

The New Bestiary

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In the early days of anthropology, it was not quite clear whether the new arrival was an infant prodigy, or simply a know-all adolescent. If the claims of the first generations of anthropologists were correct, marvellous keys had been discovered for tracing the prehistory of the family and the origins of religion; but the development of the subject brought about their rejection, though Morgan's scheme of the evolution of the family was absorbed into the ossified dogmas of Soviet Communism (from which it has by now been quietly dislodged), while Sir James Frazer's mythology of corn spirits and dying gods not only impressed Freud but gave English-speaking intellectuals their abiding image of traditional religion.

Professional social anthropology meanwhile followed the path of academic respectability, the elaboration of its own methodology and, more particularly, its own academic language, which admirably fulfilled the related functions of revealing its mysteries by successive degrees to the initiated while concealing them from outsiders. Respectability once attained, however, has a way of losing its charm, and we now seem to be on the verge of a new wave of anthropologists as prophets. Dr Roy Willis presents himself as one of the first of the band, with his revelations contained in *Man and Beast*¹, the first of a new series, entitled *Approaches to Anthropology*, under the general editorship of Professor Mary Douglas.

Let it be said at once that Dr Willis is a singularly urbane prophet and his kerygma contains little that menaces doom, though much that stirs up thought. His basic problem bears some relationship to the old problem of totemism; how is it that certain societies find satisfactory self-images in animals? The answer by Lévi-Strauss that animals are chosen, because they are 'good to think', that is, the variety and interaction of the different species of animal life provide the best image of the diversity and interlocking of the groups within a total society, does not entirely satisfy Dr Willis, since it ignores man-animal imaging which is of a non-totemic nature, as well as not explaining fully why particular animals are chosen as images.

Like most other original thinkers Dr Willis has brought together a number of ideas presented by earlier authors in a new synthesis. The very term of 'imaging' is derived from Godfrey Lienhardt;² Beidelman's re-examination of Evans-Pritchard's material has been used to understand the importance of cattle to the Nuer; the influence of Mary

¹*Man and Beast*. By Roy Willis. Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, London, 1974, pp. 143, £2.95.

²See G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961.

Douglas is strikingly impressive, not only in the explanation of the significance of the pangolin to the Lele,³ but also more generally, in Dr Willis' concern with anomalies, boundaries and exchanges. Yet the completed dish is definitely from Dr Willis' hand.

Perhaps the major difficulty in reading this book is not any particular sectarianism of style or terminology, or even the unquestionable richness of Dr Willis' thought, but rather the way it seems to be written at two levels, the first level being an essay in comparative social anthropology, the second being a rather more ambitious attempt to suggest how particular social structures can generate systems of thought, and to open up the question of similarities between the belief systems of certain oral cultures and the philosophies of literate societies.

It seems to me that, at the first level, Dr Willis is brilliantly successful. The three societies considered are the Nuer of the southern Sudan, the Lele of Zaire, and the Fipa of Tanzania. For the Nuer, with their concern with cattle, Dr Willis draws on Evans-Pritchard's abundant ethnography; for the Lele, he has had the benefit of the personal advice of Professor Mary Douglas; and he did fieldwork himself among the Fipa. In the Nuer Dr Willis discerns an inward-looking society which finds in its cattle both the means of marriage and sacrifice and an appropriate idiom of individual identity; in the Lele, both a sharp consciousness of boundaries, particularly that between the quarrel-ridden villages, and the mysterious, life-giving forest, and a belief in the possibility of the transcending of boundaries, revealed in the cult of the pangolin, a creature which breaks the elaborate categories of Lele animal classification, and which is believed to come from the forest to the village to offer itself as a voluntary sacrifice; finally, in the Fipa, he finds a way of life calmly confident in the power of rational activity over virgin nature, and which regards the domestication of the python as a fitting symbol of this power.

Dr Willis recognises that animals are not merely 'good to think', creatures to whom their wiser elder brother can attach any symbolic meanings he likes. Obviously, if there were no cattle in Nuerland, cattle could not have the importance for the Nuer that they do. While, however, he gives full weight to ecological and economic factors, he also seems to argue for the existence in the societies studied of certain basic social axioms, some of which—notably those related to ideas concerning exchange—can be explained against the background of the economic environment, while others, drawn, presumably, from a limited stock of alternatives available to the human mind, are of a more strictly metaphysical nature. To give examples, the Nuer, with their limited technology and lack of trade, have little interest in exchange, and, for the exchanges that are important to them their 'bovine idiom' of cattle suffice. Exchange is important for the Lele, but the relatively limited trade with other groups and the complex entanglements of marriage negotiations lack a cultural evaluation which would overcome the Lele

³See my commentary on Mary Douglas' two important books, *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols* in 'The Earthbound Pangolin', *New Blackfriars*, September, 1970.

belief in sharply marked boundaries and classifications—a belief immediately visible to anybody observing Lele villages. Finally, the Fipa had developed in the pre-colonial period a combination of a developed trading system with a pacific foreign policy, which, Dr Willis seems to think, relates to the high value the Fipa attach to cordial and relaxed conversation.

For cases of axioms of 'a more metaphysical nature', the best examples come from the Nuer and their neighbours, the Dinka. The importance of dichotomous classifications—Spirit and below, man and wild nature, bull and ox—for the Nuer doubtlessly relates, as Dr Willis suggests, to the division of the Nuer year into the dry season, when the Nuer and their cattle gather in large camps, and the wet season, when they settle in villages on ridges, but to interpret this deep-seated principle which interprets the worlds of culture, nature, and spirit as being characterised by a series of unequal and unbridgeable dichotomies—with special esteem given to those creatures and events which, like birds, twins, and sacrifices seem to bridge the unbridgeable—as simply a reflection of the environment would be a reduction unacceptable to Dr Willis. The Dinka, on the other hand, instead of accepting the world as ultimately a place of division, seem to strive consciously for the reintegration of both the individual personality and the world as a whole. For another Sudanese people, the Mandari,⁴ it is division, rather than potential unity that is stressed, but the equality of the divided halves is also a significant value.

Similarly, among the Fipa and the Lele, an interplay of surrounding environment and unquestionable axioms is deftly noted by Dr Willis. With the Lele indeed, idealization of the forest and depreciation of the village overrides nutritional sense in teaching them not to eat goats and pigs. Good meat for them comes out of the clean and holy forest. This would not appeal to the eminently rational Fipa, who, however, like their portrayer (with whom they seem to have one of those elective affinities not unknown in the history of anthropology), are aware of the danger of over-much rationality, as they show by their theory of the 'head' (the active, planning, rational side of human nature) and the 'loins' (the passive, hidden, non-rational side), which need to be in interaction rather than antagonism.⁵

As with others of Dr Willis' concepts, that of social axioms is not new (Meyer Fortes has applied it extensively in the field of kinship studies)⁶ but he does employ it in a new and significant way. It is possible that *Man and Beast* may in future years be seen as a trail-blazing book that opened up contact between anthropology of the 'thought structuralism' type and the ecological approach (associated particularly with American scholars, such as Vayda, who strive to see any human culture as part of a much wider 'eco-system').⁷ In this interaction between observed en-

⁴Cfr Jean Buxton, *Religion and Healing in Mandari*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, pp. 19-24.

⁵The parallel will be noted with European ideas of *animus* and *anima*.

⁶Cfr his *Kinship and the Social Order*, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1969.

⁷See A. Leeds and A. P. Vayda (editors), *Man, Culture and Animals*, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1965, and R. A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, Yale University Press.

vironment and the human mind, Dr Willis, like the Fipa, seems to give a slight edge to rationality, but he would readily recognise that the mind must be somewhere when it thinks.

With regard, then, to his first level, that concerned with the specific problem of the variety of ritual attitudes to animals in these three societies, Dr Willis seems to me to have met with a very high degree of success. It is with the claims made at what I have called his second level that I feel uneasy. Perhaps, of course, I am reading too much into his argument, but I believe that I am stating concisely a consistent line of thought that lies a little below the surface for most of the book. What Dr Willis seems to be saying is that the ideologies which emerge consciously in complex societies (characterised by substantial class differentiation, developed systems of trade, widespread literacy) are very similar to the patterns of value found in traditional societies (any society where an anthropologist feels he can do anthropology).⁸

Thus, the values of Nuer society seem to be Kantian, in that the transcendental self (seemingly the hidden reality beneath the outward sacrifice of an ox) is valued over the empirical self, whose deeds are swiftly forgotten (unlike, in this, other African peoples, whose songs and stories preserve the glory of their heroes). Yet against the Nuer world of sharply defined categories, Dr Willis launches much the same criticism that Marx made against the idealism of Kant. Nuer consciousness is an ahistorical one, and this leads the Nuer seriously to misunderstand their own society, as when they regard Nuer-Dinka strife as simply a permanent antagonism and not as a process by which very large numbers of Dinka have been absorbed into Nuer society. Insofar as the Nuer have a historical consciousness, they project it onto the world of wild animals, in which they are not particularly interested. Dr Willis vindicates this at first sight surprising suggestion by examining the meaning of Nuer myths in which a lineage emerges with a monstrous twin birth, a human and an animal child being born together. The emergence of a new lineage is a historical event, which changes the a-historical situation of Nuer society, and hence is an appropriate occasion for a natural monstrosity to parallel the social one. Furthermore, there is some evidence that such stories are particularly associated with lineages which have absorbed many Dinka, and the Dinka frontier is the area where history seems most likely to break in. There is, then, a double contrast in the Nuer view of animals, first between the wild animals, associated with the historical and the unexpected, and the cattle, mirrors of mankind, and secondly between the bulls, symbols of headstrong individualism, and the oxen, analogies of men fully incorporated into, and subjected to, the world of social obligation.

For the Lele of the Kasai, Freud and Rousseau are highly relevant, with their sense of the dark, powerful, mysterious forces which outweigh whatever is obvious and individualistic. For the Lele, of course, these forces are identified with the forest, and Dr Willis argues most

⁸I am sorry to sound frivolous; however, other terms, such as 'primitive' or 'small-scale', have been found wanting, and no doubt there are plenty of possible objections to 'traditional'.

persuasively that for them the individualistic competitiveness of village life is felt as a mere superficial game, compared to the abiding reality of the forest with its communal, spiritual, and uncommercial values.

With the Fipa, finally, we find ourselves in a society 'closer to the Enlightenment than the Reformation'.⁹ Dr Willis finds that the distinction between the head and the loins, already mentioned, is consistent with the general Fipa confidence in rationality and the capacity to turn raw nature into meaningful culture. The size of Fipa settlements, remarked on by the 19th Century travellers, suggests to Dr Willis, who considers that it is a feature which cannot be explained on purely ecological reasons, a trait which marks a certain type of civilisation. 'These are cultures which, like the Fipa, have placed the centre of gravity of the universe firmly within the human community, and have exalted the human intellect in its struggle to understand and control nature. Like the Fipa, such societies have combined a sense of history with social-evolutionary theory. Such civilizations were those of classical Greece, 18th Century France, 19th Century Britain and 20th Century U.S.A. All these were or are essentially urban civilisations'.¹⁰ Fipa rationality finds its appropriate natural symbol in the python, induced by cult priests to settle on a stool, to eat millet porridge, and, on ritual occasions, to have its scale rubbed by oil, just as the body of bride and groom are rubbed with oil in their wedding ceremony. Thus, it becomes an image of nature peacefully domesticated and sacralised.

All this is impressive. Dr Willis has evidently been influenced by the approach attempted by Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols*, but is much less sweeping in his claims, more thorough in his examination of evidence. However, a reviewer has to see how far Dr Willis' book presents proof that there is a relation between certain features of social structure and certain patterns of thought which can exist in societies in other respects very different, how far we are just being presented with striking analogies without any explanation being imposed on us, and how far this is simply another in the succession of delightful books, such as *Utopia*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Rasselas* (not to mention Montaigne's *Essays*) which see in the non-European world a critical mirror for Western man, with this difference, that here the detail on conduct and custom is ethnographically authentic. Perhaps Dr Willis himself, if questioned, might refuse to assign the book to any one of these categories, suggesting that a book does not only have the meaning ascribed to it by its author but also those discovered by its readers.

As a reader, then, I have to see what can be said against Dr Willis' extremely fascinating suggestions. Let me start with the Nuer. I am not very happy with Dr Willis' glittering epigram, 'A repressed historical consciousness confronts the Nuer in the alienated form of social relations with wild beasts'. To expand this slightly, what Dr Willis is saying is that the categories which their society imposes on Nuer are so static that the concepts of chance, change, and event are only accorded significance in discourse about the animal kingdom, which is in any

⁹*Man and Beast*, p. 88.

¹⁰*Man and Beast*, pp. 108-9.

case marginal to the Nuer world view. Similarly, Dr Willis finds support for his view that the Nuer rank the transcendental self far above the empirical self by claiming 'Personal renown in Nuer society belongs only to a peripheral category of people, the long-haired, unkempt prophets'.¹¹ But is this all really so? Is Nuer society so static in its consciousness, and are prophets so marginal?

Professor T. O. Beidelman, in a study¹² which Dr Willis cites, but does not discuss in detail, has argued that the static image of Nuer society which we have is because we see it very much through the eyes of Evans-Pritchard, who found a Durkheimian approach particularly sympathetic, since he was drawn to the specifically Durkheimian problem of the relation between ideology and social norms. Had he (so Beidelman claims) investigated Nuer society from the standpoint of Max Weber's problem of the relation between authority and power, the prophets would not have appeared so marginal, nor would Nuer social consciousness have appeared so static. For Beidelman, the prophets are charismatic, but also institutionalised figures, whose role is to handle certain recurrent social strains, which arise from the range of Nuer social relations becoming too wide for the 'aristocrats' (men of influence, belonging to the locally dominant lineages) to handle. If we accept Beidelman's interpretation, the Nuer are much closer to at least a semi-historical consciousness than *Man and Beast* suggests.

Turning to the Lele, I again feel that Dr Willis (in spite of, perhaps even a little because of, the advice of Professor Douglas) has pushed his evidence a little beyond what it can really stand. Does the Lele contrast between the village and the forest really parallel the contrast drawn by one strand of Western thought between the busy, conscious, superficial, individualistic self and the deeper, richer, communal, unconscious self? The Lele material certainly fits a common African pattern by which the 'bush' (African English for the uncultivated land away from the villages) is regarded as having raw power, both dangerous and serviceable to human life, which must be approached by appropriate skills, both religious and technical, to be made safely useful. But it does not seem (and I admit that I do not have at hand Professor Douglas' *The Lele of the Kasai*) from what I recall of the published material that the forest is thought of in this way as a communal self, rather, surely, as an area where the sacred is much more active than in the village. Again, I am not sure if the published evidence really supports what seems to be Dr Willis' argument that the complex arranging of marriages which traditionally took up so much of Lele time and energy is regarded ultimately as merely a game, compared with the forest hunts.

With the Fipa, we are on Dr Willis' home ground. But whereas Evans-Pritchard reached the Nuer before serious change had taken place, and Professor Douglas was among the Lele just a few years after the traditional marriage system had begun to crumble, much of Dr Willis' account of the Fipa is a historical reconstruction of their atti-

¹¹*Man and Beast*, p. 121.

¹²T. O. Beidelman, 'Nuer Priests and Prophets', in T. O. Beidelman (ed.), *The Translation of Culture*, Tavistock Publications, 1971 (paperback, 1973).

tudes in the last quarter of the 19th Century. The Fipa certainly seem characterised by that *urbanitas*, whose nearest English equivalent is not so much urbanity as hospitality; but is this, even when coupled with their living in largish settlements, sufficient to justify Dr Willis' comparison with the Enlightenment? The Fipa certainly seem less deeply aware than the Nuer of the presence of the supernatural and less ready to sacralise their environment than the Lele, but this does not necessarily bring them close to the mechanical deism of Voltaire, any more than their precolonial economy and technology paralleled those of 18th Century France. Quite possibly, Aquinas would have found himself more at home with them than would Diderot; he might even have disapproved of the action of the pioneer Catholic missionaries in shooting the sacred pythons, a sacriligious initiative to which, however, the Fipa, used to welcoming new powers, rapidly adjusted themselves.

To put my criticisms at their most general level, I feel that making parallels between the implicit values of traditional societies and the explicit philosophies set forward by professionals in complex society can be vastly stimulating, if it is regarded as stimulating, and not as a great new key finally to unlock all the history of thought. If it were treated as such, it would simply be a new form of reductionism, like every other 'nothing but' dodging by rejecting the reality, the problems, and the necessity of articulate human reasoning.

Yet when I have said this, I must add that I am only repudiating one way in which this book might be read, and Dr Willis might well retort with the French saying: 'There are no bad books, only bad readers'. This book's concern with animals is sufficiently real to give it a little of their livingness and unpredictability. Perhaps we can say that it represents the weaving together of two strands of thought, each with an honourable ancestry, one that man diminishes somehow his own humanity if he does not in some way acknowledge his own kinship with the beasts, the other that only by seeing the non-European peoples as they are, not simply as objects of heartless cruelty, or mindless benevolence, can Europeans attain self-knowledge as Europeans. It is a book which leaves one asking questions—for instance, why do some societies find their self-imagining not so much in animals as in the carved masks and masked dancing so characteristic of the West African coastal zone, and what are the ultimate biological and psychological roots of our attitudes towards animals—but also somehow satisfied.