

Book Reviews

The Interpretation of Ritual. Essays in Honour of A.I. Richards.
 Edited by J.S. La Fontaine. Tavistock Publications.
 1972. £3.50p.

The appearance of a volume of essays on ritual is, in itself, some index of changing interests in British anthropology. This is not, however, to say that all the papers are modern in style. And, indeed, one who wished to contribute to this festschrift for Audrey Richards felt unable to do so once the theme of the book had been chosen.

The Interpretation of Ritual is, in fact, an excellent miniature of the history of our discipline since 1945. The articles by Firth and Esther Goody still display a desire to talk about 'social adaptation' or 'manipulation' before fully eliciting the grammar which underlies their observational data; the timidity of the references to kinesics and codes merely serves to confirm their date. At the other extreme are the articles by La Fontaine and Ardener in which the composition of the cultural syntax receives primary attention. The piece by Southall is an 'English reaction to Lévi-Strauss', but of a far higher quality than many of those in this category hitherto published; it is a valuable essay.

There is also a debate between Leach and the sociologist-psychoanalyst Bott. She gives a rather unsophisticated psychoanalytic interpretation of the Tongan kava ceremony. Leach does not raise all the issues involved in the relations between psychology and anthropology, but his critique of Bott's interpretation is just. Quite legitimately he objects to what he calls the fairly straightforward kind of functionalism to which it is attached. Rightly, he draws our attention to the intuitive aspect of functionalism. On the other hand, he exaggerates when he claims that structuralism is 'objective'. No method is objective in a hard sense, but structuralism certainly does not lose its analytical superiority or become undermined by one's acknowledging that the analyst plays an active and selective role. On the broader issue of the debate, one ought to recall the work of Kluckhohn on witchcraft or Bettelheim on ritual. No one would deny the importance of an interchange between psychology and anthropology, but these earlier failures impress upon us the fact that the task is not achieved in a conceptually satisfactory way with any facility. And before the attempt is made, one ought to ask, as Bott does not, just how adequate our different psychological theories are, that is, just how useful a model of the human mind psychology gives us.

It is a sign that anthropology has left the Gluckman stage when, as the editor says, there is no longer a need felt to define ritual. Special definitions of ritual, or ceremonial, as different from ordinary social or pragmatic behaviour conceal a rather profound error. If ritual is formal, patterned, symbolic action, then we have all the elements of a definition of any behaviour which we would wish to call social. Once a semiological view of society is seriously adopted the retention of the category 'ritual' at all would clearly be a mistake; finding definition of no import is perhaps a step towards a full realization of this.

An interesting point emerges from Ardener's and Southall's papers - namely that our changing analytical interests show fieldwork to have been defective in important ways. It has become

customary to point to the theoretical failings of our functionalist ancestors, but to commend them for their excellent fieldwork. But the obvious influence of a theoretical framework on a research technique lessens the weight of this 'empirical compliment' considerably. Paradoxically, anthropology in its recently more penetrating and analytic phase has been more dependent upon detailed ethnography than functionalism ever was. It would be a nonsense for functionalists to delude themselves into thinking that they dealt with 'facts' whilst structuralists irreverently dabbled in metaphysics. A close scrutiny of these two approaches might even suggest the justice of reversing the charge-though doubtless many would remain unconvinced.

Malcolm Crick.

Three Styles in the Study of Kinship. J.A. Barnes. £3.00.

London: Tavistock Publications, 1971

Professor Barnes might ponder on whether he has written the wrong book. This is a study of the study of kinship (and this reviewer has no intention of writing a study of the study of the study ...), or more precisely of the work of three practitioners in this field; they are Murdock, Lévi-Strauss, and Fortes. Uneasy bedfellows one would have thought, but the choice seems to have been dictated less by the range of views which they represent than by one of the author's aims which is "to assist the transformation of social anthropology from an intuitive art to a cumulative science." To achieve this questionable enterprise, Professor Barnes deems it necessary to make a decisive break with the past. Accordingly he has selected 1949 as the cut-off point on the grounds that the three anthropologists mentioned above, whom he sees in some sense as typical of some post-Malinowskian and post-Radcliffe-Brownian era, all published major works in that year. This seems an extraordinarily arbitrary step, for the first essential in the founding of this new science should be to demonstrate that the ideas (I hesitate to say theories, let alone general laws) in existence at that time were generally accepted. However Barnes shows only too clearly that there was no more general agreement in the field of kinship studies in 1949 than there is today. Paradoxically he almost manages to make a stronger case for social anthropology as a non-cumulative science than another book published at the same time by the same house which mainly supports such a view.

What of the three studies? They provide more or less good commentaries on the works of the three anthropologists. I found Professor Barnes at his best when dealing with Murdock and at his worst with Lévi-Strauss. Fortes comes out of it quite well but then his batteries of irreducible principles make his position almost impregnable and impregnate. None of these examinations is very conclusive (indeed they are all rather negative) and it is curious that another of Barnes' aims is "to encourage others to tackle the works of Murdock, Lévi-Strauss and Fortes more effectively" when there are in existence more effective treatments of these writers than those offered here.

It was suggested at the beginning of this review that Professor Barnes has written the wrong book. Apparently he had originally intended a second half to this volume in which he planned to undertake case studies of particular problems and topics on the lines represented by his Inquest on the Murngin. Although it is difficult to know without seeing the result, this sounds a more valuable, interesting and above all positive exercise than that which has appeared.

Peter Rivière