

BOOK REVIEW

A.S.A. 9. Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations.

( ed. M. Douglas, Tavistock, 1970 ).

The essays in this volume were presented at the A.S.A. conference at Cambridge 1968. They are intended to honour Evans-Pritchard and to commemorate his justly famous monograph of 1937. But for a scholar (like Hocart in this respect) who never became infected by the vulgar positivism and scientism introduced into our discipline by Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, the contents of this book can surely be no real tribute. We are glad to see historians working on our type of problem; in anthropology we must be grateful for scholarship from any source. The stance of many of the anthropologists, however, is a latter-day structural-functionalism that one had hoped could not survive into the 70's. Ardener's paper is the only one to make real reference to Lévi-Strauss' work on primitive thought, and his use of the idea of a template (in the sense this term has in molecular biology) sets it apart from the rest and puts it in the same class as Douglas' excellent article on primitive rationing in A.S.A.6. The papers by Pitt-Rivers, Ruel and Lienhardt are commendable but most of the others are uninspired. I might take Lewis' "A Structural Approach to Witchcraft and Spirit-Possession" as an example. It represents a type of study in the Radcliffe-Brownian conception of comparative sociology, the type of endeavour which Pocock in his perceptive and precocious introductory book (1961) quite rightly says must be abandoned rather than refined. Correlational exercises are, in the exact sciences, always indicative of inadequate conceptual work. And no-one but a social scientist in this tradition could possibly be so naive as to conceive the relationship between social structure, belief and values to be so simple as his essay supposes. The appearance of the term structural in the title also seems rather odd (unless there is a special London usage of the word). Surely Chomsky's work ought to have brought seriously into doubt the explanatory adequacy of the type of parametric model which Radcliffe-Brown bequeathed us for dealing with any type of meaningful rule-governed human phenomena? But, it seems, many are unaware that there is any other type of approach available for our discipline. Kingsley Davis' comment in 1959 that functionalism is not a particular social theory but is sociological explanation had all the signs of a last desperate stand for one conception of social science, but, unfortunately, it appears that many believed him. Boulderman's obvious feeling of dissatisfaction is surely just, and perhaps too politely expressed. The need he indicates for real rethinking rather than more studies is required not only in this field but throughout the whole discipline. If the type of work in this book is given to a new generation of students in 1971 as current social anthropology it may do irreparable harm. It would be no loss to the academic world if such a tradition were to disintegrate. Evans-Pritchard in 1937 was responsible for a redirection in anthropological attention. It seems that teaching in many departments of this country goes on unaware of the significance that such, and other, different approaches could have for our subject. Certainly the majority of articles in this book do not remotely approach the degree of intelligent sensitivity in the treatment of primitive thought which Evans-Pritchard attained so many years ago.

Malcolm Crick .

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