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Review: Ecology and Indo-Iranian Reconstruction

Reviewed Work(s): Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions by Bruce Lincoln

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BOOK REVIEW

ECOLOGY AND INDO-IRANIAN RECONSTRUCTION

Priests, Warriors, and Cattle: A Study in the Ecology of Religions. By BRUCE LINCOLN. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1981. Pp. 242.

This fascinating book by Bruce Lincoln has the invaluable merits of being both one of the most accurate studies in ecology of religions ever produced in anthropology and a very serious reconstruction of some fundamental Indo-European myths related to the possession, recovery, and sacrifice of cattle. The basic idea behind Lincoln's attempt is that "it is necessary to recognize the truly generative role of ecology with regard to culture and religion. It is not enough simply to state that culture is based on ecology. One must go further and put it more strongly: the given features of ecology serve to mold or shape culture, which in turn serves to mold or shape religion. This can be seen in the case at hand" (p. 173).

The case at hand is a comparison between the religious systems of some Nilotic tribes (Nuer, Dinka, and Masai being the most important) and the reconstructed religious system of the Indo-Iranians. In both cases, one expects—if the postulates of ecology are true—that from similar generative ecological features similar religious systems would develop. Lincoln succeeds in demonstrating this almost unquestionably.

Both East Africans and Indo-Iranians, at the time when their respective religions were codified (i.e., some millennia ago in the case of the Indo-Iranians), were possessors of cattle. "The fact of cattle . . . gives rise to the practices of sacrifice and cattle raiding. These, in turn, generate classes of specialists—priests and warriors—who in turn establish their own sets of deities and myths" (p. 174). In both religious systems there is a "cattle cycle": the celestial sovereigns give cattle to their people; the cattle are stolen by

traditional enemies and must be recovered by a class of specialists (the warriors); they turn the cattle over to another class of specialists (the priests) whose function is to sacrifice them in order to insure proper food for all and the favor of the celestial sovereigns so they will continue to bestow cattle upon the people. The cattle cycle is thus formed by two other cycles: the "priestly cycle," involving sacrifice and continuity of food resources; and the "warrior cycle," which might be considered internal to the first, involving the recovering of cattle stolen by the enemy.

In both systems, priests are higher in rank than warriors, since they are supposed to form the necessary link between people and gods. In both systems, there is a difference between ideal practices of warriors, who, in their raids, are only supposed to recover stolen cattle from their enemies, and their real practices, which often amount to stealing and feeding on unsacrificed (i.e., "unclean") animals.

Certainly there are also differences between the Nilotic and the Indo-Iranian religious systems (see esp. pp. 166–72), but their common features are striking. Only one explanation could account for these strong resemblances: "Clearly, appeals to common origin, historical contact, or cultural diffusion cannot be accepted. . . . The most likely solution lies in the fact that the ecological base of both cultures is the possession of cattle" (p. 173).

Both the premises and the conclusions of Lincoln's study are fascinating. One major difficulty arises from the fact that, while the religious systems and the cultural environment of the Nilotic tribes have been described by twentieth-century anthropologists, the Indo-Iranian myths, amounting to an ancient epoch prior to the separation of the Indo-Europeans, must be reconstructed from texts whose cultural reference is lost. Is this a reliable enough basis to permit reconstruction? Most contemporary linguists doubt that there was ever an Indo-European common language, which probably represents only a useful fiction. The case of religion is still further complicated by the fact that many religious motifs have a circulation transcending any ethnic and temporal limitation. Of course, this does not make reconstruction impossible, but it does increase the difficulties considerably.

Lincoln seems to be aware of this, and his scholarly work could be cited as an example of accuracy. Yet some points seem to me questionable. They are not important, but they show that even such a careful scholar as Lincoln cannot always avoid the danger of the "hermeneutical circle," of an ideal reconstruction which later is presented as an (inductive, this time) reconstruction. I found only two such examples in this book: for the sake of symmetry, Lincoln gives the name *Remus* the highly questionable etymology P-I-E **Yemo* ("twin") (p. 86), which would be, as a matter of fact, a completely superfluous confirmation of the fact that, as Livy states, Romulus and Remus were twins. A second case of rather far-fetched reconstruction is his attempt to explain the Greek and Roman myth of the battle between Herakles and the cattle thief Geryon (Cacus) as a late adaptation of a myth whose protagonist would have been the hero **Trito* (pp. 103 ff.). One of the arguments in favor of this thesis would be the frequent references to the number three in Propertius, Ovid, and Vergil (pp. 112–13; *tria tempora*,

trinodis, ter lustrat, ter temptat, ter resedit). Threefold repetition of an action is so frequent in mythical narratives, as well as in folktales, that it could not form a sound base for such a delicate reconstruction as the one Lincoln attempts.

However, the number of questionable assertions is surprisingly small for such a rich and erudite book as the one I am reviewing. Lincoln is a consummate scholar, who knows enough to avoid immature reflections and gives brilliant solutions to the most controversial questions. He only once seems to rely on Widengren's overruled statement that in Babylonian and Sabian astronomical speculation "the seven planetary spheres are identified with specific metals and colors" (p. 75). Several scholars have shown that this is a fiction sponsored by Rawlinson and later on by W. Anz and W. Bousset.

In conclusion, Lincoln's work is not only highly original but also extremely important for scholars in comparative religion, especially those concerned with Indo-European religions. This young scholar has infused new vitality into a discipline that did not seem particularly suited to innovations—perhaps because comparative I-E religion requires a broad linguistic scope which younger persons often do not have. Bruce Lincoln has, however, brilliantly shown that age is only a relative, not an absolute, criterion for being able to explore this immense field.

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