptable sentences of a language. The set of sentences that constituted a language was examined, and various possible mathematical models for explicitly defining such a total set were explored. Transformational generative grammarians seek true universals of language, both formal and substantive. Instead of proceeding from sounds through syntax to meaning with the unnecessary constraints adhered to by structuralists, Chomsky began his approach to language from a point between sound and meaning, namely the structure of sentences.<sup>35</sup> The philosophy underlying this approach to linguistics thus accepts

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<sup>33</sup>Chomsky, Noam (1964) Current Issues in Linguistic Theory. An outline of current linguistic theories. The Hague: Mouton, p.18.

<sup>34</sup>Cited in Elders, F. (1974) Reflexive Water (ed.). A recorded discussion between Chomsky and Foucault, p.137. Subtitle - The basic concerns of mankind, Condor.

<sup>35</sup>Chomsky, N. (1965) Aspects of a Theory of Syntax. Examines sounds and meanings and their repetitive patterns. Cambridge, 1015 pp.

the need to postulate abstract constructs when attempting to describe natural language.

The idea of performance relates to nuances of meaning shaped by reference to a particular style of cognition. Performance contains errors, false starts, pauses, memory limitations, non sequiturs,<sup>36</sup> etc. Chomsky has therefore distinguished sharply between performance and what he calls competence, that is, the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his own language and an ability to articulate and reconstruct information in line with an available framework. The locus of the creation of meaning is taken to be those standards that socially reproduce the collectivity. Combinations of ideas embody a social construct, and the means constituting those ideas are given social recognition. Competence therefore refers to the level of acceptance of a framework. The field-worker is not a free floating agent existing in vacuo, detached absolutely from a particular framework. He learns rules which he takes with himself to the field.

This means that everything is comprehended from the self referent vantage point; the world exists for someone only as he is conscious of it. Rollo May expressed it this way:

We cannot ... stand outside our own skin and perch on some Archimedes point, and have a way of surveying experience that does not itself depend upon the assumptions that one makes about the nature of man or the nature of whatever one is studying.

(1961, p.290)

Things are significant or insignificant, important or unimportant, attractive or unattractive, valuable or worthless in terms of their relationship to oneself. We evaluate the world and its meanings

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<sup>36</sup>Chomsky, N. & Halle, M. 'The Sound Pattern of English', in Chomsky, N. (ed.) (1968) Language of Mind. Observation into differential language styles. N.Y.: Harcourt, pp.4-5.

(including other people's world for them) according to how we see ourselves.<sup>37</sup> Translations between distinct and bounded contexts indicate meaning to be newly formulated, rather than accurately retained. The Italian words 'Traditto Traditare' mean that the translator betrays the original intended meanings. The observer is bound by predominant commitments that signify a point of view. As Rieff put it: "Character is the restrictive shaping of possibility."<sup>38-39</sup> Let us now reformulate the problem we have set ourselves by recasting it in the context of an African ethnographic example.

"Mukanda": rite of circumcision

In Ndembu social structure<sup>40</sup> cleavages occur between fissive segments so that the competition for the highest ritual role brings together the widest possible number of localities at the highest, general and most inclusive level. Similarly at each corresponding level in descending order of abstraction role positions are taken up by ritualists with correspondingly less range of responsibility and obligation tied to role performance. Therefore at the highest and most inclusive level of influence the ritualist enjoins the greatest power, taking in and cross-cutting many localized lineage segments. The lowest ritual positions cover a relatively narrow context - probably an exclusive context to which a lineage segment is located. Higher ritual positions

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<sup>37</sup>May, Rollo (1961)'The context of psychotherapy' in Contemporary Psychotherapie: M. I. Stein (ed.). N.Y.: The Free Press. See also May, R. (1953) Man's Search for Himself. Man's existential dilemma. N.Y.: Norton.

<sup>38</sup>Rieff, cited in Becker, Ernest (1974) The Denial of Death. The fear of death. N.Y.: The Free Press, p.266.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid. In addition, Becker writes "Abstractions will never do. God terms have to be exemplified ... Men crave their principles incarnate in enactable characters, actual selective mediators between themselves and the polytheism of experience." p.266.

<sup>40</sup>Turner, Victor (1967) The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual. London: Cornell, p.155.

are competitively sought after - Nyaluhana is a case in point (loc.cit.).

There are two major contenders for the right to sponsor Mukanda and to perform its leading roles. One is Headman Machamba, the other, Headman Nyaluhana. Each had his factional following in the vicinage during the Mukanda situation (ibid.: 159). Generally speaking, factions are multiples of village memberships, where internal quarrels in villages sometimes result in dissident groups and individuals supporting, sometimes openly but more often clandestinely, the faction opposing the headman's. On the face of it, Nyaluhana is supported by Wukengi, whose head is Nyaluhana's classificatory sister's son, by Wadyang'amafu, by Kafumbu, by Nyampasa, and by Mukoma. Machamba, on the other hand, is supported by Sampasa, and by Sawiyembi. Turner thought that Nyaluhana's claim was the more strongly backed up, but it must be mentioned that much of Nyaluhana's following had closer links with Wukengi than with himself, and that Nyaluhana and Wukengi were by no means on the best of terms. The outcome of their rivalry was by no means a foregone conclusion when it was first suggested that Mukanda should be performed.

Nevertheless, Nyaluhana's claims to sponsor Mukanda and allocate its key roles were formidable. His village was "a village of the chieftainship (mukala wawanta), and men belonging to its matrilineal nucleus may become candidates for the Kanongesha senior chieftainship, or rather for the Chibwika chieftainship, whose incumbent was Konongesha's heir apparent. Indeed, the current Kanongesha, Ndembi, belonged to the Nyaluhana matrilineage; but for this very reason, it was unlikely that the next Chibwika would be nominated from Nyaluhana Village, for it is the Ndembu convention for each new Chibwika to be appointed from a different village belonging to the chiefly maternal descent group. Nyaluhana claimed that his lineage was descended from Nkeng'i, the uterine sister of the founder of the Kanongesha chieftainship. Turner's genealogies of Ndembu villages recorded several female

village heads in the nineteenth century, and indeed there was a woman village head, Nyampasa, in the vicinage when Turner made his study of Mukanda. The present Kanongesha's mother's mother was an older sister of the first Nyaluhana. Kanongesha Ndembi had married Wukengi's sister's daughter when this woman, Mulosu, had been a member of Nyaluhana's village, that is, before Wukengi had split from Nyaluhana Village. Kanongesha had a son by her, whom he had sent to be circumcized at this Mukanda. Nyaluhana Village, like the other villages in the vicinage, lay within Kanongesha's own area. Kanongesha thus held a two-fold authority over the vicinage. He was Senior Chief and Native Authority of all Ndembu and was also the local territorial chief. Since he was a matrilineal kinsman of Nyaluhana, and had clearly indicated that he favoured Nyaluhana's claims by sending his son to the latter's village, it seemed long odds at the time that Mukanda would be performed in the vicinage, that Nyaluhana would control the most important ritual roles.

Nyaluhana himself had been Senior Circumciser (Mbimbi wamukulumpi or Mbimbi weneni) at no less than three previous performances of Mukanda. The first occasion had been in 1928, shortly after Nyaluhana had succeeded to the headmanship of his village. The novices' seclusion lodge had been erected near his village (which was then situated beside the Kanjimu River, a mile or two from its location in 1953). Nyaluhana had again been Senior Circumciser in 1941, when a Mukanda was held at Katong'i Farm, an offshoot of Nyaluhana Village. The third time was in 1943, at Nyaluhana Village itself, when the village was not far from its present site, near the Kachibamba River. Thus, there were abundant precedents for Nyaluhana's continuing to fill the senior role (ibid.: 160). In conclusion then, each faction or fission in Ndembu social structure constitutes a perspective and position within which and from which to view a social structure.

Historical and cultural relativism maintains that whatever is "truth" in history is relative to the process under which it arose and without reference to which it cannot be understood.<sup>41</sup> Central to this position is the notion that the student of human affairs constructs his account under the dominance of his particular values (op.cit.: 31). Moreover, these evaluations are not simply personal, but reflect societal conditions and hence change from age to age (op.cit.: 34). A presuppositionless nirvana is unattainable because as both Marx and Mannheim asserted, class interests form the basic substructure of knowledge systems. It is unnecessary to assume any specific world view is false. Each has access to a part of the truth though "the truth in its entirety escapes all theorists because each limits itself to a specific line of vision".

At whatever developmental stage a culture finds itself, preconditions valued for their adaptive and aesthetic power pull people together into a similar belief system. Without this conserving force serving to yield a common heritage, the problems of order, survival and unity would not begin to be solved. Human psychic stability is balanced in a precarious fashion. There is always the danger of slipping into biological centredness - a neurosis, or slipping outside the limits to experience flights of ideas - a psychosis. Culture, as E. Becker (1973, p.45) so rightly assumed, is the life and death struggle to impose boundaries, and limits, categories and classifications, whose erasement at any step means death. Culture is simply the struggle of life over death and

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<sup>41</sup>Mandelbaum, Maurice H. (1967) The Problem of Historical Knowledge. An answer to relativism, N.Y.: Harper & Row, p.19.

good over evil. Social relations may be metaphors for exchange but when the "relation" evaporates men die with it. For, as de Saussure wrote, the viewpoint creates the object, the object does not create the viewpoint.<sup>42</sup> It is necessary for man to divide his universe into specifiable relevancies so as to erase any fiction. Man continually reconstructs categories in perspective form by definitions, insulating him from madness and death.

"Commonsense", a composite of elements

Robin Horton holds that there are striking similarities between primitive and scientific forms of thinking.<sup>43</sup> He believes that in the case of traditional African cultures one should distinguish between commonsense and theoretical thinking, and this distinction is essentially of the same kind as that between commonsense and science in western culture. He says:

Commonsense is the handier and more economical tool for coping with a wide range of circumstances in everyday life. Nevertheless, there are certain circumstances that can only be coped with in terms of a wider causal vision than commonsense provides. And in these circumstances there is a jump to theoretical thinking.  
(loc.cit.)

According to Horton, the search for theoretical explanation is the search for unity behind apparent diversity, simplicity behind seeming complexity, order behind chaos, regularity behind arbitrariness. He explains as follows:

Indeed, some modern writers deny that traditional religious thinking is in any serious sense theoretical thinking.

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<sup>42</sup>Rossi, I. (ed.) (1974) The Unconscious and Culture. Paris: Mouton.

<sup>43</sup>Horton, Robin (1967) 'African traditional thought and Western science'. Comparison of different modes of thought. Africa, 37: 60-61.

In support of their denial they contrast the simplicity, regularity and elegance of the theoretical schemas of the sciences with the unruly complexity and caprice of the world of gods and spirits ... From the point of view of sheer number, the spirits of some cosmologies are virtually countless. But in the superficial sense we can point to the same tendency in Western cosmology, which for every commonsense unitary object gives us a myriad of molecules.

If, however, we recognize that the aim of theory is the demonstration of a limited number of kinds of entities or processes underlying the diversity of experience, then the picture Horton believes becomes very different.

Indeed, one of the lessons ... is precisely that the gods of a given culture do form a scheme which presents the vast diversity of everyday experience in terms of the action of a relatively few kinds of forces ... Like atoms, molecules, and waves, then, the gods serve to introduce unity into diversity, simplicity into complexity, order into disorder, regularity into anomaly.

(Ibid.: 51-52)

A second characteristic of theoretical thinking, both in science and African religious thought, is that the theory places things in a wider causal context than that used by commonsense:

Through the length and breadth of the African continent, sick or afflicted people go to consult diviners as to the causes of their troubles. Usually, the answer they receive involves a god or other spiritual agency, and the remedy prescribed involves the propitiation or calling off of this being. But this is very seldom the whole story. For the diviner who diagnoses the intervention of a spiritual agency is also expected to give some acceptable account of what moved the agency in question to intervene. And this account very commonly involves reference to some event in the world of visible tangible happenings. Thus, if a diviner diagnoses the action of witchcraft influence or lethal medicine spirits, it is usual for him to add something about the human hatreds, jealousies, and misdeeds that have brought such agencies into play. Or, if he diagnoses the wrath of an ancestor, it is usual for him to point to the human breach of kinship morality which has called down his wrath.

(Ibid.: 53)

Thus, the "diviner" as Horton would have us believe, does what the scientist does also:

Reference to theoretical entities is used to link events in the visible, tangible world (natural effects) to their ancestors in the same world (natural causes).

Horton believes that both the diviner and the scientist make the same use of theory and transcend the limited vision of natural causes provided by commonsense. (ibid.: 54).

I believe Horton's thesis is indefensible. An example demonstrating the fictive nature of our perceptions, and how they vary according to context, is given by Trobriand ethnography. Malinowski was interested in the perceptual resemblances between parents and child. He found a complicated but culturally uniform pattern of such perceptions. Among the Trobriand Islanders, children were perceived to look like their father but not like their mother. Furthermore, siblings, children of the same father, did not look like each other.<sup>44</sup> This posed a perceptual paradox to Malinowski because he saw the Trobriand society as a matrilineal society that regarded the mother and child as "blood" relatives, but not the father and the child. To Malinowski the similarity between father, and son and sister seemed obvious. By breaking the rule Malinowski discovered it was very bad manners, embarrassing to the brothers in particular, to mention that two brothers looked alike. A still worse offence was to say a brother looked like his sister. A normal observer imagines the world exactly as he sees it. He accepts the evidence of perception uncritically. He does not realize that his visual perception is mediated by indirect reference

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<sup>44</sup>Segall, M. H., Campbell, D. T. & Herskovitz, M. J. (1966) The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception. Case studies in cross-cultural thinking. Chicago: Bobbs-Merill, pp.25-26.

systems. Implicitly, he assumes that the evidence of vision is directly and immediately unmediately given. This attitude is phenomenal absolutism. Learned organizations are phenomenally absolute operating mostly below consciousness. Common principles that possibly could serve to unite the underlying events, however, cannot be applied when these events are significantly grounded in a unique context. The Trobrianders saw no causal link between the father's image being impressed on the foetus and the assertion of similarities that they did not see. Malinowski (op.cit.: 3 and 6) believed that over and above these restraints on verbal expression, the actual perceptions followed the cultural pattern. Malinowski makes a plausible case for perceptual differences (op.cit.: 28). The ideas of Hallowell and Wittgenstein converge, that is the world looks the way a people have learned to talk about it.<sup>45</sup> Where an individual is a member of a cohesive work group he "speaks the language of his group; he thinks in the manner in which his group thinks. He finds at his disposal only certain words and their meanings. These ... determine to a large extent the avenues of approach to the surrounding world ... Thus it is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals ... but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterizing their common position." (Mannheim, 1960, pp.2, 3)

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<sup>45</sup>I refer to the early Wittgenstein who emphasized logical positivism (Vienna school) that saw language as the main tool shaping reality. This position differs from the later Wittgenstein, who saw language as masking the intricacies through which meanings were conveyed. The form of the logic coloured discourse itself. It is this later position that I shall emphasize. Above, I refer to the "picture theory" but as I go on, I show that this "picture theory" is akin to "commonsense" and therefore positivist, in treating observable events as "real".