

NATURAL SYMBOLS - Barrie and Craessil (1970)

by Mary Douglas

Mary Douglas' new book Natural Symbols grew out of a series of lectures and some of the needling tone apparently necessary to rouse the slumbering anthropologist has come through. From the evidence of this book it seems that a spirit of unadventurousness is abroad and if she succeeds in defeating it she is to be congratulated. At the posing of questions, and it is reasonable to say that practically every statement in the book is a challenge, Dr. Douglas is excellent. Perhaps the sermonising on the Friday mass might have been less obvious but the emphasis on the extensions of the body is welcome. Although I have no desire to criticise the more worked out ideas in the book since I believe the reader will make up his own mind on the value of Bernstein's codes and the author's desire to correlate conceptual and social organization I feel that the grid-group notion ought not to be passed over because it is symptomatic of a too common reductionism. This matrix is an analytic model and by imposing a given vocabulary on the material it gives the impression that data drawn from differing cultures are being discussed whereas it is the model which is discussed. For a further example of this circularity consider Joan Lewis' views mentioned on p.83. May we suggest that the passing of structural-functionalism has left a feeling of insecurity? But the abandonment of intellectual security ought to be a fact of anthropological life. The Grid-group matrix does no justice to the complexities of the material even when modified, see p. 143, and this is the more regrettable as Purity and Danger was a remarkably good book just because Dr. Douglas' inside/outside division was presented as a synthetic not analytic proposition.

S. Milburn.

SAINTS OF THE ATLAS - Weidenfeld & Nicholson:

by Ernest Gellner.

An election is a kind of holiness rat-race. Each leader puts his party forward as the more faithful to vows, more pious, more generous to the poor and the weak, more defiant towards tyrants. In an English general election the role of political saint is complicated by being combined with the other roles, military, financial and judicial. A leader claims to be capable of authority in all spheres. Gellner's study of Moroccan Berbers, with subtle political insight, shows a people who have divided up the various political roles. A saint is entered in the sanctity stakes, very rewarding in themselves, but quite different from the competition between chiefs. Lay tribes provide chiefs; hereditary saintly tribes provide official arbitrators. The lay tribes combine into groups which vote annually for a single chief. Coalition theory will find here a classical instance of polyarchy. Each tribe takes a turn to provide the annual chief, but while it is offering a candidate for election, it may not vote. Chiefship rotates between tribes and the victory always goes to the man whose reputation for nullity ensures the voting tribes that his own tribe will not benefit unduly during his term of office. With this perfect formula for weak government, the fierce Berbers still need a system of arbitration. Hence the role of hereditary saints, who are pledged to pacifism and to Islam. Gellner shrewdly observes how a member of the saintly lineage rises to the heights of sanctity by playing his role of mouthpiece of God more successfully than his fellow saints by birth. He must be lavishly generous and show no concern for material wealth. He must do it in such a way as to ensure a rich and steady flow of wealth into his house - or he will have nothing to distribute to his clients. He watches at his window and runs out to welcome an obviously prosperous traveller, leaving less well-heeled visitors to the hospitality of his rivals. The first law of sociology is: to him who hath shall be given. This is a description of a generative cycle which sends some men up and up, with every successful arbitration they perform guaranteeing that the next will be taken seriously and so be effective too. Other saints spiral downwards in public esteem. Inevitably the saintly lineages multiply, but the demand for their services is fixed by the pattern of disputes. Consequently there is a trend to shed poor relations by labelling them with second degree sanctity. For anthropologists this book illuminates many problems of political and religious interest, far outside the scope of Berber studies. It will also be significant for historians of many periods of European history. Who has not wondered in his school days about the apparent injustice of the Anglo-Saxon oath taking procedures? Here the same system of proving innocence by getting a larger number of co-swearers than your rival is shown to be full of political wisdom and practical justice. Similarly for religious sociology - to understand how miracles were attributed to particular shrines or saints we need to assimilate this vital contribution to anthropology which is more than just a tribal monograph.

Mary Douglas.