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Deleuze, Turmeric and Palau : rhizome thinking and rhizome use in the Caroline Islands

by

Paul RAINBIRD *

The development in the humanities of a more decentred approach has made the work of Deleuze and Guattari appealing. Academics working in the humanities disciplines, such as anthropology, archaeology, philosophy and cultural studies have found in their work a useful antidote to the work of scholars who maintain a positivistic approach (e.g., Goodchild, 1996 ; Patton, 1996 ; Shanks, 1992 ; Tilley, 1993). However, in the first part of this paper I briefly introduce the rhizome plant turmeric and then outline Deleuze and Guattari's theory of 'rhizome thinking' and find that, despite claims to the contrary, it may be viewed as dualistic and deterministic. Although this provides a minor critique of Deleuze and Guattari's work it does not, however, provide a means to undermine what is still a very useful counterpoint to traditional Occidental approaches to thinking through social relationships.

Next I review the ethnographically observed use of a particular rhizome, that of turmeric, in the Caroline Islands of the northwest tropical Pacific. Its consistent record of use in various social rites supports the notion that the plant holds a special place amongst the islanders. The review also finds that one of the recorded uses

for turmeric on the islands of Palau is as a metaphor for kin relations. Such plant metaphors have for long been of interest to anthropologists working in Oceania. As Fox (1971) states in relation to investigations of such metaphors amongst the Rotinese of the Indonesian Archipelago; « [s]ince Frazer, some notion of an analogy between man and plant has lingered in social anthropology » (1971 : 244). In Roti Fox (1971 : 234) finds that « [t]he mother's brother's performances, whose intention is to make the sister's child 'grow', form the rituals of the life-cycle. In the semiology of these performances, there is a progression from 'seed' to 'sprout/shoot' and from this to the mature plant ». More famously Raymond Firth (1936) noted similar plant metaphors for kinship terminology on Tikopia and Marshall Sahlins (1985) found that amongst the Hawaiians (and in Polynesia more generally), plants, particularly taro, were regarded as embodying the gods and ancestors thus extending the plant genealogy metaphor, and, it may be noted as an aside, leading to a continual state of '*cannibalisme généralisé*'¹. Roland and Maryanne Force (1961) reviewed the evidence for Palau in a comparative paper published in the American journal *Science*. This

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1. Anne Di Piazza has brought to my attention the important work of A.-G. Haudricourt, who wrote two important papers on the topic of plant metaphor. In one (Haudricourt, 1962) he sees similarities in the way plants, animals and people are treated in western Asia as opposed to their treatment in Oceania. The other paper (Haudricourt, 1964) illustrates the use of a tuber as a metaphor for genealogies and clan divisions in New Caledonia.

use I consider in more detail below and find that the way the rhizome is thought through in Palau appears to be inconsistent with the theory of rhizome thinking proposed by Deleuze and Guattari.

Turmeric

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa* or *C. domestica*) is a plant probably native to South Asia, but is found domesticated from the Indian sub-continent through Southeast Asia and into the Pacific (Brouk, 1975 : 331 ; Pearson, Cunningham and King, 1993 : 186). The spice is well known in Europe as a constituent of curry dishes and is derived from the rhizome, which is located at the base of the plant just below ground level. Sopher (1964) reviewed the use of this plant and found that the current secular use of the plant as a flavouring is by no means representative of the role the rhizome has played in many societies. He states that « turmeric is a magical plant of some importance from India to the Pacific Islands and Madagascar » (1964 : 102).

Rhizome thinking

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) developed a theory of the rhizome which, it was hoped, would free western-minded people from the follies of aborescent thinking. Aborescent thinking is tree thinking, a search for rootedness and an evolutionary hierarchy developed from those roots and expressed in a genealogy. Deleuze and Guattari consider aborescent modes of thought, which they find dominate Western academic thinking, derive from the European fascination with the forest and deforestation. They note that where forests have been removed to create fields, trees are replaced by root crops and domesticated animals whose genealogies are specially preserved to conform to breeds. Although explicitly attempting to avoid a duality they contrast this mode of thought with that found in the 'East'.

In the East, according to Deleuze and Guattari, there exists a system of thought more akin to a plant having a rhizome rather than a root. The rhizome is similar to a root in that it is linear, however, it differs in that it does not form a lineage, it can bud off in any direction, and it can reconnect at any point. A rhizome forms a complex web (sometimes described as an open network) whose form can not be predetermined. For Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome system is

the nature of all things. Even a tree, when thought of from this perspective, always has « an outside where they form a rhizome with something else — with the wind, an animal, human beings » (1988 : 11).

The web of the rhizome grows from the centre (*milieu*) and as it expands, it continually transforms the whole of the multiplicities of which it is constructed. Adopted as a social theory, it requires a commitment to contextualisation and multiple meanings, and the rejection of social evolution and unilineal genealogies in interpretation. This shift in perspective is not an easy task, as it significantly challenges the epistemological basis of humanities disciplines and, as such, is inherent in much of what Rosenau (1992) labels 'affirmative post-modernism'. Deleuze and Guattari have explained why this difficulty in comprehending a new perspective exists in a way which would probably delight the 'New Agers', people who for example, « believe that there are psychic forces at Stonehenge — energy fields, ley lines » (Bender, 1993 : 272). Deleuze and Guattari (1988 : 18) find that in the West « [w]e have lost the rhizome ». That is according to Deleuze and Guattari, the sedentarised people in the West have had the tree metaphor so completely inculcated that they are (almost?) mentally unable to achieve other modes of thinking. It is perhaps then the case that in the midst of high capitalism we have lost a sense of how 'things' really are. This loss of sense or senses in Western society has been claimed by many people for many different facets of life (e.g., Finney, 1995 for magnetoperception; cf. Rainbird in press).

Returning to the discussion of Eastern cultures in Deleuze and Guattari's study they find that the difference in thinking between East and West is the result of :

« a relation to the steppe and garden (or in some cases, the desert and the oasis), rather than forest and field; cultivation of tubers by fragmentation of the individual; a casting aside or bracketing of animal raising, which is confined to closed spaces or pushed out onto the steppes of nomads. The West : agriculture based on a chosen lineage containing a large number of variable individuals. The East : horticulture based on a small number of individuals derived from a wide range of 'clones' » (1988 : 18).

Ignoring the generalisations in this quote, we learn that the differences between the two modes of thought are due to a different social experience of perception of space and the use of different plants for cultivation. The different

experience of space is elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari in proposing that nomads live in 'smooth' spaces, areas that do not restrict movement such as deserts and most interestingly for my study, oceans, which makes up a significant percentage of experienced space in the lives of the inhabitants of Pacific islands (see Rainbird, 1999); this smooth space is opposed to the 'striated' space of the sedentary agriculturalist (1988 : 381). At this level rhizome theory is not only dualistic, but it could be claimed exhibits aspects of environmental determinism. However, this need not detain us here, and more importantly Deleuze and Guattari ask « [d]oes not the East, *Oceania in particular*, offer something like a rhizomatic model *opposed in every respect* to the Western model of the tree? » (1988 : 18, emphasis added). These questions I will return to below, but first I need to focus on the use of the rhizome plant turmeric in Oceania as a prelude to suggesting an answer.

Turmeric use in the Caroline Islands

In the islands of the Pacific the history of turmeric cultivation is, given the similarity of its name *ango*, *rang* and *reng* throughout the islands, probably equal to that of initial human colonisation (Barrau, 1961 ; Sopher, 1964 : 102). That the first settlers saw fit to include this rhizome in their sailing vessels suggests a long history of importance beyond that of food flavouring. However, neither was selection necessarily for its 'magical' attributes, as other qualities attached to the plant could have been its aroma, colour, and starch content (Sopher, 1964 : 94). I will return to the topic of aroma below, but the yellow-orange colour of the rhizome has been extracted for use as a dye and mixing it with other substances can change its colour. Starch is an important element for a healthy diet, but other starchy aroids with large corms, such as taro, were introduced in to the Pacific at the same time as turmeric and are far better suited to providing sustenance. While the plant had its uses it is not, in dietary terms at least, an essential item for survival. Why then was turmeric transported? Here I will present some of the

ethnographically recorded uses of the plant in the Caroline Islands of the northwest tropical Pacific.

The Caroline Islands are a long chain stretching from Palau in the west to Kosrae in the east, roughly 4 to 9 degrees north of the equator. The majority of the islands are coral atolls, but the larger are high islands and in the case of Yap, Chuuk (formerly Truk) Lagoon, Pohnpei (formerly Ponape) and Kosrae form the administrative centres for states taking their name within the Federated States of Micronesia, while Palau is the main component archipelago of the 'independent' Republic of Belau. Each of the Caroline Islands has a long and varied history of colonial administration starting with the Spanish through to the Germans, Japanese and most recently the Americans^{2, 3}. Colonial government brought with it people to document the traditions and practices of island cultures as recorded through ethnography and/or oral history (see Kiste and Mashall, 1999). I present below some of the reported local uses of turmeric extracted from these records.

That turmeric maintained an importance following its introduction into the Pacific is suggested by its inclusion in inter-island exchange⁴. One such exchange (or perhaps more correctly tribute) system involved all the atoll communities east of Yap as far as, but not including, Chuuk Lagoon. Lessa (1966 : 36-7) reports that this system, known as the *sawei*, featured representatives from most of the atolls, some people travelling well over 1000 km, to provide tribute to certain villages in the Gagil District of Yap. Most of the tribute took the form of woven items and shell valuables. The tribute was made to appease the villagers, for « otherwise the Yapese, because of their superior magic and control of the supernatural, would destroy the outer islands with destructive storms and typhoons » (Alkire, 1977 : 52). However, reciprocity is recorded and the atoll dwellers returned to their islands carrying turmeric amongst other things. As recently as 1961 Alkire (1965 : 135) recorded a trading expedition from Lamotrek Atoll to Chuuk Lagoon, a distance of over 600 km and outside of the traditional *sawei* network. They took cordage and tobacco and

2. In regard to the political struggles see, for example, Kluge (1991), Parmentier (1991), Smith (1991). An overview of colonial history can be found in Hezel (1995).

3. The current ambiguity surrounding self-rule is illustrated by this statement: « Well, Palau [Belau] will not be fully independent politically because of certain elements associated with full independence. If you were to categorise by saying whether it is independent or not independent, I would say that it is independent with certain conditions. We are married to the United States, politically married » (From speech by President Kuniwo Nakamura on Palau 'Independence Day', October 1, 1994. [First published in *Islands Business Pacific*, October 1994; quoted from the *Pacific News Bulletin* 9(11) : 3).

4. Any studies of contemporary sailing skills in the Carolinian atolls has dispensed with the myth that the Pacific islanders were isolated on their island homes (see e.g., Gladwin, 1970 ; Lewis, 1972; Thomas, 1987 ; Finney, 1994).

hoped to return with, amongst steel wire for fishhooks, turmeric.

Sopher (1964) noted that aroma is one of the potential qualities of turmeric. From a eurocentric perspective it is difficult to judge the aromatic qualities of a substance which most Westerners would consider unperfumed, that is, a disagreeable smell : the concept requires relativisation. Although the ability to use the sense of smell is a universal of human existence, what people actually derive from a particular smell — pleasure, nausea, hunger — is culture specific and can change from one community to another (Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994).

In the Pacific coconut oil is often used as a base to make perfume with the scent usually derived from flowers. Turmeric powder is commonly mixed with coconut oil, and although Sopher (1964 : 113) has noted that this mixing can have the effect of changing the colour of the cosmetic from yellow-orange to red, I propose that the aromatic propensities of the rhizome may have been a little recorded but important aspect of turmeric use. Turmeric contains in its oil the organic compound *d- α -phellandrene* which is often used in perfumes and soaps (Parry, 1962 : 211 ; Poucher, 1974 : 366). Goode-nough and Sugita (1990 : 416) found particular words in Chuukese which may relate to the use of turmeric as a perfume in Chuuk Lagoon.

These words are :

sópwósópw meaning « a kind of turmeric cosmetic prepared in a single half coconut shell mold » ;

péér which is a « type of turmeric cosmetic prepared in a mold made of two coconut half-shells bound together » ; and,

teyikeey to « anoint with turmeric ».

The first two words are suggestive of the manufacture of a soap-like product, while the third may refer to a perfume. That perfume held a special place in Chuukese society is implied in the following story told to Edwards and Edwards (1978 : 6-7); it refers to a large abandoned stone built enclosure on a hill top on the island of Tol.

« It was said that coconut oil was made at Fauba that was so delightfully scented as to be highly sought after in the islands and rumored to be magic. The people who made this coconut oil were considered so special that they could have

hot food even when all others had to eat cold. The oil story would have the secret for how the oil was produced as the reason for the walls being constructed and that a number of spys [sic] were killed trying to obtain the knowledge ».

Lessa (1966) found on the atoll of Ulithi that turmeric was used as an offering to both the living and the dead. In one instance an islet community had broken a taboo by killing a turtle and not offering it to the 'king' of the atoll on a neighbouring islet. After three months they were able to make amends by presenting gifts to the king including rope, sails and turmeric (Lessa, 1966 : 46). According to Lessa (1966 : 50) each lineage in Ulithi has a ghost to which a shrine is dedicated. The shrine is constructed of a bamboo grid from which offerings of coconut oil, loincloths, *lei* (flower necklaces) and turmeric are suspended. Also on Ulithi turmeric used on the body marked various rites of passage of the individual from birth to death (Lessa, 1966). A baby is bathed three times a day and rubbed all over with coconut oil and turmeric. Soon after marriage the groom's family provides the bride with a new skirt and rubs turmeric on to her body. At death the corpse of a Ulithian is washed, covered in turmeric, and decorated with flowers prior to burial ⁵.

Fischer and Fischer (1957 : 290) note that, what they term 'body paint', manufactured from mixing turmeric and coconut oil, or on occasion turmeric alone, was common in the area of Chuuk and on Pohnpei. Erik Pearthree (personal communication) notes for Palau that in the public ceremonial presentation of a new born to its mother, in which she gives the baby its first milk, her upper body, including nipples are anointed with turmeric. Through this process the baby tastes turmeric as its first food. Also in Palau, if the « omens were favourable », warriors proceeding to combat would paint themselves with « strength-inducing turmeric » (Parmentier, 1987 : 79). However, it is also in Palau that a very different use of turmeric is found. This use is in the form of a plant metaphor and it is a discussion of this which returns me to Deleuze and Guattari.

Palau

In Palau the metaphor of the turmeric rhizome is used to explicate relations between

5. Parmentier (1994 : ch. 3) notes a number of uses for turmeric in Palauan mortuary rites, and recorded the rubbing of oil and turmeric onto the body of the deceased. He was told: « Women use a lot of turmeric on the corpse, until it is red all over. The turmeric [*reng*] represents the feelings of the women... And when women from related houses come to the village they will carry turmeric as a sign of their feelings » (1994 : 51).

kin and between villages. Traditionally the people of Palau, the westernmost and largest of the Caroline Islands, made sense of kin relations through matrilineal descent. To explain these relations they used what has been termed the 'turmeric metaphor' (Parmentier, 1987 : 177).

The Palauans visualise the rhizome of the turmeric plant as having a 'mother' root from which the offshoots grow. The mother root symbolises the female side of the matrilineal descent system with strong kin links retained from one generation to the next. The multiple offshoots represent the male side of the matrilineal society with these offspring finding links with other family members increasingly dissipated (Force and Force, 1972; Parmentier, 1987 : 177).

This metaphor is also used to explain village ranking. Origin myths relate that the four main villages of Palau were born to the goddess Milad. She gave birth to sons and daughters meaning that the villages are gender specific. The daughter village of Milad, Imelik, gave birth herself to a child who is the village of Ngebuked. Due to this direct relationship with the mother root of the turmeric plant through matrilineal descent the male villages born to Milad were required to take special care of the villagers of Ngebuked. So the sons of Milad, represented as offshoots of the rhizome, regarded Ngebuked as a direct descendent of the goddess Milad (Parmentier, 1987 : 177-180).

The Palauan concept of thinking through a rhizome is then rather different to the one proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. As I have shown above, for Deleuze and Guattari (1988) the rhizome is a complex web with no end and no beginning, no vertical hierarchy, and no lineages. This for them acts as a metaphor to aid in the understanding of the complexities of living. I am sympathetic to their aims, but the Palauan version⁶ of rhizome thinking is one that retains a linearity, exhibits a hierarchy, does not link back on itself and, in its female part at least, cannot be entered from any point.

Conclusion

Returning to the questions posed earlier it may be seen that Deleuze and Guattari's proposition that aborescent thinking displaced

rhizome thinking in the West has to contend with the Palauan use of rhizomes in what is essentially a root thinking metaphor. And with regard to Oceania providing the finest example of rhizome thinking the Palauan case must make this assertion rather more questionable. In the Oceanic island of Palau, at least, there certainly does not appear to be a « *model opposed in every respect to the western model of the tree* ». That the rhizome metaphor is useful in thinking through aspects of social construction, particularly in European polities I do not question, however, here we find another example of a crude totalising discourse of the 'Orient' being emphasised (*cf.* Said, 1978).

What I hope to have shown is that in a wide range of contexts turmeric appears to have been considered a special plant⁷. Although not necessarily 'magic' as suggested by Sopher, this does extend the examples he provided 30 years ago, and at least supports the idea that the rhizome — if not rhizome thinking — plays more than a simple subsistence role in Oceania. That Deleuze and Guattari assertions have been found problematic within the specifics of a contextualised approach may be thought of as unsurprising when one considers the fragmentary and open nature of their publications, and indeed as Goodchild (1996 : 2) finds from their work :

« There is no longer any true or false ideas, there are just ideas. There is no longer any ultimate goal or direction, but merely a wandering along a multiplicity of lines of flight that lead away from the centres of power. Aborescent models of structured thought and activity are replaced by an exploratory rhizome. Any move of thought or social relation is desirable, so long as it does not lead back into an old or new convention, obligation, or institution ».

Surely, such aims, whether or not flawed in the detail, must be regarded as worthy indeed and has provided for me a point of departure allowing an exploration through the nomadic spaces of both foreign anthropologists and Carolinians. In reconnecting with Deleuze and Guattari at some point beyond my point of departure I have reaffirmed the importance of a contextual approach; there can be no doubt that rhizomes are good to think through in both the abstract and physical worlds, but making sense of these worlds can only be achieved through exploring the local circumstances.

6. These versions have been recorded, for the most part, by Western anthropologists. It is possible to propose the contention that these scholars came from 'root stock' and were unable to comprehend, and therefore could not properly transcribe, Palauan accounts of rhizome thinking. However, a Japanese ethnologist, Hidikata (1973) appears to concur with the others.

7. The outline I have given of turmeric use in the Caroline Islands is not meant to be exhaustive of all references.

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Mots-clefs / Keywords

Curcuma, Deleuze et Guattari, Palau, rhizomes, Îles Carolines.

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