

Leach's concept of the virgin birth



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Central to theoretical discussions on kinship is the concept of paternity and its connexion between notions of biology and culture. Certainly, Leach is not the only anthropologist to recognise the importance of these debates through debunking other anthropologists claims that some societies did not recognise fully the biological underpinnings behind the concept. Here it is important to establish the different analytical terms of dogma and factual knowledge which underline the central theme of Leaches explanation of paternity and the Virgin Birth. Where dogma is concerned Leach maintains that the knowledge projected is that of not how the world is but what the world should be like ideally. Therefore he rejects Malinowski's account of the Trobriand Islanders ignorance of physiological paternity instead proposing that Trobriander's highlight in their cultural elaborations what kinship should be not what it is, thus filiation motherhood and fatherhood is misleading in their context. On the contrary, the physiological and genealogical expression of kinship linked to procreation involving the scientific empirical data concerning the fertilisation of the woman by the man's sperm can be the distinction between factual knowledge and the manifestation of dogma. Therefore much like the Virgin Birth has to be situated in dogmatic terms, similarly the procreative beliefs of the Trobriand Islanders and Australian Aborigines can be seen to be coherent with their cosmological principles.

Firstly Leaches paper the " Virgin Birth" attempts to disregard the query of " whether certain primitive peoples...were or were not ignorant of the facts of physiological paternity" (Leach, 1966, p. 39). This dispute is channelled through the deliberation on the nature of kinship and the precedence of dogmatic knowledge in the social organisation. Precisely as Edmund Leach

contends “ human beings, wherever we meet them, display an almost obsessional interest in matters of sex and kinship” (Leach, 1966, p. 41). Further promoting the idea that all communities “ now existing are fully aware of the physiological connexion between copulation and pregnancy (Leach, 1966, p. 41)”. Therefore fundamental to his argument is not that these expectational groups are allegedly ignorant but fully equal and aware of their own kinship structure of differing conceptualisations.

Indeed, Leach initiates his dialogue in the *Virgin Birth* on the ethnographic content of the Australian aborigines who some stated were ignorant of physical paternity. For example, Leach cites Roth’s assumption that his ‘ informants were ignorant of any casual connexion between copulation and pregnancy (Leach, 1966, p. 39)’. This claim by Roth alludes to the Australian aborigines apparent ignorance of physiological paternity. Roth describes their procreational beliefs whereby the Tully River Blacks describes that a woman procreates by sitting over a fire which she has roasted a black bream given by a potential father. However, Leach situates the practice in the specificity of cultural elaborations claiming that “ in this society, the relationship between the woman’s child and the clansmen of the woman’s husband stems from public recognition of the bonds of marriage rather than from the facts of cohabitation which is a very normal state of affairs” (Leach, 1966, p. 39). He rejects the simplistic mindset of declaring them ignorant not only because they were fully aware and admitted to Roth that the cause in animal pregnancy was copulation, hence recognise the factual knowledge. Thus this illustration is not devoid of knowledge and cannot be reified as

ignorance on behalf of a community because of their positive knowledge of beliefs situated in cultural arenas.

Additionally, he argues that declarations by interlocutors don't address the physiological realities do not render them ignorant of these truths. Instead, a ritual like a myth "establishes categories and affirms relationships" (Leach, 1966, p. 42). Hence what is essential not the words but the setting. For example, he explores the Christian ethos of the virgin birth comparatively against the Trobriand Islander's circumstance. Leach refers to the gospels of Matthew and Luke as giving a lineage "which places Jesus in the direct line of patrilineal descent from David through Joseph" (Leach, 1966, p. 42). This is evidence that he utilises to present the information that Jesus' birth was just like a normal human being. He preserves that the virgin birth is unusual creation yet the mother and child (Jesus) are still upheld as normal social beings. He then cites the Trobriand Islander's conception involving an element of the supernatural as the child's creation is congruent to a "magical" conception (Leach, 1966, p. 40). In this instance, the mother is considered a normal human being whilst the infant is "predestined to be a hero" with supernatural tendencies (Leach, 1966, p. 43). Here he demonstrates instances of supernatural births which although Tylor claims these dogmas come to fruition out of "mistaken attempts to explain cause and effect in the world of nature" (Leach, 1966, p. 43) here the virgin birth and Trobriand birth can be seen as reflection of the dogma of society in which it is sustained.

So the critical debate is to address is how societies sustain dogmatic declarations of these kinds which counteract their given understandings. I

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have already established that Leach rejects the position that other anthropologists have held that people practice such principles because of childlike ignorance a situation Leach discards this in relation to the Australian aborigines, Trobriand's and Christians. Adequately Leach does not approach the causal facts of these philosophies, switching to a focus on the light the myths shed on the social situations. Concluding that dogmatic accounts must be able to be positioned in social organisations. Their substance rests in cultural elaborations of procreation and paternity only becomes logical when situated the entire social logic.

Moreover, Leach claims that such a reading comes on the part of the anthropologists' ignorance of the meaning of paternity and because of this the question has been misinterpreted. Therefore, Malinowski's conclusion that "knowledge of impregnation, of the man's share in creating the new life in the mother's womb, is a fact of which the natives have not even the slightest glimpse" (Malinowski, 2014) tells us more about his personal prejudice against them as a bias support of evidence to uphold their 'primitive' nature. This obliviousness is furthered by Leaches claim that "if the ethnographer in question believed what he was told it was because such belief corresponded to his own private fantasy of natural ignorance of childish savages" (Leach, 1966, p. 41). Consequently, the matters related to what procreation is all about and the association with reproductive principles and the broader frameworks such as cosmology, religion and the culture in which they are positioned has not been recognised. Leach reflects the ignorant statement back onto the naivety of the anthropologists in the fields themselves. Hence the explanation for this artificial ignorance of the

communities indicates that the physiological facts of paternity are transgressed through procreation grounded in these dogmas and religious scriptures. These then expose the binaries of the physical and metaphysical, here and now and transcendental as well as the natural and supernatural, which allow for the cultural aspect of a biological process.

As I stated previous Leach distinguishes two kinds of knowledge factual and dogma. He argues that when expressing views about kinship there is no link between sex and pregnancy as presented as factual but rather as dogma. For instance, he argues that the virgin birth “ serves to reinforce the dogma that the Virgin’s child is the son of God” (Leach, 1966, p. 42). The dogma of the virgin birth is in Leach’s view compatible with a patriarchal social system (Leach, 1966, p. 43), where he establishes the religious theme in the dogma of the virgin birth is the relationship between God and men. He perceives that in all societies social “ distance in time, space and generation” (Leach, 1966, p. 46) is a primary human practice. Therefore, Mary a virgin mother does not have a biological message but only a sociological cause of procreation illuminating complex affiliation of God beyond the bounds of this world and the human entities of the physical domain. This supersedes that biological ordering of procreation through the social elaborations which affirm a relationship between the natural and supernatural.

In conclusion, Leach’s approach to procreation is one that emphasises the cultural elaboration which stresses significances of particular cultures.

Hence, paternity is a notion rooted in the system which it must be looked in.

The question of physiological paternity presupposes a view of reproduction typical to the West as primarily a natural and therefore universal process.

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Hence Leach alludes to the idea that paternity is not embedded in physiological rather physical representations are utilised for articulating social meaning, for instance, the connections between the natural and supernatural. Consequently, as Schneider points out that “ the biological elements have primarily symbolic significance and that their meaning is not biology at all” (Schneider, 1972, p. 45). Indeed, such of purely physiological view of paternity obscures specific conceptual and cultural variables. Conclusively the Trobriand and Australian aborigines procreative politics result in the same sort of reflections between human and divine, which is no different to the refined dogmas of Christianity.

Bibliography

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